The Refiner's Fire

Abraxan

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Chapter 1 – Of Art and Finances

As shadows lengthened that hot summer evening, a teenaged boy slumped against a wall near the play park. He drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs, hugging himself in misery. It had been a very long couple of weeks since Harry Potter had returned to Number Four, Privet Drive from his fifth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were being their usual nasty selves, and Dudley was bullying Harry in ever more devious ways. Harry had the regular contact with Order of the Phoenix members they'd promised, which did help him with his relatives to some extent, but he was still having trouble coping with his grief, guilt and fear. He kept these problems to himself, always insisting "I'm fine!" when anyone asked, but he was far from being fine. All he wanted was quiet time alone. He needed to come to accept both Sirius's death and the implications of the prophecy he'd heard from Dumbledore about him and Voldemort. Harry's shock and sense of denial about both things had just begun to wear off, leaving him aching, empty and scared inside, but he dared not show his feelings around his family. He'd managed to hide his grief from them until earlier that evening, after a chicken dinner, when a stray thought wandered into his head: *"Buckbeak would enjoy these bones."* The thought of Buckbeak brought the loss of Sirius crashing through the fragile protective barriers Harry had tried to build around his emotions, and he gulped back a sob.

"What's the matter with you?" Dudley demanded.

Harry shook his head and swallowed hard, fighting back tears, furious at himself for losing control. "Nothing."

"Mum! Dad! Look! He's CRYING!" his horrible cousin chortled with glee.

"What is wrong with you?" Aunt Petunia snapped.

"I said NOTHING! I'm FINE!" Harry shouted as he rose to leave the room.

"SIT DOWN!" roared Uncle Vernon. "What is the meaning of this? What have you done this time?"

Harry was devastated. What had he done this time? Just managed to lead the only parent-figure he had left to his death, just as he had done with Cedric. It was his fault his parents were dead. His fault, in each and every case. His fault. . . .

He lifted his head and returned his uncle's glare. He wouldn't let them get to him. Stiff upper lip and all that. "I said it's nothing. Just leave me alone. May I please be excused?"

"No, not until we get to the bottom of this," his uncle growled. "If we leave you alone in this state, there's no telling what abnormal mischief you might do!"

A deadly silence settled over the table, broken occasionally by Dudley's snorts of laughter at Harry's dilemma. Harry fought for self-control, anger taking the place of his overwhelming grief for at least a moment.

"I'm FINE. May I PLEASE be excused now?" He ground his teeth, praying he wouldn't do accidental magic in his rage.

"What's the matter, did you fail all your exams? Did your little friends dump you?" Dudley asked in a snide voice.

"No, and no."

"I don't know why anybody would be your friend anyway. You're just a creepy, useless orphan boy without two pennies to rub together! Who would choose to be around YOU?" his cousin sneered.

"I do have friends, people who care about me. . ." Harry snapped defensively.

His statement made his uncle blanch, then swallow hard, reached a trembling hand toward his son. "Dudders, leave Harry alone, there's a good boy."

"What? Why?"

"You don't want him writing to his godfather. . ." Vernon said with a nervous glance at his nephew. The sudden pallor on Harry's face made the man look at him more closely. "How is that godfather of yours, anyway? You haven't been writing to him complaining about your life here, have you?"

Harry's emotions were too near the surface and a tear escaped. "I can't. He's dead."

Aunt Petunia straightened suddenly, her eyes like daggers. "Dead? And you continued to act as if he was a danger to us?"

"Oh, so that mass murderer's dead, eh?" Uncle Vernon cried, rubbing his hands with glee. "Now what will you try to threaten us with, huh? Humph."

"Well, I say good riddance! The world's better off without that awful man," Aunt Petunia sniffed disdainfully. "If he'd ever turned up here to visit you. . .well, it's just a good thing that never happened. What would the neighbours think!"

Dudley leaned close to Harry and sneered, "Not so tough now, are you?"

Harry stormed out of the house, ending up in the quiet park. Now he rested his head on his knees, weary to the bone, heart aching, tears sliding down his cheeks.

"It's all my fault. If only. . .if I'd just. . ." he sputtered. He pounded his fists on his knees, full of pent up rage and self-reproach. He stifled the howl that kept trying to escape his control. "Oh, Sirius, I am so sorry!" Harry lifted his head and looked up at the darkening sky. "I'd do anything to bring you back – anything. What can I do? I'm lost." He finally lost it and sobs racked his body. "Sirius, I need you! Help me. . .please, somebody help me. . . ."

A muffled "woof" and a clatter of claws on pavement caught Harry's attention. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief. A great black dog was racing toward him, its tongue lolling happily out of the side of its mouth.

Harry stared, rubbed his disbelieving eyes again. "Sirius?"

The dog barked and started licking Harry's face as he nearly knocked Harry down in his joy.

"Sirius? Sirius!" Harry laughed, hugging the dog as it bowled him over. "Sirius! How'd you get here? What happened? Where've you been?"

"I was about to ask him the same question," gasped a woman's voice. "I've been chasing him for ages. How do you know him?" she asked Harry as he continued to hug the dog. "Sirius, you bad boy, I'm going to have to get a higher fence if you keep getting out!"

Harry's heart fell. "His. . .his name is Sirius?"

"Yes – I thought you knew him. You called him by name."

Harry looked at the dog again, staring deeply into its eyes, clutching the fur around its neck, afraid to let go. "Sirius?" The dog just panted and grinned at him. Harry slumped, let go of the dog and glanced up warily at the woman. "I thought he was. . .I used to know. . ."

The woman saw his tear-stained face and knelt beside him. "What's wrong, lad?" Her face was filled with sympathetic concern.

"Nothing." Harry scrubbed madly his face, trying to wipe away the tracks of his tears.

"That doesn't look like 'nothing' to me," she said kindly.

Harry looked up at her as she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. He swallowed, then answered. "Your dog. . .my godfather. . . had a dog. . . just like him. That's all."

"Had?"

"Yes. He's dead. They're both dead," Harry said flatly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." The woman seemed at a loss for words, just squeezed Harry's shoulder gently before sitting down facing him, the dog lying happily on its back between them as Harry scratched its belly.

"Mum! Mum, where are you? Have you found him yet?" Two girls, a five year old and a teenager, ran around the corner and stopped when they saw the scene before them. The five year old stared at Harry, pointed at him, then said, "Mummy, is that a tramp?"

"Hush, Patricia. Don't be rude," her mother said. "This young man helped me catch Sirius."

"But, Mummy, look at his clothes!" the child insisted.

"Maybe he's an American rap singer," the teenager suggested to her sister, trying to be helpful. "They wear baggy clothes like that."

Harry's cheeks flamed red with embarrassment. Dudley's clothes fit him about as well as a tent would, except it would be a short tent – Harry's arms and legs hug well below sleeves and trouser legs since he was now head and shoulders taller than Dudley. He got up to leave.

"Mister?" Patricia said, "are you a rap singer? Are you famous?"

Harry didn't know quite how to answer that. He hesitated, miserable, but not wanting to be rude.

"Girls, that's really quite enough," the mother said sharply. "I'm so sorry. . ." she told Harry.

"Don't worry about it," he answered. He leaned down to look the little girl in the eyes. "Yes, Patricia, I'm the famous Harry Potter," he teased gently, with a slight smile, "but I'm not a rap star. I'm just Harry."

"Then what are you famous for? And why are you dressed like that? It looks like your trousers are going to fall off!"

Harry sighed. His infamous temper was rising again. He tried to clamp down on his anger, to respond kindly, but the truth just fell out of his mouth. "I'm an orphan and have to wear my cousin's hand-me-downs and he's part elephant," he snapped. "And if it weren't for my belt, which also was my cousin's and would wrap around me twice with lots left over if I hadn't cut it off, these stupid trousers probably would fall off!" He wanted to leave, but was surrounded by the woman and her girls and the dog.

"Patricia! Apologize this instant!" the mother insisted. "I'm ashamed of you!"

"I'm sorry, Harry Potter," Patricia said hesitantly, apparently unnerved by Harry's anger.

"Harry," the mother said, "I'm sorry. She's only five and she just. . .she just speaks her mind without thinking. She didn't mean to be rude."

"It's okay, I've heard lots worse," Harry replied with a shrug. He sighed, then knelt in front of the little girl. "I honestly can't help how I have to dress, and it makes me angry. You can understand that, right? I am sorry I snapped at you, Patricia."

"It's OK," she said in a small voice.

Harry stuck out his hand to Patricia. "Friends, then?"

Patrcia's face lit up in a smile as she held his hand and shook it. "Friends!"

Harry grinned and straightened up, glancing shyly at the mother and older girl. "Friends, as well?"

The woman smiled warmly at him. "Absolutely. I'm Margaret Asher, and these are my daughters, Cassandra and Patricia. Do you live around here? We just moved here recently. Maybe you go to Casey's school? Beacon Hill?

"No," Harry said uneasily, "I mean, yes, I live near here, but no, I don't go to Beacon Hill."

"Mother," Casey said, seeing Harry's discomfort, "You're giving him the third degree."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Old reporter's habit, interviewing people as soon as I meet them. My apologies," Margaret said quickly.

"Reporter?" Harry asked, unnerved.

"Retired – for a while, anyway. I stopped working when Patricia was born. Once she's going to school full-time, I'll find another job," she said with a smile.

Somewhat relieved – at least the danger of her writing about him wasn't imminent – Harry said, "Oh, I see. Well, it's nice to meet you. Welcome to the neighbourhood. How did you happen to name your dog 'Sirius'?"

Patricia piped up, "After the Dog Star, silly!" Her cheeks showed deep dimples as she giggled. "Did you know there was a Dog Star, Harry?"

"Why, yes, I did." He smiled down at her, but stopped himself before saying anything about Astronomy class.

Margaret stood up, dusted off her shorts, and snapped a leash on Sirius's collar. "Harry, are you interested in a summer job by any chance? My husband is looking for someone to help out in his shop. You look like a strong young man."

Harry went pink. He hadn't thought about himself looking like a "strong young man" but he had been growing quite a lot recently. "What kind of work is it? I haven't had any real job experience yet."

"Construction. He lays marble, granite and ceramic tiles and does worktops as well, and needs an assistant to help with the labour. He pays well. When does your next school term start? And when could you start?"

"Term starts on September first," Harry answered with a delighted grin, "and I could start tomorrow." The thought of having a legitimate reason to be out of the Dursleys' house all day was delicious.

"Here's my husband's card. Go to his office in the morning and let him tell you what he needs, and you two can go on from there. OK?"

Harry took the card and glanced at it, then smiled and said, "Thanks!"

Casey looked at the gangly boy with his messy black hair, his odd round glasses and his horrible, way-too-wide and way-too-short clothes. He looked awful, but there was an interesting light in his emerald green eyes, dignity in his manner despite his circumstances, and great charm in that crooked smile. It could be an interesting holiday.

"So you're not sixteen yet?" Douglas Asher asked the next morning. "You'll have to get permission from your parents to work, then."

"Erm," Harry began uncomfortably, "my parents are dead. I live with my aunt and uncle. I don't know what they'll say. I'll be sixteen in a few weeks, though."

Douglas liked this young man as soon as he met him. And he'd heard from his wife all the information she'd learned from him. An orphan whose relatives dressed him in hand-me-downs that didn't fit him at all. There had to be a lot more to that story. That kind of wardrobe would devastate most teenagers, but Harry seemed to accept the lifestyle imposed on him with unusual grace. He might resent his relatives and the wardrobe they made him wear, but he seemed to still have plenty of self-respect.

"Tell you what. I'll talk to your uncle myself. It's the right thing to do."

"If you want to. . ." Harry replied uncertainly.

"Suppose I just call him so you can start today?"

He gave Doug the number for Uncle Vernon's office at the drill plant, then tried not to fidget while the man called him. He really wanted this job. It would be just like Uncle Vernon to not give his permission. Harry crossed his fingers and hoped for the best.

"Vernon Dursley, here."

"Hello, Mr. Dursley. This is Douglas Asher. I'm a neighbour of yours. We live on Wisteria Walk. My wife met your nephew last evening and told him I was looking for an assistant with my tile business. I've just met young Harry and would like to offer him a job for the holidays, but since he's not yet sixteen, I wanted to get your permission so he can work for me. I'll be happy to meet in person if that will help. Harry seems like a fine young man."

Vernon spluttered and fumed and grumbled before he growled into the phone, "Fine young man! Fine young man! What has he been telling you?"

"Not much, except that he'd like to earn some money this summer."

"Oh. Money, is it?" Vernon replied, with a far more ingratiating tone. "How much are you going to pay him?"

Doug thought a minute. The change in Vernon's voice gave him the feeling Vernon didn't have Harry's best interests at heart. "I'm going to give him a trial run for a couple of days, and then he and I will decide if this job is right for him. I'll pay him the minimum wage for the two days. We'll decide from there if he's worth more than that." He winked at Harry as he said this.

"Well. . .it's your choice. I won't be held responsible for anything he breaks, understand?" Vernon blustered.

"Uh. . .yes, that's fine. I'll take it out of his salary if he breaks something."

"Just as long as you understand," Vernon insisted.

"No problem. Thanks. Bye." He stared at the phone for a moment after hanging up. "Harry, I'm taking a chance on you. Your uncle doesn't seem to have much faith in you. Do I need to be worried?"

Harry's shoulders sagged. "What did he tell you?"

"That he's not responsible for anything you break. He also didn't seem to think you're a 'fine young man.' So maybe I should ask you a few more questions?"

Harry braced himself for whatever was coming. "OK."

"Where do you go to school?"

Harry stiffened. "I go to school out of the country."

"Really? Which school? Which country?"

Harry sighed. "My uncle tells people I go to St. Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys. I actually go to school in Scotland, a small private school. My parents arranged it when I was born."

"And your uncle is bothered by your going to this private school for some reason?"

"My uncle is bothered by the fact that I exist."

"How long have you lived with them?"

"Since I was a year old – when my parents died."

Doug sat silent for a minute, studying the tall, skinny young man in front of him. This boy stood on his own two feet, didn't ask for pity, accepted his lot in life and still kept his dignity. Doug was impressed. "I believe in letting people prove themselves. I think you have potential. Let's find out if that's true, shall we?" He smiled and stretched out his hand.

Harry shook Doug's hand and grinned. "I won't let you down, sir. What would you like me to do first?"

One week later, Harry's sore muscles were beginning to adjust to his work. He carried heavy loads of building materials wherever they were needed, and was learning how to lay tiles. Harry was fascinated by the beautiful marble and granite tiles and worktops they were installing in this elegant home. He was sitting in the shade on his lunch break, playing with shards of trimmed tiles, making various patterns with the colours and shapes he found among the discarded scraps.

Harry's activity aroused Doug's curiosity, and he walked over to see what the boy was doing. "I didn't know you were an artist," Doug said with a smile.

"Me, an artist?" Harry said, looking up at Doug in astonishment. "I can't draw at all."

"You may not be able to draw, but you have an eye for colour and patterns. What you've done there would be a beautiful mosaic."

Harry looked at his creation again. "Really? What's a mosaic?"

Doug squatted next to Harry, his hand tracing the pattern in the air above the tiles. "The curve of this line here, and the others that flow into it, the way the colours go together, your choices of where to put the granite versus the marble and ceramic tile – very nice, Harry, really. And a mosaic is what you've made here, only you grout it onto a surface – like we've been doing inside on the floors and walls. Mosaics are sturdy enough to be used out of doors, as tables, for instance, or walls, or in the bottom of swimming pools, that kind of thing. Mosaics have been an art form for centuries. You're really good at this. I'm impressed."

Harry grinned. "Wow! I was just playing. I think the tiles are beautiful. I hate to think of these pieces being thrown away."

"Tell you what, lad. You can have all the trimmings and chips, whatever you want, and leftover tiles after the job if that will help. I'll give you some grout and a board to mount your mosaic on and find an appropriate table base for it. This would make a beautiful table top. If we can sell it, you can just pay me for the table base, and keep the rest."

"Are you serious? Would people buy things like this?"

"If you can make it before we finish this job, we'll show it to the owners. They might like it as a garden table, since it matches the tiles in the house. It will tie the outside of the house to the inside quite nicely." Doug clapped Harry on the shoulder as he got up. "Good job, Harry!"

Harry laughed and said "Thanks!" then went back to arranging the tiles in ways that pleased him.

Harry's table was a huge success. Doug showed it to his clients and proposed a handsome price to which they readily agreed. As Doug handed Harry his share of the payment, Harry's eyes widened.

"Wow! They paid this much for it? I can't believe that!" he breathed. "I was just playing! I'm no artist!"

"Harry," Doug replied, "the best artists usually consider their work to be fun. You are an artist in mosaic tile. Keep up the good work! Oh, and by the way," he added in a low voice, "I'd open a bank account if I were you. You're going to be making good money here, and you don't want your uncle to dig it out from under your mattress, do you?" He chuckled.

"You're right. I'll open an account today!" Harry said. "And I'm going to buy some new clothes, too," he added with a grin.

"Tell you what. You've been working really hard, and you do need to get to the bank and the shops. I'll give you the rest of the day off to get your errands done. See you bright and early Monday, okay?"

"Thanks!" Harry answered with a grin, shoving the wad of notes into his pocket.

Harry stopped at Mrs. Figg's house before he started his errands.

"Harry, dear, how nice to see you!" she said as she opened the door.

"Hello, Mrs. Figg. I was wondering if you would do me a favour?"

"Of course, Harry, whatever I can do. Come on in. Would you like some tea?"

"No, but thank you. Actually, I'd just like to use your fireplace to contact Remus Lupin."

"Certainly. The floo powder is in the blue canister with the white kittens on it, over on that shelf."

"Thanks!" Harry got a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the cold fireplace. Green flames erupted, and he knelt down and stuck his head in them as he called "Number 12 Grimmauld Place, London." A few dizzying moments later, Harry was looking into the kitchen at Order Headquarters. "Remus! Are you there?" he called.

A moment later, Remus came striding into the room, his lined face filled with concern.

"Harry! Is everything all right?" he asked with concern.

"Yes, it's great! I need your help, though," Harry replied with a grin.

Relieved, Remus smiled. "What can I do for you?"

"Can you come to Mrs. Figg's, so you can go to the bank with me and help me open an account? A muggle bank, not Gringott's. I think I'll probably need an adult's name on it as well as mine, since I'm only fifteen. Mr. Asher paid me in cash and I don't want to carry this much money around, so I'd like to go to the bank right away. I don't want to take up too much of your time, I know you're busy, but. . ."

"Ah, so you've earned some money at that job of yours, eh?" Remus said with a chuckle. "Hang on, I'll be right there." Harry pulled his head out of the fire, then suddenly Remus appeared in it, spinning in the green flames, then stepped out into Mrs. Figg's parlour.

"Thanks, Remus, I really appreciate it," Harry said. "That mosaic table I made sold for a lot of money, and Mr. Asher gave me most of it!" His excitement shone all over his face. "I don't want Uncle Vernon to take my money away. I want to buy some clothes that fit me, and have money to spend on . . .erm. . .other things. . ." he hesitated.

"Things like. . .dates with that pretty blonde you've been talking about?" Remus said knowingly.

"Maybe. . ." the boy said as he turned pink. "She does seem to like me a bit."

Remus laughed and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Let's go get your account opened."

"Thanks, Mrs. Figg," Harry called as they left. "Bye!"

"Bye, Arabella. Thanks for taking care of Harry," Remus said warmly.

"Nice to see both of you. Goodbye!" she answered as she shooed cats away from the door and let Harry and Remus out.

As they walked toward the local bank, Remus said, "I've been wanting to talk to you about something, Harry. This seems as good a time as any."

Concerned at the serious tone in the man's voice, Harry replied, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, no, nothing's wrong, honestly," Remus reassured him, patting him on the shoulder companionably. "It's just that. . .well. . .I was wondering. . . ."

Harry stopped and looked Remus in the eye. "What is it?"

Obviously nervous, Remus clasped his hands together, then wrung them a bit before shaking them out and putting them in his pockets. "Harry, I . . . I was wondering if . . .erm. . .you'd like . . ."

"What?"

"Me to be your guardian now that Sirius is gone," Remus finished in an uncomfortable rush. "I mean, you may need someone to sign forms at Hogwarts, or like now, to help you open a bank account, things like that. I'd like to do that for you if you'd be willing to let me. . ." he finished hesitantly.

"If I'd let you? That's BRILLIANT!" Harry grabbed Remus in a tremendous hug. "Thank you, Remus!"

Remus breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, wonderful," he said as he returned Harry's hug. "I've been worried about how you'd take the suggestion. I know I can't replace Sirius, and certainly not your parents, but I'll do the best I can to look after you."

"Does this mean I can come and live with you?" the boy asked eagerly.

"I'm afraid not." Remus's face saddened as Harry's shoulders drooped in disappointment. "I don't have the blood bond with you that your aunt does, and the magic Professor Dumbledore put in place to protect you depends on that blood relationship. There's no stronger safeguard for you than that."

Harry looked frustrated, but then grinned, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "The Dursleys were just giving me a hard time about Sirius not being around to threaten them anymore. It will be nice to be able to say I have a wizard guardian again."

"Going to use the werewolf to threaten your relatives, are you?" Remus said with a sly smile.

"Oh, that would be good fun, wouldn't it?" Harry chuckled. He sobered suddenly. "By the way, I have a strong suspicion my uncle is going to want a large chunk of the money I make – maybe call it 'rent' or something equally ridiculous. I'm rarely there, only sleep there, really, and they hardly feed me. They quite obviously don't spend any money on clothing me, and I still do most of the work around there, so I see no reason I should owe him rent. How should I handle that?"

"That's a really good question, Harry. I do think his trying to get your money is a strong possibility."

"Yes, Mr. Asher actually warned me to watch out for that. He promised not to tell Uncle Vernon how much I actually make."

"That's decent of him. He sounds like a nice fellow."

"He is. What should I do about Uncle Vernon, then?"

"Hmm. I think I'd approach it this way. . ." Remus began.

At the local bank, Harry and Remus waited patiently for the manager to speak to them about opening an account. The manager sat in his glass cubicle, glaring out at them from time to time, quite obviously studying Harry's ridiculous clothes and messy hair, and Remus's genteel but shabby attire. Finally, he pushed his paperwork aside and invited them into his office.

"Hello, sir," Harry began politely, offering to shake hands with the manager. "I'm Harry Potter and this is my guardian, Remus Lupin. I'd like to open a bank account."

The bank manager looked at Harry's hand as if it were filthy. "I know who you are," he snarled.

Harry's face hardened into the stoic look he hid behind when faced with Dursleyish behaviour. "I beg your pardon?"

"Where'd you come up with money? Rob a bank? Steal it from your aunt and uncle? I've heard about you and where you go to school. Your aunt and uncle bank here, you know." The man eyed Harry with great suspicion, sneering at Harry's hugely outsized clothes. "And my son is best friends with your cousin, Dudley. I know all about you. And I've never heard of any 'guardian.' What kind of scam are you trying to pull?"

Harry's face fell. Of all the people to be the manager of the bank. He was doomed.

Remus stepped forward. "Excuse me, sir, but Harry has done nothing wrong. He has earned some money and wishes to put it in a bank account. You run a bank near his home. You are about to lose his business," he said sternly.

"Good riddance," the bank manager said. "Give these juvenile delinquents an inch and they'll take a mile. Take your business elsewhere."

"Gladly," Harry snarled, and he and Remus turned and left the bank. Outside, Harry's cheeks were white, he was so enraged. "See what I have to deal with here?" he asked, deep hurt in his voice.

"I'm so sorry, Harry, honestly. That man needs an attitude adjustment. Maybe during the full moon. . ." he teased, trying to get a smile out of Harry. It worked.

"That would be brilliant!" he laughed.

"There must be other banks around here," Remus suggested, looking hopefully at the boy.

"I don't know where they are. This is the only one I know of," Harry said slowly, his shoulders drooping as if the weight of the world was on them.

"I have an idea," Remus said. "Why don't we ask your boss? Maybe he uses a different one."

As they walked to the tile shop, Harry asked, "Can a person have more than one godfather?"

"I believe so, Harry. Why?"

"How does someone become a godfather?"

Remus thought a while before answering. "Godparents are chosen by the child's parents and are part of the christening service, if the child is christened. The godparents are supposed to feel the same about religion and other values as the parents, and reinforce those teachings, and to spend time with the child and help in his upbringing. Sometimes they're named as the guardians in case anything happens to the parents. That's the way it was with Sirius and your parents, Harry. I was at your christening too – you were so well-behaved. We were all so proud of you," he added with a tender smile at the memory, then glancing at the tall young man beside him. "Why do you ask?"

"Can I choose my own godfather, since my parents are gone?"

"I don't see why not," Remus replied.

"What would have to be done to make it legal?"

"I imagine just having a form filed with the Ministry of Magic saying you'd asked for this person to be your godfather would suffice. I can talk with Professor Dumbledore about it if you like, find out what needs to be done."

Harry stopped and turned to look his friend in the eye. He studied that careworn face, the kind, haunted eyes. "Remus?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be my godfather as well as my guardian?"

Remus smiled warmly at Harry, tears pricking his eyes. "Harry. . .I would be tremendously honoured to be your godfather. Thank you for asking."

"Thank you!" the boy replied, giving Remus a delighted hug. Harry stood back and said in surprise, "Look! I'm nearly as tall as you are!"

"Yes, you are! You're really growing up, Harry. I have a lot of godfathering to catch up on, I guess." He ruffled Harry's always-messy hair and they laughed together, each one happy to have someone to call "family."

A little while later, they walked into the tile shop office. "Back already, Harry?" Doug asked in surprise.

"Hello, Mr. Asher," Harry replied. "This is Remus Lupin. He's my godfather," he added proudly.

Doug was shocked. "Your god. . .I thought you said. . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to confuse you. My godfather Sirius is dead. Remus is my parents' other best friend. I've just asked him to be my godfather. He offered to be my guardian, and I asked him to be my godfather as well." Harry's face was shining with pleasure.

"Oh, Harry, that's wonderful!" Doug answered. "Mr. Lupin, how very nice to meet you! And congratulations on your new godson. He's an exceptional young man. Oh please, do sit down! I seem to have forgotten my manners. Would you like tea?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Asher," Remus began.

"Doug, please," he said.

"Doug, then. And I'm Remus. We don't want to take up much of your time. We were hoping you could help us with something."

Harry began. "I was wondering if you could recommend a bank for me."

"What about the one just past Magnolia Crescent?" Doug suggested.

"Erm. . .that's where my aunt and uncle bank. The manager there. . .erm. . .didn't want my business," Harry replied, looking embarrassed, with resentment in his voice.

"What? What happened?" Doug was stunned. How could a bank possibly refuse this boy's business?

Harry and Remus looked at each other, then Harry told his boss what had happened.

"I'm appalled! Come on, Harry, we're going to sort this out right now," the man said as he grabbed his keys and mobile and headed for the door. "Sarah," he called to his office assistant, "I'm going to the bank with Harry and his godfather. I'll be back soon."

"OK, Doug, bye!" she called back to him.

"Erm. . .Mr. Asher? I honestly don't want my money in that bank. Is there another one not too far away?" Harry said as they all slid into his truck.

"Yes, I have my business account on the other side of town. We'll get you set up there. I can deposit your pay automatically into your account that way, and you can have a bank card so you can withdraw money from cash machines or use it as a credit card if you want."

"That would be great!" Harry said, beaming.

"First, though, we're going to the other bank and deal with that manager," Doug said sternly.

Harry was nervous. He'd never seen his boss angry. Mr. Asher was usually very easygoing. Even when things went badly wrong in the shop or on a job, he rarely got ruffled, much less angry. But he was obviously angry now. "I don't want to cause any trouble. . ." Harry began.

"You didn't cause any trouble, lad, don't worry about it," Doug assured him.

At the bank, Doug stormed over to the manager's cubicle, Harry and Remus in tow. "Mr. Polkiss, may I have a word?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Asher, so lovely to see . . ." the manager began, but blanched as he saw the rage on Doug's face and Harry and Remus behind him. He gulped.

"You refused to do business with an employee of mine," Doug began. "You then insulted him. You have just lost not only his business, but mine. I want all my money out of this bank right now, in cash."

Mr. Polkiss blanched. "C-c-cash? But sir, it's not our policy to pay out such large amounts in cash."

"Pay me. Now."

"Mr. Asher, I'm sure we can come to some accommodation for the young man, since you vouch for him, and. . ."

Doug leaned toward the cowering bank manager. "Did I not make myself perfectly clear? Cash. Now."

Polkiss choked back a croaking "Yes, sir," and got on his computer to make the arrangements. Doug got on his mobile. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm closing the account we have at the Magnolia Crescent branch bank right this minute. I'll explain later. Don't write any cheques on that account, and make a list of those that are outstanding, okay? I'll have another one set up by the end of the day. Yes, that's right. OK. I'll see you later. Bye."

Eventually, Doug had his money, and he, Harry and Remus left the bank. "OK, let's go to my bank."

Harry cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Erm. . .Mr. Asher?"

"Yes?"

"Uh. . .could we go to a shop so I can buy better clothes before we go to the bank? Maybe it would help if I didn't look like such a . . . ." Harry was at a loss for words, his cheeks hot with mortification. He could see Mr. Asher was still pretty upset, and didn't want to waste his time on errands, but if a similar scene happened with his boss as witness, Harry thought he'd just want to fall through the cracks in the floor. There was only so much humiliation a person could take in one day, after all.

"If that's what you want to do, that's what we'll do," Doug agreed. "But Harry. . .your character shines through no matter what you're wearing. I had no reservations about asking you to work for me when you first came to me, and you were dressed just like that. I know a good man when I meet him. And I haven't regretted hiring you for a second," he finished with a comforting smile.

Harry felt warmed by Doug's confidence. "Thanks. But dressing better will probably be a help."

Once they reached a department store, Harry seemed confused by the variety of things on display.

"What's wrong?" Doug asked in concern.

"Erm. . .I didn't know. . .it would be so big. I don't know where to look. . .what sizes to get. . ." Harry said with a nervous stammer. And he needed so many things – trousers or jeans, shirts, underwear, socks, trainers. . .and some food! Well, hopefully there'd be enough money for him to buy some food, and maybe have some left over for emergencies. He'd planned on putting half his money in the bank, and spending the other half on necessities, but now that he was in the store, he was just overwhelmed.

"You've never been to this shop, then?" Doug said with a smile.

"Erm. . .I've never been shopping," Harry replied, still seeming stunned by the variety around him. He turned to Doug and added quickly, "Except for my school things, of course, but we shop in a different place for those."

"We can go there if you'd like."

Uh-oh, he couldn't explain away Diagon Alley. Time to get off that subject! "Oh, no, I don't want to put you to that trouble. It's in London, anyway. This is fine. If you could just. . .show me where to look?"

"Sure! Come on, then." The three of them went into the young men's department and started looking at T-shirts, sleeveless T-shirts, shorts and jeans. Doug and Remus held up various sizes of shirts against Harry, trying to decide which would fit him best, but the enormous size of the shirt he was wearing made it impossible to see how big Harry himself actually was. "Here are three sizes of the same shirt and the same jeans, Harry," Doug said. "Take these into the fitting room and try them on – and come out and give us a look at them so we'll know what sizes to look for, okay?"

Harry grinned and carried his stack of clothing into the dressing room. A little while later, he came out in a sleeveless T-shirt and jeans. The shirt was baggy on him, with big gaps at the extra-large neck and arm holes that showed how very thin he was. When he bent over to tighten the laces on his outsized trainers, every bone in his spine showed, and his scapula looked like knife blades. Doug was appalled. When Harry returned to the dressing room, Doug turned to Remus and murmured, "Has he always been this thin?"

"At school, he's as well-fed-looking as any other boy his age, although until now he's been much smaller than the boys in his year. His relatives don't feed him very well, and there's not

much I can do about it with circumstances the way they are," Remus replied. "The school feeds the children very well."

"If it's alright with you, then, Remus, I'd like to start giving Harry lunch at work," Doug said. "Maybe we can fatten him up with one good meal a day. I'd noticed he's only bringing one piece of toast for his lunch. He works too hard to get by on that little food."

"I think he's growing too fast to get by on that little, as well. Harry's a proud boy, though. He'll be uncomfortable about your generosity unless it's handled delicately," Remus warned.

"I know just what to do. My wife is taking a cookery class, actually, and is making far too much food for us. It's become quite a hobby for her. I'll just ask her to do lunches for Harry and me. We can tell him he's a guinea pig for her cooking, just as I am," Doug said with a chuckle. "Do you think that will work?"

"That sounds wonderful. You're very kind. Thank you so much," Remus replied with great sincerity.

A short time later, Harry, Remus and Doug were at the cash desk with his purchases.

"Harry," Doug said, "Let's ask her to remove the labels from one outfit so you can wear them."

"Will they do that? That would be great!" he replied with a grin. The whole shopping experience had been a bit nerve-wracking for the boy. He'd been terribly embarrassed to have to ask about sizes on underwear and socks, and to explain to Doug he'd kept Dudley's extra-wide trainers on his own narrow feet by filling them with old socks. Doug thought that idea was pretty ingenious, but Harry was embarrassed to have to expose so much of his awful lifestyle to his boss and his godfather.

Soon, resplendent in a new T-shirt and jeans that actually fit him, with shiny white trainers on his feet, Harry felt like a new man. He bounced in his trainers, a huge grin on his face. "I never knew they were so springy!" He laughed with the glee of a small child with new shoes.

Doug and Remus exchanged a look that spoke worlds about their feelings about this young man and the life he'd been forced to lead. "Come on, then, Mr. Fashion Plate, let's get going to the bank!" Doug said, clapping a hand on Harry's shoulder.

The new bank gave them no problems, and everything was soon set up. Doug would deposit Harry's money directly into his account, and Harry had his own bank card and cheques to use as he needed. A bit of instruction in how to use the bank card and cheques later, they were headed back to Doug's office.

"Mr. Asher, I simply can't thank you enough," Harry said as he shook Doug's hand.

"It was my pleasure, lad," Doug replied. "Remus, it was good to meet you. Please let us know next time you're in town, and we'll have you over for dinner."

Remus flushed with plea. "Thank you, Doug. That would be wonderful!" He and Harry waved goodbye and left the office, heading toward Privet Drive.

"Um, Remus?" Harry said as they walked. "This is a lot of shopping bags. Even a few will cause me all kinds of trouble, and Dudley may take them away from me – or Uncle Vernon might. Could you make them small enough to fit in my pockets? I'll just carry one or two in my hands. Will I get in trouble with the Ministry for enlarging the bags again once I'm in my room?"

"Dumbledore has been considering obtaining a dispensation for you to do magic despite your age, because of the danger you're in. I'll talk to him about going ahead with that as soon as possible. But even without it, you shouldn't get in trouble with that little bit of magic. If the Ministry does say anything, I'll back you up." He glanced around to see if there were any muggles nearby. "Here, duck into this corner a moment." He performed a preservative and anti-crushing charm on the food Harry had bought, and then a shrinking charm on Harry's bank book, bank card and all but two bags, bags which had just a couple of pairs of socks, some underwear, a T-shirt and one pair of shorts in them. Harry hoped that, by having a sampling of what he'd bought in the bags that showed, his family wouldn't pay as much attention when he came downstairs in new clothes. "There you go. You know how to enlarge them, right?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry answered in his best schoolboy voice, and then laughed. "Thanks!" He hesitated a moment, then knelt down, loosening his shoe laces and putting the shrunk bags in his trainers. He grimaced at Lupin. "Good thing you put a preservative charm on the food!"

"Why are you putting them in your shoes?"

"I just realized, if they're in my pockets, he might find them. He will probably make me turn out my pockets looking for my money." Harry finished tying his laces and stood again.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you?" Remus asked, his face filled with concern.

"No, I'd rather handle it myself," Harry replied with more confidence than he felt. "Thanks so much for everything. I really enjoyed spending the day with you."

"I enjoyed it too. We'll do this again soon, all right?"

"I'd like that! Bye!"

"Bye, Harry. And good luck. You deserve it." Remus watched the boy square his shoulders, bracing himself for the coming confrontation, then enter the house. Remus sighed as he turned to leave. Vernon was already yelling at the boy.

"Well?" Uncle Vernon demanded. "Did that man pay you?"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry replied, clutching his shopping bags a little tighter.

"Let me see your cheque."

"I've already put it in the bank," Harry said, bracing for the explosion he knew was coming. He didn't have to wait long.

"You WHAT? Turn out your pockets!" Vernon bellowed. "We'll see if you have any money or not!"

"I don't have any money left," Harry snapped as he turned out his pockets. "There, see? I opened a bank account. And I bought some clothes that FIT me," Harry snapped, shaking the shopping bags in his fist.

"You can't open an account without an adult signing for you," Uncle Vernon snarled, a serious warning in his voice as he began to redden.

"My guardian signed for me," Harry answered.

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry suspiciously. "What guardian?"

"Remus Lupin, my wizard guardian," Harry replied defiantly.

"If you have a guardian, you can go live with him!" Vernon shouted.

"No, I can't, and you know it! Aunt Petunia has an agreement with Professor Dumbledore, and I have to stay here. Believe me, if I could live with Remus, I would!" Harry retorted.

Vernon was grumbling, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. "If you're making money, you will start paying rent!" he growled.

"If I were making enough money to pay rent, I'd move out and get a proper place where I could do what I want and eat what I want and do my schoolwork when I want. I'm already doing all the gardening and most of the cleaning and cooking here – I think you owe me pay, rather than my owing you rent!"

Uncle Vernon turned a fabulous shade of purple. "Go to your room! There will be no supper for you tonight!"

"Fine!" Harry snapped as he turned on his heel and took the stairs two at a time. He slammed the door with great satisfaction, enlarged the bags from his shoes, and pulled out the food staples he'd bought with some of his pay. He put the food under the loose board under his bed, keeping out a meat pie, some crisps, an apple and two Mars bars for his supper. No more hungry evenings when Uncle Vernon punished him with no supper. Life was getting better all the time!

Chapter 2 – Lunch Breaks and Friendship

On Harry's next day at work, he brought a piece of toast for his lunch, as usual. He'd managed to sneak an apple out of the house without Aunt Petunia noticing, as well, and was pleased at his successful larceny. He sat under the tree in the garden behind the shop polishing his apple before taking a bite of it when the owner's daughter, Casey, appeared, a large basket over her arm.

"Hello, Harry," she said with a big smile. "All right, there?"

"Yeah," he replied with a shy smile. "You?" he asked as he got up and offered to help her.

"I'm just wonderful," she said, letting him take the basket from her.

"Where would you like this?" he asked.

"Right there next to you would be fine."

Harry tilted his head, confused. "Next to me?"

"Of course! It's your lunch," she said with a laugh.

"My . . . lunch?" He looked at her quizzically. "I brought an apple," he said, holding out the small piece of fruit. Even in her choice of produce, Aunt Petunia was miserly.

"Yes, your lunch. My mum is taking cookery and she decided to try out her new recipes. I brought lunch for Dad, and for you and me as well. I've already dropped Dad's off in his office. This is ours."

"Wow. Why me?" Harry said with a delighted smile as he put the basket down and sat cross-legged next to it.

"She had lots of boy cousins growing up and said they never seemed to get enough to eat when they were teenagers, that they had 'two hollow legs' when it came to food. So she thought the same might apply to you. Are you hungry?"

Harry laughed out loud. "Always!" and grinned as he saw container after container coming out of the picnic basket. He helped Casey spread a tablecloth and set the food out, then waited politely for her to start serving herself.

"Go on, then, tuck in," she encouraged him.

"Oh no, ladies first," he said, a crooked grin on his blushing face. He wished he were dressed better, but of course that wasn't possible unless he wore his school robes or his nice new clothes. This girl was so pretty, and was being friendly to him, and they were having lunch together – amazing! – and he looked like a tramp, as usual. Working with tile was so messy, he'd continued wearing his old clothes to work. He shoved nervous fingers through his hair, trying to calm it down, but only succeeding in streaking the white marble dust coating his jet black hair. *I must look like a zebra now, with all the black and white stripes in my hair*, he

thought miserably. *And she saw me trying to flatten my hair. Way to go, Potter. Just act like an infatuated fool, why don't you.*

Casey noticed his attempt at improving his appearance and found his actions pleased her very much. If you looked past the clothes, he was a sweet, well-mannered, handsome boy, if a bit skinny and shy. "Here, I'll serve both of us, how's that?"

"Fine," he replied breathlessly. *Am I ever going to stop being nervous around girls?*

They chatted about various things as they ate, just getting to know each other. They found they liked the same bands, but there were many things Casey mentioned enjoying that Harry didn't understand – books he'd never read, films he'd never seen. She tried to find out what football team he followed, or what other sports interested him, and all he could reply was, "I, erm, like to run."

"Are you on a team at school?"

"Erm. . .yes."

"What's your distance?" she asked, trying to draw him out.

"Erm. . .it varies." *I play Quidditch. I'm really fast on a broom. I don't do other sports, although I do actually run for fitness. How do I get around all this?* "Actually, I'm good at the speed things, but I do some distance running as well, for fitness, you know. We have a large lake on our grounds, and I run around the lake in the mornings before class whenever I can."

"You have a lake? Do you swim, then, or go boating?"

Thinking of the second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and the first-years' traditional arrival at the castle in boats, he replied, "A little of both. I'm not very good at either, though," he said honestly.

Wow, a teenaged boy who's modest about sports! That's simply unheard of. He doesn't look bookish in spite of those glasses. He does have some muscle on that skinny body, so he must be an athlete, right? Casey amused herself with her thoughts about the boy sitting across from her. He seemed very reserved, quite shy even, yet had an aura of maturity that didn't match the shyness. Interesting.

Harry racked his brain trying to think of things to talk with her about. He wanted to prolong this conversation as long as possible, but was stuck for good topics of conversation.

Casey saw his discomfort and thought, *I'll bet he's never had a girlfriend. He doesn't seem to know what to say or do.* She decided to try some other topic of conversation. "What do you do when you're not here at work? What are your hobbies? Or do you hang out with friends?"

"Erm. . . my friends from school all live a long way from here. When I'm not here, I have lots of chores to do for my aunt and uncle."

"Like what?"

"I do the gardening and yard work, and stuff in the house, you know," Harry said lamely, not wanting to go into his status as a virtual slave to the Dursleys.

"Oh, I love gardening! What kind of plants do you have? I'm quite fond of roses, myself," she said with a smile, delighted to have finally found common ground with him. They chatted about gardening and the depraved nature of the bugs who liked to decimate their hard work for the rest of their lunch time. After that day, their conversations grew more comfortable and they developed an easy friendship.

"Dear Ron, Guess what? Casey, my boss's daughter, had lunch with me today. She said her mum is in a cookery class and wanted to try out recipes, and that she thought teenaged boys were always hungry, because she had loads of boy cousins who were always hungry growing up. I guess her cousins must be like you, hungry all the time! Ha! But living with the Dursleys, I'm hungry most of the time as well. So, lunch was a real treat! Casey says she's going to be bringing me lunch every day. Her mum is fixing enough for her dad, Casey and me to have HUGE lunches! I'm going to get fat, eating like this! Ha! Oh, I haven't told you about Casey, have I? She's our age, with long honey-blond hair and big golden-green eyes, very pretty. I keep wondering why she's bothering with me. Maybe I'm their 'charity of the month' or something, but she honestly doesn't make me feel like that. She makes me feel like she wants to be friends. I don't know why she'd want to, with the way I look in Diddy Dumkins cast-off clothes and so dirty I was actually gritty (well, I did wash my hands before eating), but I'm not arguing with her about it. When she sat down to have lunch with me today, like an idiot I tried to flatten my hair. I had white marble dust all over me, and succeeded in looking much older than I am with loads of grey hair from the dust. Trying to flatten my hair made it look worse! She just smiled. She's very nice. I'm enjoying the work. Hearing her talk about their dog Sirius makes me miss Snuffles even more than usual. I suppose some day I'll be over that. Wish that day would hurry up. Hope you're having fun there. Write back soon! Harry"

Harry was getting muscular and tanned from working at his job. This afternoon, he lay in the shade of a big tree, comfortable in his sleeveless T-shirt and shorts and new trainers. Since Casey had started bringing him lunch, he'd begun dressing in the clothes that fit him. Not only did he look better, but he was safer. Those baggy clothes of Dudley's caught on equipment from time to time and just weren't safe to wear at work, so Harry gladly binned the lot of them. Now he lay back on the grass, his glasses on the ground beside him, his arm up over his eyes as he dozed. He was awakened by a great *slurp* on his cheek. He sat up to find the dog, Sirius, wagging his tail madly and getting ready to lick Harry's face again.

"Oy, Sirius!" he said, laughing. "What are you up to?"

"He's helping me bring you lunch," Casey said. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah!" He grinned as he sat up and crossed his legs. "I'm a growing boy, you know!"

Casey laughed and sat down next to Harry. He was putting on weight as well as muscle thanks to the generosity of the Ashers. He ate as though he had two hollow legs, a "growing boy," indeed.

"Harry," she said as she set the meal out for them, "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Erm. . ." He hesitated. He wanted to be an Auror, but he couldn't very well say that to a Muggle. "A detective." Yeah, that was close enough.

"Really? Why?"

"I want to nail the bad guys," he said with great sincerity.

"Wow. Isn't that a dangerous job?"

"Somebody has to do it. It's as if. . . there's a war on between good and evil, and if all the good people worry about how dangerous it is to stop the evil ones, the evil side will win. Evil people are more interested in power or money or bullying people or whatever than in worrying about danger, so they don't think about their own safety. They just don't want to get caught. Somebody has to be the soldiers on the side of good. D'you see?"

Casey thought a moment. "Like soldiers in a war. I guess that's a good way to describe it. You've thought about this a lot, haven't you?"

Harry nodded. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I think I'd like to be a vet. I love animals and I want to be able to help them when they're hurt," she replied.

"That's great. That's several years of studying, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it will be worth it. I've already started taking some classes to prepare for it," Casey said.

"Like what?"

"Lots of biology, chemistry, maths. I took a couple of psychology courses last summer. . ."

Harry was surprised. "Psychology? For a vet?"

"Sure. To help people deal with having to put their pets to sleep. We had to put our dog to sleep a few years ago – before we got Sirius. It was an awful time, worrying about if we were doing the right thing, and grieving over poor Puddles."

He chuckled. "Puddles?"

Casey smiled. "He had a bit of a housetraining problem for a while. . ."

"Oh," he said with a grin, then sobered. "I'm sorry about him dying – I know that must have been hard."

"Probably like you and your godfather's dog – oh, but you lost your godfather at the same time, that must have been ever so awful."

Harry's eyes saddened. "Yes."

"Was the funeral horrible for you?"

"There was no funeral. He. . .they were just gone."

Casey sat up straighter, astonished. "Why? Even if they couldn't find their bodies, they could've had a memorial service."

"What for?"

"For those who loved him to have closure!"

Harry tilted his head and studied her. She sounded like Hermione in some ways, so insistent that there was a "right" way to do things. *She must read a lot of books*, he thought. "What's closure?"

Casey sat and thought a moment. "How long has it been since he died?"

"A little over a month."

"That's not that long ago. And you're still having a really hard time accepting his death, aren't you?" she said as she studied his sad eyes.

"Yes." He glanced away from her, studying the ground with sudden interest, his mouth a thin line of determination. He would NOT cry again!

She reached out and took his hand, holding it in both of hers and gently stroking it. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"You didn't make me sad – I came that way," he replied with a crooked smile.

Casey's heart turned over. There had to be some way to help him, so he would find happiness again – if he'd ever known any at all. "There are stages of grief. I learned this in my psychology classes. There's denial, then anger, then bargaining, then depression, then acceptance. Not everyone goes through the stages in that order, and sometimes a person goes through more than one stage at a time. Some people take longer to get through the stages, but if you have 'closure' in the form of a funeral or memorial service, a chance to say goodbye, then it's easier to get through the grieving process. Or so the book said."

Harry didn't know what to say. He studied the laces on his trainers for a while, thinking about what she'd said. "So. . ." he began hesitantly, "so if there's a memorial service, you think I'll get past this stuff faster? Or easier?" He looked up at her, afraid to believe her, yet hoping she knew what she was talking about.

"Lots of studies show that to be true. So I guess it must work," she said, still rubbing her thumbs across the back of his hand. His hands were nice, long fingered and slim yet strong, with interesting calluses on the palm from hours of Quidditch practice, as well as his work for her dad.

"Everyone else seems to have gone on with their lives," he murmured. "I think I'm the only one having so much trouble with it."

"Then maybe we can have a memorial service for him, just you and I," she offered. "We can. . .hmm. We can go down by the river and throw flowers in the water, say nice things about him, and say goodbye to him. Would you like to do that?"

He thought it sounded a bit silly in some ways. Flowers in the water? But then again, nothing he'd done had helped him. He was willing to try something new to get past the grief. "OK. That sounds nice. But you didn't know him. . ."

"But I know you, and he must have been wonderful for you to love him so much. I'd be honoured to be at his memorial service with you," she said earnestly. "How about Saturday? I'll bring tea. We can toast him. And his dog, too," she added with a smile.

A slow, sad smile spread across Harry's face. "That's very kind of you. Thanks."

Saturday dawned bright and breezy, a beautiful day for a picnic – or a memorial service. Casey met Harry in the park and they walked to the bridge over the river, then climbed down the slope to sit on the grassy riverbank. She spread the blanket she'd brought along, and set out the tea things. He had a fistful of flowers nicked from Aunt Petunia's garden.

"Oh, how beautiful! And they smell wonderful too," she said with a smile. "You got really nice flowers, Harry."

"Thanks," he said shyly. "This one is for you," he added as he pulled out a pink rose and handed it to her.

Casey turned as pink as the rose. "Oh, thank you! It's lovely!" She held the rose he had carefully de-thorned, and smelled its lush fragrance.

"I thought. . ." he began, then gulped and went on, "I thought it would look pretty in your hair. The pink against that honey gold. . ." He blushed as he said this.

Casey's eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. She slid the rose carefully behind her ear. "That's so sweet, Harry. Thanks."

He glanced at her, then studied his trainers for a moment, looked at her again and reached out hesitantly to tuck a strand of her long, silky hair in behind the rose. "You're welcome. Thank you for thinking of this. I'm actually looking forward to it in a way."

"Then let's get on with it, shall we?" She sat on the blanket and said, "Tell me about your godfather. What made him so wonderful. What your favourite memories are. That kind of thing. About the dog, too, Sirius."

"Sirius was my godfather's name. Snuffles was the dog," he began, then realized his mistake – he'd called her dog "Sirius" when they'd met. "We often called Snuffles 'Sirius' too, because they were a lot alike," he continued, "that's why I called your dog Sirius when I first saw him." Sensing she accepted that explanation well enough, Harry started to go on, then hesitated, trying to work out how to say what he wanted to, yet not reveal too much to a muggle. "Sirius was. . .I didn't know him all that long, you know. He was wrongfully imprisoned for 12 years. He escaped to try to help me when he thought I was in danger. I've only known him a couple of years."

She gulped, already astonished at Harry's story, and he'd barely begun. "Go on," she encouraged.

He took a deep breath, blew it out hard, rubbed his eyes, then looked off in the distance. He could see, in his mind's eye, the Dementors surrounding Sirius, ready to suck out his soul. He could see Sirius and Remus ready to kill Peter Pettigrew. He could see Sirius laughing his great bark of a laugh, teasing Harry at Christmas about something, playing games with Harry like an overgrown kid, making shadow figures dance on the ceiling as they both lay on Harry's bed in his room at Grimmauld Place. He could see Sirius frustrated at being forced to stay in Order Headquarters when he'd rather be out doing anything else. He could see Sirius in his Animagus form, bounding along beside the Hogwarts Express barking joyfully at him as the train pulled out. He could see Sirius calling encouragement to him as he battled the Death Eaters in the Death Chamber – and Bellatrix's spell making Sirius fall through the veil. Tears streamed down Harry's face as he thought of all these things. A gentle hand on his shoulder brought him back to the present.

"It's OK to mourn."

He ducked his head, scrubbed at his eyes with his knuckles, then turned to look at her. "You've seen me at my worst. Sometime I hope you can see me when I'm not falling apart all the time."

"I hope so too."

"OK, so. . . Sirius. He was Sirius Black, the man they had on the telly a couple of years ago as an 'escaped mass murderer' – only he didn't do it, he was innocent. He was my dad's best mate in school, they did everything together. He and my mum were good friends too. He was best man at my parents' wedding. He was strong, loyal, funny, irreverent . . . a rascal in many ways, a real ladies' man, too." He smiled. "The only girl he wanted to date who would never go out with him was my mum. All the other girls stood in line to go out with him, to hear him tell it." He chuckled and shook his head, remembering how he and Sirius had howled with laughter trying to have a "father/son" talk about the fairer sex. "He was a father-figure to me, a brother, a friend. He died trying to protect me. . . ." Realizing he'd said too much, Harry glanced at Casey and then tried to change the subject. "Snuffles was a great black dog like your Sirius. . ."

"Wait a minute – you said he died trying to save you? I thought you said they both fell down a hole?"

He sighed. "Erm. . ." He thought for a minute, then shrugged. Better to tell a lie based on the truth than a complete fabrication. "There's this evil man who was after my parents. He killed them, and tried to kill me – that's where I got this scar," he added, pushing his fringe off his forehead. "After he tried and failed to kill me, he disappeared. He's back, and he came after me again, and Sirius found out about it and tried to save me. That's how he died."

Casey was shocked. No wonder Harry was grieving so hard. He was blaming himself for his godfather's death. "If he died trying to save you, how did you escape?"

"There were other people there helping – they helped me escape."

"What happened to the bad man? And why's he after you?"

"He got away again. I can't explain why he's after me. Maybe it's just unfinished business, I don't know."

Casey was alarmed. "So he's still out there looking for you?"

He tried to reassure her. "He doesn't know where I am now. He lured me to that place, let me think Sirius had been captured. I went to try to rescue Sirius, then Sirius tried to rescue me, and you know the rest. It was my own stupidity. . .I should've known better, but. . ."

"Oh, Harry, anyone can be misled. Don't blame yourself."

"But it was my fault," he insisted.

She didn't know what to say to that. After a moment's pause, she said, "Why was he after your parents? And how did you escape when you were a baby?"

He drew shapes in the dirt by his feet as he tried to think of a logical answer. "Well. . .my mum died protecting me. That's how I was saved. He was after my parents because they were trying to stop him."

"They were detectives?"

With a grim smile, he nodded. "Yes, you could say that."

"Wow. Do you remember them?"

"Sometimes I can hear my mum screaming as she died – like in dreams, y'know? Other than that, no, I don't remember them."

"How awful! I'm so sorry!"

"'S'OK. It was a long time ago."

Casey shook her head, appalled at what this gentle, sweet-natured boy had been through in his life so far. She sighed and said, "So what else about Sirius?"

"He invited me to live with him, but his name hadn't been cleared yet, so I was stuck living with my aunt and uncle. When he asked me if I'd be interested in living with him, I'd only known him a very short time, and I'd been afraid of him before I got to know him – he was an 'escaped mass murderer,' after all, for all I knew then. But when he asked – that was one of the happiest moments of my life." He smiled a little at the memory. "I'd be living with my dad's best friend. He'd be able to tell me stories about my parents, about them growing up and being married, about when I was born, all that kind of thing other people hear in their families all the time." He paused, his face growing solemn again. "I'd never heard any of it. My aunt and uncle won't talk about my parents at all except to tell people my parents were killed in a car crash, and that's where I got my scar. That's so unfair. They were murdered! I don't know why they can't accept that. Sirius. . .he opened doors to my family history, to my parents. . . . We

were going to live together and be a family." Tears were streaming down his face again. "We never had the chance."

"I don't know what to say. That's the saddest story I've ever heard."

"It's not all sad, you know. Sirius loved me. Nobody ever hugged me, ever, not since my parents died, until I went away to school when I was eleven, and even then not often. Sirius hugged me, wrestled with me, tickled me, made me feel loved and important to him. I'd never had that before. I can count on one hand – well, maybe with a few extra fingers – the number of times I've been really, truly hugged by anyone but Sirius. Most of those were from my friend Ron's mum. She's kind of adopted me." He chuckled, thinking fondly of Molly Weasley. "She has seven children. She said one more doesn't make much difference, but she treats me . . . well, she makes me feel really special. Some hugs were from my friend Hermione, others from my friend Hagrid. And some from Remus, too. But that's about it." He looked at her with very serious eyes. "You come from a loving family. I've seen how you all treat each other. You're always hugging or patting each other on the back or arm, whatever." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "I was . . . hungry . . .for someone to care enough . . . to want to touch me. I used to think I must smell bad or that something was very wrong with me. Nobody ever wanted to sit near me, touch me, or talk with me. . . except to yell at me, of course . . . ." His voice trailed off. "When I finally got to go away to school, I made friends, good friends, but I still missed having the closeness of a family of my own who cared about me. Sirius changed all that for me."

"Your aunt and uncle never hugged or kissed you, cuddled you, any of that?"

"They barely changed my nappies, and did that at arm's length," Harry said bitterly. "As soon as I was out of nappies, they never touched me again except to hit me or push me around. Baths, dressing, eating, skinned knees, whatever, I was on my own."

Casey realized she'd been cherished her whole life. She couldn't imagine any child growing up with no love at all and still turning out to be as nice a person as Harry was. He was considerate, well-mannered, kind-hearted, generous – how could that be, with the way he'd grown up? Thinking of his experiences gave her the shivers. "They sound like awful people."

"Too right." He sighed, shook his head and rubbed his face hard. "OK, what's next in this service? I've probably been maudlin long enough."

"Now we drink a toast to Sirius and Snuffles and throw the flowers in the river." She poured tea from her thermos into two cups and they stood and lifted their cups to the river.

"To Sirius Black. And to Snuffles." Harry said, his voice breaking. "Best family a bloke could have."

"Hear, hear," Casey said quietly.

They drank their tea, put the cups down and sprinkled the flowers in the river so they made a small multi-coloured carpet floating downstream. With each he flower tossed, Harry said, "Thank you, Sirius, for being part of my life. Thank you for the fun we had together. Thank you for listening to me, for being there for me. Thank you for . . .loving me." His voice broke. He bit his lip, trying not to cry anymore. A soft arm came around his back, and the next thing

he knew, his head was being drawn down to Casey's shoulder. He stiffened, nearly pulled back, then accepted the comfort offered gratefully, wrapping his arms around her and holding on to her tightly. She rocked Harry back and forth, crooning to him and stroking his hair and rubbing his back as he sobbed.

A while later, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "I'm so sorry. What you must think of me. . . . I got your blouse all wet. I don't usually cry, but now I can't seem to stop."

"It's OK. It's part of the healing process. And I don't mind at all. I just hope it's helping."

He scrubbed frantically at his face, as if he was trying to scrub his skin right off to remove the tears.

She reached up and took his hands in hers. "Harry, honest. It's OK."

He smiled his crooked smile at her through his tears. "I can add another hug to my list now," he said with a broken chuckle. "Thanks."

"Any time you need a hug, Harry Potter, you come see me!" she laughed. She reached out and wiped the last tears from his cheeks, then wrapped her arms gently around his neck. "Did anyone ever tell you that you give great hugs?" she said with warm laughter in her voice.

Harry looked a bit startled. "Actually, no."

"Well, you do!" She looked up into his emerald green eyes, smiling at him.

He leaned in slowly and shyly, gently kissed her cheek, then rested his forehead against hers. "Thank you. You really have helped me today. I mean that." He took a step back, taking her hand from his neck and kissing her palm before letting go. "I suppose we should get going," he said. "You probably have lots of other things to do today."

"Actually, I'm free all day. Do you want to go do something fun now? It's a beautiful day."

Harry helped her pick up the tea things and put them in her basket, and fold the blanket they'd sat on earlier. He smiled at her and said, "I'd love to spend the day with you." He shyly took her hand and they walked back up the riverbank, off for a day of adventure.

Chapter 3 – Beginnings

Harry and Casey began a slow, gentle courtship after Sirius's memorial service. After his humiliating first snogging session with Cho, Harry was reluctant to open himself up to embarrassment like that again. But with Casey. . .Casey was comfortable in her own skin, and she was comfortable with him. She had a brimming self-confidence that let her float blissfully through life, and her exuberance spilled over onto Harry on a regular basis. She was often the one who reached for his hand or patted his shoulder while making some silly comment, long before he thought she'd be comfortable with him reaching for her in any way. Harry was struck with a sense of wonder that this beautiful girl from a well-to-do family would even consider being seen with him, much less being so friendly with him. He cherished every moment they had together.

Every day, they'd eat lunch and talk, and on as many days as he could manage, given his Dursley workload and his homework from Hogwarts, after Harry finished work, he'd go home to wash and change, then they'd go for a walk, usually ending up sitting on the swings in the play park where they'd met. The Dursleys were just as pleased if Harry wasn't in the house at all, as long as he got all the work done, so Harry and Casey often stayed in the park until tea-time, sometimes later. Several such evenings later, as they walked along the edge of a little wood, Casey reached for Harry's hand and laced her fingers through his, then leaned against his arm, rubbing her cheek on his shoulder. He stopped walking and looked down at her, his nerves tingling, hoping he was reading the signs right. His stomach was doing flip-flops. Her lashes were a dark, feathery fringe against her cheek as she relaxed against him. She turned toward him and lifted her face, gazing at his mouth expectantly. Harry's stomach was doing tap dances on top of the flip-flops now. He could feel himself shaking. *Please don't let me mess this up*. He let go of her hand and put his arm gently around her back, his other hand touching her cheek hesitantly. She smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling. His nerves absolutely on fire now, he leaned down and brushed her lips with his. She lifted her arms and put them around his neck, pulling him back down for another kiss. Harry thought his heart would explode with delight. *She likes me, she actually likes ME!* Breathless, he pulled back and gazed at her, bedazzled that she cared about him, that she was kissing him! A joyful smile spread over his face, which grew broader as she laced her fingers in his hair and pulled him down to kiss him again. A few lovely snogging moments later, Harry was savouring the delicious sensation of holding Casey in his arms, her face tucked into the hollow of his shoulder, her breath tickling his neck.

"Harry?" she murmured.

"Hmm?"

"I hope you don't think I'm too forward or anything," she said, nuzzling his neck as he held her.

He turned his head to look at her. All he could see was her ear, her cheek, and that magnificent golden fall of hair that reached past her waist. "Erm. . .no?" he said, hoping it was the right answer. "I thought you were . . .um. . .just about perfect." The feel of her breath on his neck and her lovely warm curves against his body were driving him mad.

She chuckled and snuggled against him, which wasn't helping Harry's situation at all. Embarrassed, he broke the embrace as gently as he could, kissing her nose as they parted.

"Only 'just about perfect'?" she said, her eyes twinkling merrily up at him. "I'll have to try harder!"

Harry gulped. "Really?" he said, a blush suffusing his face. "Erm. . .OK," he said with a chuckle as he bent to kiss her again. Ever so timidly, he opened his mouth and barely brushed her lips with his tongue. She returned the favour eagerly. Fireworks went off in Harry's brain, and other parts of his anatomy as well, as he revelled in the taste of her. "Umm, perfect," he murmured against her hair when they finally broke the kiss. He put his arm around her shoulder and walked her home, where he was treated to yet another perfect kiss. *And to think I didn't want to come back to Privet Drive ever again*, he thought ruefully as he walked home. *I'm so glad Dumbledore insisted I came back!*

Harry's growth spurt was so exhausting, whenever he was still for more than a few moments, he seemed to fall asleep. Another lunch time at work found Harry sound asleep under a tree in his typical pose, his glasses lying on the ground beside him, his arm up over his eyes. His nose started to wriggle as something brushed it ever so lightly. . .then brushed it again. . .then that tickling sensation moved to his bare shoulder and chest and warm lips were pressed against his.

"Mmmmm," he murmured in delight as he started to return the kiss – but the lips had been removed. Had he been dreaming? He opened his eyes and squinted. Nope. Not dreaming. Or if it was a dream, it was a good one. A slow smile spread across his face. There was that long waterfall of honey gold hair cascading down onto his chest and tickling him.

Casey gave him an impudent grin and flicked her hair again, knowing she was driving him mad. "You are such a sleepyhead!"

"Growing is hard work!" he whined, then gave her an impish grin. "How about another kiss, now that I'm awake enough to appreciate it?"

She pouted prettily for a moment. "You should've appreciated the one you got. I don't have any more to spare!"

"Oh really?" Harry laughed. He wrapped his hand around the length of her hair and gently pulled her down into his arms, then rolled her over onto her back. "Are you sure about that?" Laughing and kissing at the same time can be a bit awkward to manage sometimes, but he and Casey had managed to master it.

"Oh my, what big muscles you have!" Casey giggled as she ran her fingers over his arms.

"The better to squeeze you with, my dear," he leered in his best "big bad wolf" voice as he tightened his embrace, then started to back away from her. "Seriously, though, you're going to get messy if we keep this up. I'm all sweaty."

"Yes, where is your shirt, young man?" she teased, not allowing him to budge from his position.

"I was moving some boxes in the shop and the metal strap on the load broke loose. Ripped my shirt to shreds."

"Oh no!" Casey cried in alarm, pushing his arms away, sitting up and searching him for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"Just a scratch, nothing major. I'm pretty good at getting out of the way of dangerous objects," he grinned, thinking of the many Bludgers he'd dodged the last few years. "I was exaggerating about the shreds – it just ripped the shirt most of the way down the side, so I gave it up as a lost cause. At least the shirt was the only casualty – nothing actually fell, no tiles are broken, and nobody got hurt but me. It's pretty hot today anyway. Your dad didn't seem to mind my working shirtless. Did I break a rule? I didn't think to ask, once my shirt fell off. I don't have an extra one here, and didn't want to take time off to go home for another, as I have a table to finish today."

"Oh, heavens no. I was just surprised. You've always seemed kind of . . . I don't know. . .shy, or modest, I guess, so seeing you shirtless was kind of a surprise. A *nice* surprise, though!" She laughed at the rich blush washing his cheeks. "I won't tell you how long I stood there watching you sleep," she teased, as she held the end of her hair and used it like a paint brush to define the planes of his chest, "admiring all these nice muscles. Hmm, bulging biceps, lovely pecs, washboard abs. . .you must be working out besides working here."

Harry put his hand over hers where she was "painting" his chest. "If you keep tickling me, I will have to retaliate," he said with a chuckle. "I haven't really been working out, I just run in the mornings, but I enjoy running, so that's not like 'working out.' And I lift a lot more things myself here in the shop than the other guys do. It keeps me from having to work out in a boring gym – if I had a boring gym to work out in, that is," he finished with his crooked grin.

She smiled back at him, then said, "You know, dear sir, I still haven't found your wound. Are you fibbing to me?"

"Does this look like the face of a liar?" Harry asked in mock indignation. Then remembering his history of getting out of trouble by saying whatever was convenient, he added, "Don't answer that!" and turned around with a chuckle, showing her a long scratch down his right side near his back.

"Oh, poor baby. It's not too bad, actually," Casey said. She giggled, then leaned down and kissed it. "There, I've kissed it and made it well!"

Harry stiffened as she did it, and hesitated before smiling over his shoulder at her.

"What is it?" she asked, thinking she'd offended him.

He turned back to her, and then paused for a long moment. "Erm. . .nobody's ever done that to me before," he said quietly. He couldn't possibly describe how her simple act had made him feel. Although he knew she was just playing, she'd touched a place in his heart. He tried to get back to the silliness of a moment before, twisting around to glance at his wound. "Is the scratch gone now?" he asked with an attempt at his crooked grin.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to make you feel bad," Casey began.

"No! That was the sweetest thing. . . ." He didn't know what else to say. Finally, the right words occurred to him. "Thank you," he replied simply.

She leaned down and kissed the wound again, more tenderly. "Anytime you have an ouchie, you come to me and I'll take care of it for you, OK?"

"OK," he said with a warm smile. "That's a deal!"

Casey opened the lunch basket and started setting out their meal. "But my goodness, when those metal straps go, they are lethal! You must really be quick on your feet!"

"Yeah, well, when it comes to trying to stay intact. . ." he grinned as he sat cross-legged in front of where she knelt. "I do try to work at it. And I was pretty lucky, too. Your dad nearly had kittens when he heard what happened."

"I can just imagine! You did put antiseptic on it, didn't you?"

"Yes, Doctor," he said in a mock-serious tone. She started "beating him up" with the end of her hair, very gently. Soon they were both giggling.

"OK, young lady, are you going to feed me or not?" he whined playfully.

Casey handed him his lunch and a small cold bottle of apple juice. "I hope this is okay. Mum's going organic this week."

"I think it's brilliant," he said sincerely, then took a huge bite out of his wrap, which was a soft tortilla filled with meat, vegetables and cheese. "Mmmm, gbob doo!"

She giggled. "What?"

He struggled to swallow. "I said, 'good, too!' I suppose I was using Ron's table manners for a moment there. Sorry about that." Harry had told Casey all he could about the Weasleys, Hermione and Hagrid. It was hard to talk about his life without mentioning magic or wizarding things, but he thought he hadn't made many slip-ups so far.

"Harry," Casey asked a while later. "Do you believe in magic?"

He choked on a mouthful of crisps. After fighting to swallow without strangling, he managed to croak out, "Sorry?" *Oh no*, he thought, *has she guessed? Where did I slip up?*

"Magic. You know. Hocus-pocus, magic tricks, disappearing acts, that kind of thing," Casey continued calmly.

Whew, Harry thought in relief. *She must have seen something on the television, or read something – it wasn't me. Please, don't let it have been me!* "Erm. . .yeah. I don't know. Do you believe in it?"

"I think it would be wonderful if it were real! Wouldn't it be fun to fly through the air without a plane? Although brooms look like they'd be pretty uncomfortable to ride on."

He had to stifle his impulse to explain the Cushioning Charm that made riding broomsticks much more comfortable than it looked. "Why do you ask?"

"I was reading a story that involved magic and thought, 'wouldn't it be fun to turn Dudley into a toad'?" Her merry eyes caught his and they both exploded in laughter.

"A toad? That would be an unkind comparison to toads everywhere, don't you think?" Harry asked when he caught his breath. "But yeah, it would be great to turn Dudley into a toad – or to give him a pig's tail!"

Casey fell over, she was laughing so hard at this picture. "That's perfect! I love it! Wouldn't it be fun?"

Harry grinned at her, shaking his head. "I think it would be great fun." He decided to stop there before he got himself into trouble.

"There's a film about Merlin at the cinema this weekend. Would you like to see that on our date?" she said. They'd been going out every Friday night and Saturday afternoon for weeks. Harry spent Sundays at 12 Grimmauld Place or The Burrow, visiting Remus and his friends. "I love films about Merlin and King Arthur."

"Yes, that sounds great! I've never been to the cinema," Harry said eagerly.

Casey was shocked. "Every time I think I've heard everything there is to hear about you, you come up with a surprise for me. How can you have never been to the films? You're such an innocent!"

"The same way I've never been to most places other kids get to go," he reminded her gently. *And there are lots of things you still don't know about me,* he thought. *If only you knew. . . .*

"What would you like to do, if you could do magic, Harry?"

Harry smiled to himself, having a private joke about his "real life" as a wizard, then sobered. "If I could do anything magic at all, I'd like to get all the evil people of the world locked up so the good ones can enjoy their lives safely. And I'd like to fly on a broom. I think that would be brilliant!" He grinned hugely at the thought. "What would you do if you could do magic?"

"I like the idea of being invisible. I think that would be amazing. Imagine how you could sneak out of your house and do what you want if nobody could see you!" Casey laughed.

"Invisibility has its uses, I'm sure," Harry agreed, trying not to choke on his meal as he laughed. If Ron and Hermione could hear them now!

"So how was your first film?" Casey said as they strolled toward her house, holding hands. He leaned over to smell the pink rose in her hair. Every time they had a date, he brought her a pink flower for her hair, usually a rose, invariably nicked from the Dursleys' garden. Somehow his smelling the rose turned into kissing her hair.

"I liked it a lot," he said with a grin. "Especially the part where we snogged through the credits."

Casey playfully punched his arm. "Harry! You were supposed to be paying attention!"

"I don't know what a gaffer or best boy is anyway, nor do I know any of those people personally, so I don't think it's too horrible that I missed seeing their names up there," he insisted as he put his arms around her and pushed her against the wall of the darkened building they were passing. "I'd rather pay attention to you," he continued, moving in to kiss her again. When they broke apart, he put his forehead against hers. "I honestly, truly, thoroughly enjoyed the film. Thanks for thinking of it. I enjoy stories about Merlin. And I *especially* enjoyed the credits!" he finished with a laugh.

"Harry Potter! You rascal!" she responded, laughing as she pulled him down into another kiss.

"Oy! What's this!" an all too familiar rough voice called.

"Eauw. Gross," a second boy said with a dirty titter.

"Hey! Get a room!" cried a third voice, shrieking with laughter at his own wit.

"Big D – that's your stupid cousin snogging that girl!" The fourth boy sounded as if he were announcing the sighting of a UFO, he was so astonished.

Harry sighed and straightened up. Dudley and his gang had found them. "What do you want?" Harry said to his cousin as non-combatively as possible. If he could avoid a confrontation. . .

"What do you think you're doing?" Dudley said stupidly.

"What's it look like?" Harry snapped.

"Hey, Dud, it's that Casey girl who just moved in on my street," Dudley's best friend Piers said with sneer. "Now we know she's a. . ."

"Piers," Harry warned quietly. "If you don't watch your mouth, I will have to wash it out for you. And in case you hadn't noticed, I'm bigger than you now."

"Just taller – and there are five of us!" Piers cried. He was, by far, the smallest one of the group, but the mouthiest. The others were just dumb muscle, following Dudley's mean-spirited ideas and egged on by Piers's comments.

"Come on, Harry, let's leave these children alone," Casey said in her coolest, most mature tone as she calmly took Harry's arm and steered him away from the gang.

"Hey! We're not finished here," Dudley yelled after them.

Harry turned back to face his cousin, his jaw clenched, fighting to control his anger. "Dudley. You do know what I will do to you when we get home if you don't leave us alone."

Dudley quailed under Harry's steady gaze, but before he could say anything else, Piers yelled, "Get 'em!" and started running toward Harry and Casey. Piers, instigator that he was, got the other bullies in the gang started, then stood back to watch what happened. He would jump into the fray once their victims were down and already being pummelled. Dudley waited a moment, and then decided to follow his mates in their attack on his cousin and Casey.

Harry didn't pull out his wand. He didn't think of anything particular to do. He just felt a huge rage grow inside him, and a protective instinct about Casey that meant anyone trying to get to her would definitely have to go through him. He put himself between Casey and the gang, pressed her against his back with his left hand, then raised his right hand and held it out toward the oncoming bullies. It was as if they'd hit a wall. They fell backwards, rolled on the ground in confusion for a moment, then got up and tried again. When they were repelled six feet from their intended victims for the second time, they pelted down the road away from Harry and Casey. Harry dropped his hand and turned toward Casey, taking her hand and starting to walk hurriedly away, hoping to get clear of the area before any Aurors arrived. "Come on, let's go," he said, his heart beating wildly. He'd just done serious wandless magic he didn't even know he could do. Was he in trouble or not? And how would he explain it to Casey?

"H-h-harry?" Casey stammered. "What was that?"

"I dunno. Maybe they heard someone coming. They stopped and we got out of there, that's all that matters to me," Harry assured her, hoping she'd take him at his word. When they'd got a couple of streets away, he slowed his pace and put his arms around her. "You're trembling! Are you cold? Are you okay?" He pulled her close and held her tightly, trying to comfort and calm her.

"I think. . .it's. . .j-just. . .n-n-nerves," she said, her teeth nearly chattering. "I was really scared. They had us cornered, and there was nobody around to help, and. . . ." She trembled in his arms for a few moments. When she was calmer, she pulled back to look up at him. "Harry, you were so brave! The way you stood up to them. . ."

"Dudley's gang has beaten me up regularly all my life," he said with disgust. "I'm used to their tactics."

"I think after tonight, they'll leave you alone. I don't know what you did, but I felt tingles coming off your body, like waves of. . .I don't know, power, electricity, something. It was . . .huge. . .and kind of scary."

Oh no, Harry thought. He studied her face, swallowed hard, hoping against hope. . . . "Are you . . .afraid. . .of me?"

She seemed surprised by his question. "Why would I be afraid of you?"

"I don't know. . .what you just said. . .it made me wonder," he said nervously. "I was trying to protect you. Did I hurt you?"

"No! No, you didn't hurt me, I'm fine – just, um, unnerved, I think. I've heard about Dudley's gang, how they beat up little kids and so on. I never thought about them beating you up."

"I'm their favourite target," he replied grimly, "or have been until recently. I'm glad I've had such a growth spurt this summer. It's been a real help to be so much taller than Dudley. It kind of puts him off, y'know?" Harry said with his crooked grin. He sobered, then continued, "Dudley and his gang enjoy picking on me. It's the only sport they're good at, I suppose." He tilted his head and gazed at her, tenderly brushing the hair back from her face. "I'm sorry you were frightened." He looked at her a few moments longer, his face growing sadder with each

moment as he considered the horrors of his life and how they'd already had an impact on Casey. She probably was afraid of him now, but just hadn't admitted it to herself yet. If she wasn't afraid, perhaps she should be, with all the bad things that happened to him. He felt he was a magnet for trouble. The last few weeks of peace, happiness and mostly avoiding confrontations with the Dursleys had been abnormal for him. He shouldn't have let himself get used to it. "They probably won't bother you if you're not with me," he said slowly, trying hard to read whatever was in her eyes. "If you . . .um. . .don't want to. . .," he sighed before continuing, "go out with me anymore. . . I'll understand."

Casey looked at him in surprise, and then took a moment to gather her thoughts. She could tell her answer was very important to him. His eyes were filled with raw emotion. The sadness, the loneliness, the haunted look he'd had when she first met him – they were all back. Dudley would not have that kind of victory over Harry, not if she had anything to do with it. She took a deep breath and put on her most pert attitude. "Why would I not want to go out with the Hero of Privet Drive," she said with a smile. "You rescued me, Sir Knight. I am your fair maiden, and am delighted that chivalry is not dead."

Relieved, Harry hugged her tightly, burying his face in the hair lying thickly on her neck and shoulder. "Thank you. You had me scared for a moment there." He held on to her, breathing a sigh of contentment. "You smell so good," he murmured. He pulled back and gazed into her eyes, then kissed her. When he straightened up again, he added, "You taste good, too."

"Mmm, you too." Casey chuckled and leaned her head on his shoulder. "My hero," she murmured contentedly as she snuggled against him. After a few moments, they walked down the street with their arms around each other, glad the evening had had a happy ending after all.

That Sunday at Grimmauld Place, Harry said, "Professor Dumbledore, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"Certainly, my boy! How has your week been?" Dumbledore responded kindly. "Come and sit down, have some of these lovely biscuits Molly just brought in. Tea?"

"Yes, thanks." As they went through the motions of having tea and biscuits, Harry gathered his thoughts. "Erm. . .you know, sir. . . I've been seeing a Muggle girl."

"Remus says she's a lovely young lady. I'm so happy for you," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "I have to say, honey blond hair has always been a favourite of mine, especially on young ladies."

Harry grinned at his beloved headmaster. "She is beautiful," he began, "and . . .well. . .what I need to ask you, sir, is. . .erm. . ."

Dumbledore waited patiently. Harry had apparently got stuck or run out of steam – he was silent, watching one of his trainers idly kicking at the worn carpet.

"Do you need to have a talk about something of a rather. . .sensitive nature?" Dumbledore suggested. "Have you, perhaps, done something you oughtn't?"

"Sort of." He watched as sad lines began to appear in his professor's face. "Oh, no, sir, not that!"

"I hesitate to ask what you mean by 'not that.' Perhaps it would be best if you just told me what's troubling you."

"I, um. . .I think I need to tell her I'm a wizard," Harry said nervously.

Dumbledore looked relieved in a way. "May I ask why you feel such a need?"

Harry told him about the magic he'd performed the previous day, when Dudley's gang had attacked them.

"You produced such a shield wandless and with no incantation? I knew you were going to be a powerful Wizard, but that's a remarkable skill to appear with such power and accuracy when you've had no training. I will have to look into extra classes for you, in order to train this talent of yours." Dumbledore paused, thinking. "I agree there's a reason to tell her you're a wizard. I don't, however, think it's the best thing to do right away. Put it off as long as possible. Perhaps you won't need to tell her at all."

"So I do have your permission, if I need to tell her. If I end up having to do serious magic in front of her, that kind of thing, right? I don't want her memory erased or altered."

"Yes, you have my permission, but do remember, this confidence is not something to share lightly. It will endanger you for her to know about you, especially if she cannot keep such news to herself," the headmaster cautioned.

"I'll be very careful about it. I hope I don't have to tell her, but in case I'm forced to do it, I wanted your permission first."

"Thank you for asking. That was wise of you." Dumbledore took another bite of his biscuit. "These are delicious, aren't they?"

"Yes," Harry grinned, taking a big bite out of his own biscuit, grateful to be able to spend time with his headmaster.

After a few more companionable moments, Dumbledore said, "I think it's time I taught you another charm."

Harry grinned up at Dumbledore. He loved having the old headmaster teach him new skills. Dumbledore was a great teacher. "What is it?"

"It's a communication charm. With it, you can whisper messages into people's ears many miles away, if need be. If the other person knows the same charm, you can communicate back and forth that way, fast as thought. It's ridiculously difficult, but since you're showing an aptitude for wandless magic – which is quite advanced, I must say – it's possible you may be able to master this charm. It would certainly be a useful tool for you to have."

"How does it work?"

"Go and stand in the corner there with your back to me. Tell me what you hear."

Harry went and stood where he was told. "Erm. . .I hear doxies in the curtains again," he chuckled. "Mrs. Weasley will be furious!"

A small voice in his ear replied, "I'm sure she will be. Sherbet Lemon."

Harry turned around, his eyes alight with excitement. "You said, 'I'm sure she will be. Sherbet Lemon.' And I recognized your voice! It sounded as if you were talking to me directly."

"Precisely! Now you see how it works," Dumbledore said with a smile that twitched his long silver beard. "You can do it with a wand while you're learning it, or if you're sending it a long distance, but I imagine you'll be able to do it wandless before long. The incantation is *Adfero*. You can say this aloud while you're learning the spell, but the spell loses its main value, which is secret communication, after all, if you have to speak the incantation. Give your wand a firm wave, pointing it in the direction of the recipient, thusly," Dumbledore demonstrated, "while thinking of the person's name, then say *Adfero*. So if I want to send you a message in this manner, Harry, I will point my wand where I think you are – if I'm at Hogwarts, I'll aim it toward Surrey if you're at the Dursleys', and you will receive it. The spell works like post owls, in being able to find the recipient with very little information. I think *Harry Potter* and say *Adfero* and my message, and within seconds you will know what I wanted to tell you. Let's try it, shall we?" The headmaster smiled encouragingly at Harry.

"So I think 'Professor Dumbledore' and say 'Adfero' and then my message. I wave the wand when I think your name, is that right?" Harry frowned in concentration, trying to get every step locked in his mind.

"Yes, that's perfect. Give it a try."

Harry thought about what kind of message to send. *I should probably have my message planned before starting*, he thought. He pondered a moment more, took a deep breath and extended his wand. "Adfero!" A small silver light flew between his wand and Dumbledore's head.

Dumbledore continued to smile benignly at the boy. Nothing seemed to happen.

"It didn't work, did it?" Harry said, disappointed.

"Well. . ." Dumbledore began, "what I received was quite a tumult of ideas, no clear message. I was waiting for the message to appear."

"Oh. I thought I had it organized enough. Let me give it another try."

"Keep your first message simple, Harry. Remember, all I sent you was 'Sherbet Lemon.'"

"But I also heard you say 'I'm sure she will be.' You answered what I had said."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, that's true, but the message itself was 'Sherbet Lemon.' Keep it that simple at first."

"OK." He took a deep breath, tried to quiet all the thoughts rampaging through his ever-busy mind and concentrate on something very simple. He performed the spell again.

Dumbledore tilted his head, as if trying to figure something out. "Something about Miss Asher, a mosaic you're working on, Fawkes, a dog named 'Sirius,' Miss Granger and Ron Weasley? It's a bit jumbled."

"Rats! That's not what I was trying to send," Harry grumbled.

"Try it again. The fact that the spell is working at all is quite remarkable in a wizard of your age. You'll get it. Take your time."

Harry screwed up his face, forcing every extraneous thought to the back of his mind, and concentrated hard on a very simple message to send. The silver light flew from his wand toward Dumbledore again.

"Ah!" said Dumbledore. "Chocolate frogs?"

Harry's face lit up. "Yes! That's it!"

"Well done! Do it again, making the message more complex. I will turn my back so I can't anticipate the spell."

Harry cast the spell again.

Dumbledore laughed out loud. "I love the way your mind works, Harry. 'Ron Weasley loves Chocolate Frogs and Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans.'" Dumbledore smiled a moment longer, his eyes twinkling in amusement. "And as an afterthought, you added that he also loves Miss Granger but he's too thick to realize that."

Harry blushed crimson. "Oh! I didn't mean to send that! I was just thinking it after I sent the other. . ."

"You need to be in complete control of your thoughts when you open this channel of communication, Harry. Just send what you want to send, then lift your wand and end the spell. You held the wand on me too long." The headmaster chuckled. "And I agree with your assessment. I do believe he has deep feelings for Miss Granger, but he has not yet realized it."

Harry and Dumbledore worked on the spell for quite a while. After a while, Harry was able to control the spell well enough for the headmaster to suggest he try it wandless and in silence. "This spell can go badly wrong, as you've seen, if you don't remember to end it when the message ends. Be careful of that. Without the wand to concentrate the magic and give you a physical reminder of the spell's power, you might reveal more information than you intended."

"OK." With a lot more trial and error, he was able to perform the spell without his wand. It felt weird the first few times the silver light emerged from his fingertips rather than his wand, but soon Harry had firm control of the spell both with and without his wand.

"Well done, Harry!" Dumbledore said. "Now to refine it even further – you can send it without using your hands, no gesture at all. Simply think what you want to send, and to whom it will be sent, then think the incantation. Concentrate hard, Harry, this is extremely difficult magic."

Harry tried repeatedly, but wasn't able to get a complete message sent without using some kind of gesture.

"As I said, it's very hard to do. You work on that. It's an extension of wandless magic. I believe you will master the spell soon."

"I'll work on it, Professor. It would be very useful to be able to send a message with no gesture or incantation that someone else can notice."

"There will always be a small silver flash when you send it, so just be aware of that. With practice, the flash can be minimized to the point where someone who sees it thinks they may have imagined it," Dumbledore said as he sat down to the tray of biscuits once more and conjured a fresh pot of tea. "I want you to use this spell if anything untoward happens. If your scar hurts, or you see Death Eaters nearby or if you get flashes of Voldemort's activities – or if you're in need of help, or just need to get a message to one of us quickly. This kind of magic is something the Ministry cannot track, so it is a secure communication system. You can talk to me or Remus or Professor Snape or Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick whenever you need to. Those I just mentioned can answer your messages as well as receive them. Not everyone in the Order can do the spell themselves, but anyone can receive it."

"What if I don't know where the person is? Say I need to tell you or Remus something, and you're away on Order business?"

"Excellent question. In that case, concentrate on the person's name and picture him firmly in your mind, but in a kind of foggy surrounding, since you don't know his location. Wave your wand in a circle as you think this and the message will find him. Do you want to try it?"

"Yes," Harry said eagerly.

"All right. Send a message to Remus, asking him to join us," the headmaster suggested.

He performed the spell, and soon Remus entered the room. "Harry, did you call me?" he asked, his face puzzled.

The boy grinned and told Remus what he'd done.

"Well done! I was in the attic, and thought you were right behind me. I turned around and you weren't there, so I did what you asked and came down here. I have to say, I was quite surprised when I heard your voice and you weren't there. It was good and strong too, a well-done charm. Good work!"

"Thanks!" the boy replied with a huge grin. What a wonderful charm! He could use this one in so many ways, and the Ministry would never know. That idea led to another thought. "Erm, Professor?" he said to Dumbledore. "Can you send thoughts to Muggles this way?" he asked, not completely sure why he was asking.

"Ah, planning to whisper endearments in the ear of your young lady?" Dumbledore chuckled, one eyebrow raised in amused inquiry. He offered Remus some tea and Lupin sat down across from Harry, smiling at the turn of the conversation.

"Something like that," he replied with a grin, his ears turning pink.

"I honestly don't know. I've never tried it on a Muggle. If she got the message, she would probably think it was something she thought of herself, or that you are standing behind her whispering to her, something like that. And she couldn't return the message in the same manner."

"I understand," Harry said. "I just wondered." He took a bite of another biscuit. After a sip of tea to wash it down, he said, "May I show this spell to Ron and Hermione? Can I teach it to them?"

"You may show it to them, and if they can learn it, you're welcome to teach it to them. It is, however, a very difficult charm."

"I taught them how to do a Patronus charm," Harry reminded him.

"Yes, I know, and that was a remarkable bit of teaching. When you're grown, please do consider coming back to Hogwarts to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts," Dumbledore said with a warm smile. "You're already a brilliant teacher. You did wonders with the D.A. this past term. Not many full-grown wizards can cast a Patronus, and much less teach others how to do them."

Harry glowed under Dumbledore's praise. He hadn't thought about teaching, but he'd enjoyed his work with the D.A. last term. "Thanks, Professor, but that should be Remus's job. He's a great teacher."

Remus smiled at Harry. "I'll be back next term. But I won't be teaching there forever. You'll probably want to do other things after Hogwarts – you did say you want to be an Auror, after all. But when you're tired of that, I'll probably be tired of teaching and the job can be yours if you want it and Albus still agrees."

"Ah, that's settled then," Dumbledore said with great enthusiasm, rubbing his hands together with obvious satisfaction. "You have no idea how hard I work to find a D.A.D.A. teacher each year, and here I have two wonderful ones lined up – if Harry agrees to it, that is. And no, Harry, I won't ask you for a decision this early in your life. I've just given you an idea to consider."

"I will think about it, Professor. I have to say, the idea does appeal to me. But having Remus as the D.A.D.A. teacher again – that's fantastic! I can't wait to take more classes with you, Remus! How did you get past the Board's objections, if you don't mind my asking?"

"They have finally realized there's a war on, and that we need a consistent and excellent D.A.D.A. teacher," Dumbledore replied, "and Remus is the best Defence teacher we've had in many years. So I was able to override their objections."

"Brilliant!" Harry said with a huge grin.

That evening, Remus and Harry used Floo powder to travel to Mrs. Figg's house from Grimmauld Place. The Ashers had invited them to dinner, and Sunday evening was the most convenient time on everyone's calendar. As they walked up to the Ashers' door, Harry quickly

finished telling Remus what he'd told Casey and her family about his background, so his and Remus's stories would match.

"Hi, Harry!" Casey said as she answered the door. She smiled warmly at him, then turned her sparkling eyes on Remus. "You must be his godfather. I'm Casey. I'm so pleased to meet you. Harry's told me so much about you!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Casey. Harry's told me a lot about you, too," Remus replied with a smile.

Introductions were made all around and they soon sat down to dinner. Harry sat next to Remus at the round table, mostly to be able to step on his toes if he started to say something that wouldn't match what Harry had told the family.

As the food was handed around, Doug asked Remus, "Harry tells me you travel a good deal on business. How do you like flying that much? Is airline food as bad as they say?"

Remus and Harry exchanged a look, stifling smiles. Harry had trod on Remus's toe when "flying" was mentioned. "Oh, I normally travel by train, actually. I get a lot of work done that way. The trains seem to run on schedule more than the airlines, and they're less expensive. I don't have to go that far most of the time, either."

"Where do you go?" Margaret asked.

"I travel mostly between London and Scotland, but I do have to make other trips from time to time."

"What kind of job do you have, that you have to travel so much?" Casey asked.

Remus waited for his toe to be stepped on, but when none came, he figured he was free to make up whatever would work for him. "I'm a researcher."

Casey lit up with excitement. "What do you research? I'm very interested in science."

Remus chuckled. "I'm sorry. My research isn't that exciting. I mostly do historic research, but also, um. . . ." He looked at Harry for help.

Harry said, "He does a lot of secret stuff. He tells me if he told me what he was doing he'd have to shoot me!" He laughed, then added in a stage whisper, "I think he got that from an American film, actually!"

Remus took the hint his godson was throwing him, smiled and agreed. "Yes, I can't really talk a lot about my work. I work for one of the Ministries, but I can't really say much more than that."

"You do historic research and it's secret?" Margaret asked in amazement.

"My speciality is . . .um. . .tactics. Researching historical tactics is an important task. That's just a part of my area of concentration," Remus replied.

"Military tactics?" Margaret asked.

"Well," Remus began, "sort of." He hoped the subject changed soon.

Doug saw the problem and solved it. "Have you seen the tables Harry's been making, Remus?"

"No, but I would love to. He gets so excited when he's telling me about them." Remus patted Harry on the arm. "I knew this young man was talented in many ways, but I didn't know he was an artist."

"What else is he talented in?" Casey asked. "He doesn't really talk about himself that much."

Harry gave her a cheeky look, the equivalent of sticking out his tongue at her, and she gave him just as cheeky a look in return. They both laughed.

Remus glanced at Harry, didn't see any warning there, and answered, "He's quite good at sports."

"I run," Harry interjected helpfully.

"Yes, he's the best our school has had in many years, actually. He's very good at most of his studies, and a natural leader in his class. He's also very inventive at breaking school rules and getting away with it," Remus added with a chuckle. That comment got him a hard step on his toes, but he ignored Harry and went on. "I don't mean to imply he gets into trouble a lot. There are just some rules that need to be broken sometimes. It was the same when his father, Sirius and I were in school together. We thought some things just needed to be done."

"Like what?" Casey asked.

Remus smiled at the memory – and at the thought he'd been able to steer the conversation away from Harry and the danger of saying things that might contradict what Harry had told the family. "We would sneak around the grounds at night, looking for interesting places, hidden passageways, whatever it is that makes kids want to go where they've been told they simply are not supposed to go. James, Sirius and I were notorious for that kind of thing, but never got into serious trouble for it. Harry, Ron and Hermione are the same way. They like to explore, and with the age of the school buildings and grounds, there are lots of interesting places to explore." He thought that was as far as he could safely go with that thread of conversation, and cast around for a safer subject. Margaret came to the rescue.

"Shall we have our coffee in the garden?" Margaret asked. "It's lovely at this time of day."

Remus, Doug and Margaret chatted amiably about gardening, while Harry and Casey sat on a bench in the corner of the garden, teasing each other and giggling. When the adults were across the lawn, Harry kissed Casey, then sat with his arm around her.

Patricia ran up in front of them and stamped her foot. "Why are you kissing her, Harry?" the little girl demanded.

"She's my girlfriend. That's what boyfriends and girlfriends do," he said with a smile.

"You were my friend first! Why aren't you kissing me? You're MY boyfriend!" she insisted.

"Patricia. . ." Casey warned.

Harry glanced at Casey, then held his arms out to Patricia. "Come here, then." The little girl came to him and he sat her in his lap. "What do you want?"

"I want you to be my boyfriend!"

"But I'm Casey's boyfriend. There's not enough of me to go around!" Harry said, smiling warmly at the child. "Can't we just be really good friends?"

"You're a big boy. There's lots of you to go around," Patricia pouted.

"Stop bothering Harry," Casey said, not unkindly. "You'll embarrass him. He's our guest."

Patricia's lower lip started to tremble as tears filled her eyes. "He was my boyfriend first!"

Harry sighed. *Now what do I do?* he thought. "Patricia, you're a very pretty girl. You'll have boyfriends of your own once you start school this autumn. That will be nice because they'll be your age, they'll be interested in the same things you are, you'll play the same games, take classes together. . . ." He was quickly running out of ideas.

Patricia seemed to be considering what he was saying. "I will?"

"Absolutely. And if any of them give you trouble, you let me know and I'll sort them out for you, how's that? I can be like a big brother to you." As soon as he said it, he wondered how he could fulfil that promise, with him at school in Scotland and only available by owl post. Oh well, he'd work it out when he had to.

"A big brother? Oh. OK!" Patricia said, wrapping her little arms around his neck. She kissed him on one cheek, then the other.

He was touched. "Thank you!" he said, then kissed her on each cheek in return.

"Thank you!" she replied, then ran off to tell her parents she had a new brother.

Casey leaned her head on his shoulder. "That was sweet of you."

"I can be a nice guy when I have to," he teased.

"You're silly," she said, looking up at him. "And you're nice all the time!" She leaned in and kissed him, a kiss that grew deeper as they heard the adults and Patricia moving farther away in the garden. "Mmmmm."

"Mmmmmm, yourself," he murmured as he held her head in his hands and kissed her nose. "You're the best dessert there is, you know that?"

She laughed and kissed his nose in turn. They held each other a few moments, then got up to wander through the garden.

From across the yard, the adults witnessed the tender scene between the teenagers. Remus smiled and said, "Casey is so very good for Harry. He's never been this happy."

Margaret replied, "He's good for her too." She took her husband's hand, suddenly aware of how quickly her older daughter was growing up. That young man might be her son-in-law someday. The thought shocked her, but she was pleased that Casey had such good taste in boyfriends. Harry already fitted in with their family as if he'd been with them forever.

Patricia ran to where Harry and Casey were walking and took Harry's free hand in hers, rubbing her cheek affectionately on his arm. "Oooo, Harry! Your arm's all hairy! Hairy Harry!" she giggled.

Casey held Harry's arm up in the fading daylight and saw long dark hairs growing there she hadn't noticed before. "She's right! Okay, let's see the face. Are you shaving now?"

The adults had returned and heard this part of the conversation, watching in interest as Harry blushed under all the scrutiny. "Yes." He swallowed hard and then straightened up. "Have been for a while, now, actually," he added with a shy grin.

"Ah, our boy's growing up," Remus said with a chuckle. The evening ended in good feelings and laughter, and an invitation for Harry and Remus to return any time they liked.

Harry's mosaic tables were selling faster than he could make them while still laying tiles on construction jobs. Doug hired another man to lay tiles and install worktops, and put Harry to work full-time creating mosaic table tops out of whatever scraps he could find. Sometimes pieces of coloured glass were included, sometimes pretty stones, but in every case, the design was engaging and beautiful. Some designs were bold, some sensitive and delicate, depending on the stone he was working with. The subtle colours were most often used in light, small chunks of tile in flowing patterns. The strong colours, mainly granites, were used in bold geometric patterns most often. Each table was unique. The majority were abstract shapes and forms, but Harry was starting to do some with images in them, such as lions, dragons, and unicorns. Some of the tables were quite small, nearly pedestal sized rather than something you could sit at for a snack or a meal, but it didn't seem to matter. Whatever size they were, they were selling.

One morning, Doug got a phone call in his office.

"Mr. Asher?" a woman's voice said.

"Yes, this is he. What can I do for you?"

"This is Ruth Spectre of the *Little Whinging Times*. I've been hearing a buzz in the decorating world about some tables your company is creating."

"Really? How nice! I have a young man working for me who's quite talented at mosaics. The tables are selling very well. They're his own designs," Doug said with obvious pride.

"I'd love to do a story on him and his work, and on your company as well, of course. When may I come over and interview you both? I'll bring my photographer so we can get pictures of the young man at work, and of his designs."

"That would be brilliant!" Doug replied. "He's here every day through the week. Just let me know when you want to come."

"How about this afternoon, then? About two o'clock?"

"Fine. See you then." Doug jumped up and jogged into the shop. "Harry! Harry, guess what?"

The boy looked up from his workbench. "What's up? You look awfully happy about something," he said with a grin.

"You'll never guess."

Harry frowned as if thinking hard, then offered brightly, "You're being knighted?"

"Not bloody likely in this lifetime," Doug answered with a laugh.

He chuckled. "Then I guess I can't guess it. So?"

"A reporter is coming over to do a story about you and your mosaics. She's heard about your work through the decorators' grapevine, apparently. She's coming with a photographer this afternoon to interview you. Isn't that wonderful? And what great advertising for your work, and the company too!" The man was clearly delighted at the prospect. "Decorators! I wonder how they found out about your tables? Some of our customers must be talking. You just can't buy advertising like that!"

Harry's heart was pounding so hard, it felt as if it would burst out of his chest. A reporter? Here? Putting his name in the paper, his picture? Oh, no. What was he going to do? He stood there aghast, with his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, no clue what to say.

"Cat got your tongue, Harry?" Doug teased, misunderstanding the boy's discomfort.

"Erm. . .sorry?" he mumbled, shaking his head, still struggling with the impending disaster.

"What's up? You're going to be famous!" Doug said with a laugh. "Are you nervous about being interviewed or something?"

"Uh. . .Mr. Asher, the thing is, that is, erm. . .I honestly don't want to be in the paper. It's very nice and all that, but I really, really don't want that to happen," Harry said in a rush, desperation in his eyes.

Doug was dumbfounded. "Why not?"

"Erm. . .I'm . . .um. . .shy, yeah, y'know, I. . ."

"Harry, I know you're shy sometimes, but this is such a great opportunity! Your tables will sell even faster with this kind of publicity."

"I'm working as fast as I can now, Mr. Asher!" Harry cried. "I don't NEED more work!"

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to imply you aren't working hard. You're the best worker I've ever had, and with creative work rather than just installation. . .the fact you can turn them out as quickly as you do is amazing."

Harry flushed with pleasure at such high praise, then mumbled, "Thanks."

"Being famous isn't a bad thing," Doug teased again. "You could make a career out of this work – this kind of article would give you a start."

"I'm sorry. I just can't. I hate to disappoint you, but there's no way I can do this interview."

Doug's face fell. "You won't do it? You truly won't?"

"No."

The man sighed. "I thought you'd be so excited. It's a real coup to have a reporter wanting to do a story on you."

Harry grimaced, remembering his experiences with Rita Skeeter. "It depends on your point of view whether it's a coup or not. I know it would be a coup for you. . .it's just not something I can deal with. I'm terribly sorry. I simply can't do it."

Doug frowned, thinking hard. "I know what it is."

"What?"

"You're worried your uncle will find out you're doing really well and will try to take your money away from you, aren't you?" he asked shrewdly.

Harry bit his lip, trying to think of a way out of this situation. "Yes, that's part of it."

"What's the other part?"

"I can't explain it, honestly. I'll leave now if you want. I don't want to cause you any trouble."

Doug's jaw dropped. "Leave? You're not resigning?"

"Erm. . .no, I don't want to resign," he answered uncomfortably, his thoughts a jumble of all the awful consequences of his not having this job. More time stuck at the Dursleys. No more money for clothes or dates. Worst of all, not seeing Casey every day. No, he really did not want to lose this job. "If you want me to, I'll. . .quit." It was so hard for him to make the offer, but it seemed the right thing to do. "If you want to do the interview yourself, I'll just clear out for today. But if you do it, please keep my name out of the paper, OK?"

"I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable. I absolutely do not want you to quit!" Doug said with intensity.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

He gave the young man's shoulder a friendly squeeze. "I don't understand why you don't want to do the interview, but I respect your wishes. The reporter is coming at two o'clock. Why don't you go see if Max needs any help on that job, and if he doesn't, you can take the afternoon off. With pay, since I'm the one forcing you out of the shop," he added with a rueful grin.

"With pay? Fantastic!" Harry answered with a beaming smile. "I'll just go and see Max after lunch, then, shall I? Do you want me to let you know if I'm staying with him or not?"

"No, that's okay. I trust you. By the way. . .would it be okay with you for the photographer to take pictures of the tables you're working on? And the one you just finished?"

Harry thought a moment. He couldn't see any real problem with pictures of his work, as long as his name wasn't attached to them. "That should be fine."

"Mr. Asher, so very nice to meet you," Ruth Spectre gushed. "And where is this young artist of yours?"

"He's unable to be with us today," Doug replied.

"Perhaps we should reschedule?" Ruth said with a sickening sweetness. She did not like having her plans go awry.

"No, today's fine, but he's a teenager and doesn't want to be in the paper. He's shy, you know how kids are."

"Hmph. Most kids I know of would love to be in the paper. Ah well. What can you tell me about him?" She turned on her miniature tape recorder and got out her notebook. "What's his name?"

"He asked that his name not be in the paper either," Doug said apologetically. "I have to respect his wishes. What else would you like to know?"

"Hmm. Where did he get his training? Where does he go to school? How did he get started doing mosaics? Where does he get his inspiration? That type of thing."

"I trained him to work with tiles. He's had a job with me just this summer. He's a quick learner, very skilled with his hands, and he has a good eye for detail and patterns. He goes to a private school, I don't know any more than that, and any more than that would invade his privacy anyway, most likely. He got started when I saw him at lunchtime one day, playing with the scraps and trims from a tile job we were working on. The design he'd made was beautiful and I told him so. He didn't know what a mosaic was. I encouraged him to make table tops and the rest, as they say, is history." Doug smiled. "Oh, there was another question, what was it?"

"Where does he get his inspiration?"

"Oh, yes. I honestly don't know. He comes up with these wonderful abstracts, but lately he's added beautiful lions, dragons, unicorns, rather medieval designs. I guess he must be interested in King Arthur's time or something. I heard him say something about Merlin once."

"Merlin? What do you mean?" Ruth asked quickly.

"I don't know, I was walking by and heard him say 'Merlin.' I guess he was talking to himself, working out ideas. He hasn't done a King Arthur or Merlin design yet, though."

The reporter thought a moment, made a few notes in her notebook. "Very interesting, Mr. Asher. May we photograph his tables, at least?"

"Of course. He did give permission for photographs of his work." Doug led them to Harry's workbench, where there were two pieces in progress and one completed table awaiting delivery. Other completed mosaics sat on shelving to one side, waiting for their final cleaning or to be attached to their bases.

The photographer went to work, as Ruth perused the mosaics. "Intriguing designs. Beautiful colours and patterns here. I see why I've been hearing so many good things about his work," Ruth commented sweetly. She pointed to a small marking at the edge of each completed mosaic. "Is this his signature?"

"He does put his mark on all of them, yes. That's it."

"Hmm. H.P. Merlin. . ." Ruth murmured, a smarmy smile beginning on her face. "Is he not quite sixteen, a very small boy, black hair, glasses, green eyes, a scar on his forehead?"

"Excuse me?" Doug asked, astonished. Except for the stature, her description was perfect!

"Is that what he looks like or not?" she insisted.

"Not. . .exactly. He wants to remain anonymous, so I won't say any more about him," Doug said firmly. "Now if you'd like to see the rest of our setup here. . ." he continued, trying to get her off the subject of Harry.

"Thank you, Mr. Asher, I believe we have enough to go on with," Ruth said with a smile. "The article should be in the paper by Thursday. I'll include the contact information on your card, shall I?"

Relieved he'd got her mind off tracking Harry down, Doug smiled. "Yes, that would be fine. Thanks!"

She waved an airy goodbye, pushing her oversized bejewelled glasses up her nose, and bustled out of the shop. "Harry Potter, I presume?" she murmured with glee. "That was a Gryffindor lion if I've ever seen one!" Rita Skeeter, AKA "Ruth Spectre" since she'd lost her job at the *Daily Prophet* and been reduced to working for this little rag of a Muggle paper in Little Whinging, was on a mission. She intended to get her old job back at the *Daily Prophet*, and to get back at Harry Potter and his busybody friend Hermione Granger for keeping her out of business for so long. The article she'd done on Harry in *The Quibbler* had returned her to the *Prophet* for a short time, but it hadn't lasted.

"Harry Potter's Summer Holiday," she mused. "Great headline! Now to track down the boy and get some wizarding photos. . . ." She managed to ditch her Muggle photographer, went home and sent an owl to her old *Daily Prophet* photographer.

Meet me at my home in the morning. We're going to stake out a business where I believe Harry Potter is working. I was just there but the boy was gone. I'll bet Potter took the afternoon off when he heard I was coming. He'll be back tomorrow. – Rita.

She rubbed her hands with glee as the owl went on its way. "I'll have you soon, Harry Potter!"

Chapter 4 – Summer Fun and Birthdays

Great Britain was having one of the worst hot spells in the last fifty years, with temperatures hovering around 35 degrees Celsius. Harry and Casey were at a water park with huge slides leading into shallow swimming pools. Harry watched the fun in the pool as he and Casey stood in line waiting their turn. Boys were going down the slide first, then waiting at the bottom to try to catch their girlfriends. Very few of them succeeded in catching the girls and staying upright, but the resultant splashing added to the laughter of all involved. He glanced at Casey, who was also watching the action. "Do you want to do that?" he asked with a smile.

"Have you catch me? Yeah! It looks like great fun!" Casey agreed. They left their towels, shoes, Harry's white T-shirt and glasses and Casey's lacy cover-up by the staircase and began the climb to the top with the rest of the young people in line. The park was very crowded with people trying to find fun ways to survive the heat.

At the top of the slide, Harry gave Casey a quick kiss and said, "I'll be waiting for you at the bottom!" then put his legs into the slide tube and pushed off. He shouted with laughter as the tube spiralled and twisted, forcing his body to go way up the sides with the speed of his descent. It was almost as much fun as flying his Firebolt, although much slower. Sooner than he would've liked, the ride was over and he splashed into the pool. Standing in the waist-deep water, he turned to catch Casey when she arrived.

"WHEEEEEEEE!" he heard her squeal as she came down the chute. At the end of the slide, as she shot out of the tube, her arms flew up and she entered the water feet first – but not before giving everyone watching a spectacular view of her bare breasts, as the clip on her swimsuit top had picked exactly that moment to break.

Harry was torn between thinking *"Bloody hell!"* that everyone had seen her, and *"WOW!"* that he had seen her. He pulled her to him trying to shield her yet not touch anything he. . .erm. . .shouldn't, while the watching crowd cheered, whistled and applauded merrily.

"Harry, don't look!" Casey cried, her face scarlet.

"Erm. . too late," he replied with a laugh, blushing madly himself.

"Oh, what am I going to do?" she moaned.

Harry took a deep breath. *Think, Potter, think! No, not about THAT!. . .Ah!* He smiled at her. "This is where it's a really good thing your hair is so long," he replied practically, grasping her waist-length hair, dividing it in half, and gently laying each half across her shoulders. "Now you look like a saltwater mermaid," he grinned, "covered up but not exactly covered up. . .and beautiful! You wouldn't want to look like a freshwater mermaid – they're scary."

Startled out of her embarrassment for a moment, Casey glanced up at him. "There are freshwater. . .huh?" She saw his smile and then nodded. "Oh, I get it. You're trying to distract me. Very clever, Harry, truly, as was the trick with my hair. Thanks for that, and for protecting me like this, too. But I. . .I need. . ."

Harry was doing his best to keep his eyes on her face, but wasn't being entirely successful. He shook his head quickly, scolding himself inwardly for his bad behaviour, then squinted around,

missing his glasses as his Seeker's eyes searched for a different kind of small object. "Ah. I think that's your top over there. I'll go get it. Stay here," he said as he swam toward the top.

"Don't worry. I'm not moving!" she replied, wrapping her arms tightly around her hair to keep it covering her, then crouching down in the water until only her head was exposed, trying to stay out of sight of the still-cheering crowd.

"Got it," Harry said as he returned, suddenly feeling awkward as he handed the tiny garment to her.

She looked at it and groaned. "Oh, no. The clip is broken. It won't stay on now. What will I do?"

"Hang on," Harry answered, then swam to the side of the pool and got his T-shirt, which he offered to her.

"Thanks!" She started to put it on, but then realized there was no modest way to do so. If she lifted her arms to put the shirt on, her hair would move and she'd be exposed. If she ducked under the water to put it on, she'd be exposed and possibly drown trying to fight her way into Harry's shirt underwater. She had a choice. Be modest in front of the whole crowd, or be modest in front of her boyfriend. "I'm going to have to trust you, Harry," Casey said with a nervous smile. "Promise you won't look?"

"I won't look," he agreed, extremely glad he'd had such a lovely view before.

She moved close to him, her back toward the crowd, and started to lift her arms to put on the shirt.

Harry could tell she still felt too exposed. "Here, let me do it for you," he offered. "Keep your arms down until you're covered." He lifted the thin white shirt and pulled it over her until her head was free. After some struggling inside the shirt, which was much too big for her, Casey managed to get her arms in the holes. She smiled as Harry gently pulled her hair out of the neckline and laid it on her back. "Better now?"

"Yes, much," she said gratefully. Trying to get things back to normal, she said, "Was it fun for you?"

"The ride? Or the show?" he teased.

Casey flushed scarlet again. "Harry!"

"I'm sorry," he laughed and pulled her close in apology. "Oh, erm, uh. . .oops. Sorry, I forgot," he spluttered, blushing brightly in turn and pushing back from her. Her body inside his T-shirt was soft and . . .squashy. . .and it . . .erm. . .moved. He kept his distance, offered his hand and led her to the pool steps. "Let's go. . .uh. . ."

"Yes, let's get out of here," she concluded for him. "Maybe we can work out how to fix this top."

As they started up the steps out of the pool, Harry glanced at Casey. "Um. . .you'd better put your hair back in front of you."

"What? Why?"

He did his best to look at her face, not her chest. He was blushing so hard, he could feel the heat in his face. "Oh. . .please. . .just do it. You'll thank me later."

She looked down and saw why he thought she needed more cover. Blushing furiously again, she pulled her hair in front to cover herself.

A short time later, they found a quiet, shady spot in a small grove of trees at the edge of the park. A cool, moist breeze blew their way from the spray off one of the water rides. They spread their towels and sat down opposite each other. Harry took the swimsuit top from her hands and studied its attachment. "Can't tie it together, then?"

"No, there isn't enough material," she replied. "I cannot believe that happened! I've seen it happen a couple of times to other girls, but I never thought. . . . I'm so embarrassed. What people must think of me!"

"Casey," Harry replied, taking her hand in his, "nobody thought badly of you," he assured her. "It was an accident. Could've happened to anyone."

"But it happened to me!" She was blushing furiously again. "I'll never forget it."

Harry just couldn't help himself. He chuckled as he turned beet red. "Neither will I."

"Harry Potter! Shame on you!"

"Why? You didn't do anything wrong. Your swimsuit broke. It was an accident. I didn't do anything wrong by looking. My looking at just the perfect time could've been an accident – would've been if I hadn't been planning to catch you. I must say, though, it was one of the truly bright spots of my entire life." He was grinning widely now. "I never expected such a treat today! Too bad I didn't have my glasses on so I could see better. . ."

She put her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

"Oh, Casey, I'm sorry!" Harry said in consternation. "I didn't mean to make you cry!" He started to embrace her, thought better of it and just put an arm around her shoulders.

She looked up, her face flushed again, tears in her eyes. "You are such. . .so. . ." She was at a loss for words, but she was laughing, not crying.

He breathed a quick sigh of relief. "I'm a cad. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he offered, a huge grin splitting his face.

"You don't look sorry! And you're not a cad! You did your best to look after me. Thank you," she said, getting up on her knees and leaning over to give him a kiss. She lost her balance and fell against him. "Whoops!"

He wrapped his arms around her and protected her from the fall, an "Oof!" escaping him as he landed on his back with her lying full-length on top of him.

"I'm sorry!" Casey said, trying to stifle her giggles. "Are you all right?"

He had to think about that a moment. He had a beautiful girl in his arms who was soaking wet and only wearing a thin T-shirt on top, and he knew what was under that T-shirt. Whatever his condition, it felt really good.

"Harry?" Casey prompted.

"Hmm?" he answered, gazing hungrily into her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm. . .excellent," he murmured as he tightened his arms around her and kissed her.

A few moments later, Harry said, "Oy, that's. . .I'm. . .OK, we need to leave."

She chuckled, "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"I can't take any more of this. Let's go. I need to go and jump in the pool – right now."

"Oh, Harry, just when it was getting good," she teased.

He looked scandalized. "Are you saying it wasn't good before? I'm shocked!" He rolled her over onto her back, gave her one big sloppy kiss and got to his feet, reaching down to offer her a hand up.

"It was good before, too," she agreed. "But this was. . . ." She kissed his shoulder and ran the tips of her fingers up and down his chest.

"Don't go there," he warned. "I might not be able to stop next time. No more serious stuff today, OK?"

"Hmmmm," she murmured.

Harry looked at her, unsure what she meant. Maybe she didn't know what she meant either. Whatever. He'd think about that later. Right now, he needed to cool off, quickly. He wrapped his towel around his waist, and she put hers over her shoulder as they walked.

"Wait," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"I think I may be able to repair your top. Let me see it." She handed it over. Harry had an idea. He didn't know if he could do this kind of spell without a wand, but thought it was worth a try. Taking the top in his hands, he turned away from her a bit to hide his actions and rubbed the clip between his fingers, thinking *"Reficio."* Suddenly, he felt the clip change in his hand, restored to its original shape and size. "Will this work?" he asked as he handed it to her.

"How'd you do that?" she asked as she looked up in astonishment from the repaired clip.

He grinned impishly at her and winked. "Magic."

"You are too funny. Well, however you did it, it looks fine! Hang on a minute and I'll put it on." She pulled her arms back inside his T-shirt, pulling the swimsuit top inside the shirt as well. A few moments of wrestling under the T-shirt later, her face was wreathed in smiles. "Perfect! Thank you, Harry!" She stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

"You're welcome. I'm glad it worked."

"I'd love to know how you did it, though," she said in amazement as she handed him his T-shirt.

"I told you already!" he said with a laugh. He buried his nose in his T-shirt. "Mmm, it smells like you – and like chlorine. I may never wash this shirt again," he said, looking at her with a tender smile.

Casey took Harry's arm and rubbed her cheek tenderly on his shoulder as they walked back to one of the swimming pools. "You're so sweet."

He blushed and smiled down at her, then got a wicked gleam in his eye. "Last one in's a rotten egg!" he cried as he whipped the towel off his waist and jumped in, creating a huge splash. He turned around and held his arms open for her to jump to him.

"Oh no, you don't!" Casey warned. "You're not tempting me to jump feet-first into water again!"

"Ah well, it was worth a try, wasn't it?" he chuckled, his face full of mischief.

They splashed and messed about like little children. Harry watched how the other couples were playing in the water – this was nearly his first time at a swimming pool, after all, as well as his very first time at a pool with his girlfriend. He didn't want to miss any opportunity for fun. As he and Casey bobbed in the water he got a rascally grin on his face and dived underwater. He swam away, leaving Casey turning round and round looking for him.

"Harry? Where are you?" She kept turning around to look for him, but the glare of the sun on the water made it difficult to see above or below water.

He sneaked up behind her and grabbed her around the waist, standing up and lifting her out of the water. "Got ya!" he laughed.

Casey squealed, then squealed again as he tossed her lightly from him and ducked down to play "shark attack" on her again. She sank under the water and looked around for him.

He wasn't far away. When she ducked below the water, her hair formed a billowy silken cloud around her, sparkling in many shades of gold as rays of sunlight passed through the rippling water. He nearly gasped at the sight. He swam rapidly to her and embraced her, kissing her deeply as they stayed underwater. Eventually they had to come up for air. He pushed the hair

tenderly out of her face. "You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you," he murmured breathlessly.

She kissed the sunburned tip of his nose. "I thought we weren't going to be serious any more today," she teased gently.

"Oh. Yeah. That's right," Harry agreed, his blood pounding. He forced himself to back off, then smiled. "I just couldn't help myself. Sorry!"

They played dolphins, they chased each other and when they were getting tired of that, Harry tried another shark attack. While he was swimming toward her underwater, his scar exploded in pain. *No! Not now!* he thought as he caught an echo of Voldemort's emotions. The pain pounded inside his scar and he gasped, gulping down water. He tried to fight his way to the surface, but the light was growing dim somehow. His lungs were on fire. He was sinking. Darkness engulfed him.

Casey noticed he was gone too long. "Harry? Harry, where are you?" she called, thinking he was getting far too good at holding his breath. "Harry?" She saw his black hair moving in the water near the bottom of the pool, his pale body much too still. She swam down and grabbed his lifeless body. "Help! Somebody help me!" she shrieked as she pulled him above the water. The lifeguard jumped in and helped bring Harry to the side of the pool, pushing him up onto the deck.

"He's not breathing," the guard said. "Stand back." But before he could begin mouth-to-mouth, Harry coughed and a gush of water came out of his mouth. He coughed until he thought his lungs would rupture, but he finally got his breath back.

"What happened?" Casey cried. "Did you hit your head?"

He was still dazed. "Scar. . ." was all he managed to say before he started coughing again.

"Somebody call the paramedic," the lifeguard said. "This bloke needs attention."

"No! No, I'm fine," Harry insisted. "I just swallowed some water. I'm fine now. Thank you."

"Are you sure?" the guard asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. Honestly. Thank you. I'm sorry to have been a bother."

"No bother, mate, that's my job. Be more careful out there, OK? You've probably had enough for today, anyway," the guard said, studying Harry's face. "And you need more sunscreen. You're starting to burn."

"I'll get some straight away. Thanks," Harry assured him. He sat up and coughed a little more, fighting to get his breath back, thinking he should just carry gillyweed with him when he went swimming in the future. What had happened? Oh yes, his scar. It had erupted in blinding pain. Voldemort was happy, very happy. He'd heard some news that excited him. Yes, that was it. But what was the news? Try as he might, Harry could not capture that thought. Whatever it was, it unnerved him. He'd send a quick Adfero message to Dumbledore and Remus as soon

as he could. He stood up shakily, leaning on Casey, and they walked to their things. They found a nice shady place to sit, and she started rubbing sunscreen on his shoulders and back.

"All right there, Harry?" she asked.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry I scared you. Good thing you rescued me."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I was aware enough to feel your hair all around me – at first, I thought I was in a cloud. Then I thought an angel had come for me, but then I realized it was you," he said with a tender smile, before starting another coughing fit. When he caught his breath, he saw tears in Casey's eyes.

"I was so scared! You looked as if. . ." Casey broke off, trembling, not wanting to continue.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "But I'm fine now. Thank you for saving me. Now I owe you a life debt. That's serious stuff."

"A life debt, huh? How do you plan to pay it off?" she teased, trying to recapture the playful mood of the afternoon.

"I'll think of something. . .if it takes the rest of my life," he promised, kissing her tenderly.

Harry's message to Remus and Dumbledore that evening brought a swift response. Moments after he'd sent off his Adfero to them, Dumbledore replied, telling him to go to Mrs. Figg's house and floo to Grimmauld Place as soon as possible. Harry snuck out of his aunt and uncle's house under his invisibility cloak and hurried to Mrs. Figg's. She opened the door on his first knock.

"Come in quickly," she said, and shut the door behind him as soon as she felt him pass.

He pulled off the cloak and turned to her. "Do you know what's going on?"

"No, Harry, but they want to see you right away. Go ahead and use the fireplace," she urged.

"Thanks," he replied as he grabbed the blue canister with the white kittens on it sitting on the mantle, where she kept her floo powder. A few dizzying moments later, Harry stepped out of the fireplace into the kitchen at Number12 Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore and Remus sat at the table. "What's up?"

"Come and sit down, Harry," Dumbledore invited kindly. "Tell us what happened today." He pushed a plate of biscuits toward Harry and raised his eyebrows as he lifted the teapot.

Harry nodded his acceptance of tea, then started telling them about his scar hurting while he was swimming.

"And you lost consciousness?" Remus asked, greatly concerned. "You could have drowned!"

"I think that's why I was losing consciousness, actually. I don't think the scar hurting caused that," Harry replied. "What's he up to? I didn't have time to see what was going on. I just felt a huge rush of happiness from him."

"We aren't certain what's going on, Harry," Dumbledore replied with concern. "We have people working on it. I want you to be very careful. Will you promise me that?"

"What do you mean? Do I have to stay in the Dursleys' house, or here? What?" Harry asked anxiously. He'd been having the best possible summer and didn't want to be locked up away from his lunches with Casey, his job, his dates with Casey, his friends, Casey. . . .

"I'm putting extra wards around you, Harry, and I will add more instruments to keep track of you."

"What? No privacy?" Harry was blushing, but angry.

"My dear boy, the instruments are dark detectors. They are trained on you and let us know when there are Dark forces near you. I put these in place after what happened at the Ministry last year. If we'd known sooner. . . ."

"OK, I understand," the boy replied, hanging his head. If they'd been better able to keep track of him last year, Sirius might still be alive.

"You will still have privacy, Harry. You deserve that. I don't want to pry into your life. I just want to protect you."

Harry was humbled by the intensity of the old wizard's concern. "Thank you, Professor."

"Do let us know if you have any more flashes of what Voldemort's doing."

"I will."

"Your birthday's coming up soon," Casey said as she set the lunch things out while waiting for Harry to join her. He had just washed his hands after grouting a new mosaic. He dropped the paper towel into the bin, walked over to Casey and sat down across from her, the lunch spread between them.

"Yes, it is – and so is yours!" Harry smiled at her. "I'll be a year older than you for a whole ten days!"

"What shall we do for our birthdays?" she asked, handing him his drink.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"I was thinking. . .I'll bet you've never been to an amusement park," Casey said with a twinkle in her eyes. Boys always seemed to be strongly attracted to amusement parks, with the big roller coasters and other scary rides – she was sure Harry would love the idea.

His face lit up. "That would be brilliant! You're right, I've never been."

"My parents thought it would be fun for all of us if we all went to Thorpe Park. They have kiddy rides for Patricia, and lots of other things you and I will enjoy – roller coasters, a huge flume ride they guarantee we'll get wet! things like that. My dad said it will be our treat, Harry, for your birthday. You're only 16 once, after all!" She laughed at the delight on her boyfriend's face. He looked as excited as a small child at the idea of going to the amusement park.

"Thanks!" he said, happiness bubbling up inside him. The Dursleys had never even taken Dudley to Thorpe Park. He'd heard great things about it all his life, never dreaming he might actually get to go there someday. "I can't wait! When are we going?"

"Since your birthday's on a Wednesday and you go to visit your godfather on Sundays, we thought we'd do it the Saturday before your birthday. Is that OK with you?"

"Brilliant!"

Saturday July 27th began as a beautiful day. Harry bounded out of bed early, raced downstairs and wolfed down a piece of toast with marmalade, and a glass of juice as his breakfast. The Dursleys were barely stirring. Harry washed his glass, plate and the knife he'd used for the marmalade, dried them, and hurried to put his dishes away. As he reached for the cabinet door, his arm brushed against a pan hanging on the corner of the suspended saucepan rack, making the pans clang madly against each other.

"Oh no," he groaned, cringing as he waited for the coming explosion.

"POTTER!" his Uncle Vernon roared, stomping down the stairs.

Harry's shoulders drooped. "Yes, Uncle Vernon," he said in a dull voice.

"What's all that racket?"

"I was just washing up after breakfast," he began, "and bumped the saucepan rack. I'm sorry for waking you."

"And where do you think you're going dressed like that?" Vernon demanded as he stormed into the kitchen.

Harry looked down at his attire. He was neatly dressed in jeans and a new polo shirt, his trainers shining white, having been cleaned the night before. Even his hair was a bit less untidy than usual. "What's wrong with how I'm dressed?"

"You aren't going to work like that," Vernon growled.

"No, I'm not going to work today. It's Saturday, my day off. . ."

"Yes. Saturday. Your day off. You have chores to do here, since you're not off to that ruddy tile shop," Vernon said with sadistic pleasure.

"What chores? I've done all the gardening for the week. The dishes are all clean, the house is clean, the laundry's done and put away. What else do you want?"

"You can wash and wax my car," Vernon said with an evil look in his eye. "Get every insect speck off of the grill. Clean the upholstery. Wax the hubcaps and tires."

Harry thought quickly. The Ashers were picking him up soon. He didn't have time to wash the car now. "Uncle Vernon, I have plans for today. I'll wash and wax your car tomorrow evening, all right?" he said in as mild a voice as he could manage.

"You'll do it when I SAY to do it and I SAY to do it NOW!" Vernon roared. "'Plans,' indeed. What possible 'plans' could *you* have," he said scornfully.

"The Ashers are taking me out for the day for my birthday," he answered desperately, instantly regretting having said anything.

"I don't recall them asking me if they could take you anywhere."

His temper was rising, but he did try his best to reply calmly. "Uncle Vernon, I'll be sixteen in a few days. . . ." Uncle Vernon sneered with even more disgust, as if his nephew had no right to have a birthday. Harry had had enough. "Not that you've ever remembered my birthday. You can't require people to ask permission to take me places. I'm too old for that!" When he saw the purple color rising in his uncle's face, he knew he'd gone too far.

"Too old, are you? We'll see about that!" cried his uncle triumphantly, gleeful to once again have found sufficient reason to punish his nephew. He grabbed Harry by the ear – he had to reach up quite a way to do so now – and dragged him forcefully to the cupboard under the stairs, jerking hard on the boy's ear with every stride. He released Harry and commanded, "Stand right there," then opened the cupboard and removed Harry's trunk. "Don't want to leave you any of your freakish things to play with, since you're being punished. Get in there!"

"Uncle Vernon, no!" Harry pleaded. "I'll wash your car. I'm sorry I was rude. I can't . . ."

"GET IN THERE!" Vernon screamed.

Hoping his cooperation would calm his uncle's wrath before the Ashers arrived, Harry ducked down and crawled resentfully into the tiny cupboard, turning around and drawing his knees up to his chin. He had lived in here the first eleven years of his life. Now it was a storage area and mostly full. There wasn't room for him to even sit completely upright. He hunched over and hugged his legs miserably. "How long do I have to stay in here?"

"Until I want to see you again. Which, by the way, is NEVER!" Vernon replied with sadistic glee as he slammed the door, then not only slid the bolt home, but added a padlock he found in a kitchen drawer.

Harry's long legs were cramping, his neck and back aching as he stayed in the only position possible in the cupboard for what seemed an interminable length of time. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. "Uncle Vernon! Please let me out!" he called. The more cramped he became, the more frantic his cries. "Let me out! Let me out!" He tried to move his legs enough to kick at the door, but there just wasn't enough space. "LET ME OUT OF HERE!" His mind raced back in time – he remembered all too well being a small, abused, frightened child locked in a dark cupboard for no real reason.

Dudley came stomping down the stairs, jumping up and down on the step he knew would be right over Harry's head. "Back where you belong, eh, Potter?" he said, laughter in his voice.

As dust, cobwebs and spiders rained down on Harry, he felt despair rising up in him. He'd tried to get along with them. He had made every effort. He'd done every chore before they even asked for it, trying to make sure they had no reason to forbid him to work at the tile shop, or keep him from going out with Casey. He'd worked hard to look nice today, and here he was, his hair and clothes getting filthy, stuck in the same bloody cupboard he'd grown up in. He would not cry, but he couldn't help getting angrier by the moment. "LET ME OUT!"

Dudley laughed aloud when he heard Harry's voice.

The doorbell rang. Vernon went to answer it. Dudley was still on the stairs, having stopped jumping on the step long enough to see who was at the door.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley," Casey said with the best smile she could muster for this man who had tormented her boyfriend all his life. "We've come to pick up Harry."

"He won't be going with you today. He's. . .indisposed," Vernon said with a oily sneer.

Casey could hear a banging somewhere in the house, and Harry's muffled voice crying, "Let me out!"

"Where is he?" she demanded. "I need to see him."

"You can't," Vernon snapped, as he started to close the door.

She darted under his arm and raced into the house, calling, "Harry! Harry, where are you?"

"CASEY! I'm under the stairs!" Harry answered.

She ran to the door of the cupboard, saw the padlock and said to Vernon, "Unlock this door right now, or I'm calling the police!"

"You'll do no such thing! I can do what I want in my own home!" Vernon roared. He grabbed Casey roughly by the arm, causing her to shriek in pain. "Now get out, and mind your own business!"

"Let me go! Let me go! *You're hurting me!*"

Harry heard Casey's cries and lost all control. A huge "BOOM" later, the door of the cupboard lay in splinters in front of him and he crawled stiffly out. "Get away from her, Uncle Vernon," he said in a dangerous voice. Footsteps were pounding on the sidewalk at the same time. Casey's dad had heard the noise of the door shattering and the yelling and had come to find out what was going on. Harry crossed the hall in two long strides and pried Vernon's fingers off Casey's arm, releasing Casey and pushing her toward the door, where she ran into her dad's arms.

"Never. Touch. Her. Again." Harry warned in a low, dangerous voice, tossing away Vernon's hand as if it were covered in filth. "And if you ever try to lock me up again, I will do to the entire house what I just did to that door. That is a promise."

Doug had entered a scene of mayhem. Aunt Petunia and Dudley were on the stairs, aghast at the scene before them, Petunia wailing at the destruction in her home, Dudley with his mouth hanging open stupidly. Vernon was such a bright shade of purple, he looked as if he would explode any minute. Casey had bright red finger marks on her arm from Vernon's hand. And Harry. . .Harry suddenly seemed to be a mountain of a man in a towering rage, menace radiating from every pore.

"What's going on here?" Doug demanded as he held his daughter tightly.

Vernon, suddenly realizing an adult from the 'outside world' was witnessing these events, tried to put a good face on the situation. "Harry and I had. . .a minor disagreement," he said with a simpering smile, patting his fingertips together nervously. "It's all cleared up now."

Casey pushed away from her father and pointed a shaking finger at Vernon. "Dad, that man had Harry locked in that tiny cupboard with a PADLOCK on the door! And he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away when I went to try to open it. Harry was calling from inside, asking to be let out," she said breathlessly.

"Are you hurt?" Doug asked, looking at Casey's proffered arm.

"It's sore, but it's OK," she replied.

Doug rounded on Vernon. "You touched my daughter? You locked up that boy? With a *padlock*? What if there had been a fire? Would you have even bothered to let him out?"

Vernon quailed under Doug's wrath, which didn't hold a candle to Harry's. Harry was still in a blazing rage, but was trying to control it before any accidental magic happened.

"Eh. . .young people these days," he began, "you know how they are. No discipline, no sense of responsibility. . . . He had chores to do. . ."

"I DID all my chores for this week," Harry interrupted. "You just added washing and waxing your car to keep me from going anywhere today! You can't stand to have me around, but you can't stand for me to have any fun, either! *WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?*"

"Er. . .heehee. . ." Vernon tittered nervously. He was clearly at a loss for words, glancing fearfully between Doug and Harry, two obviously enraged men much bigger than Vernon, both of whom were also obviously much stronger than him.

Doug took several deep breaths, doing his best to calm himself. "Casey, are you sure you aren't hurt?"

"My arm hurts. It's going to bruise," she said, tears of pain in her eyes as she looked unhappily at the big red marks bright against her fair skin. "But I don't think he's done me any lasting damage. But Harry. . .Dad, he was locked up, I can't believe they did that to him!"

"It's not the first time," Harry muttered, fury still apparent in his every move. "But it will be the last."

"Harry?" Casey said hesitantly. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

Harry glanced at Casey and replied, disgust in his voice, "One ear is probably longer than the other – that's how he drags me around, you know, by the hair or the ear." He glared at Vernon. "That's not going to happen again, is it, Uncle Vernon? I will not allow it."

"You will not allow. . .?" blustered Vernon.

"Mr. Dursley, unless you want to spend time in jail for assault, I suggest you leave this boy alone. You will be facing charges for attacking my daughter. If Harry wants to add to the charges, he's welcome to do so," Doug said sternly.

Vernon blanched. "Ch-ch-ch-charges?"

"Long overdue, I'm sure," Doug replied. He glared at each Dursley in turn, amazed that three human beings could be so heartless and cruel to another. He was so disgusted by them, he didn't know what to do next.

By now, tears were streaming down Casey's face. Harry glanced at her again, and realized she was crying. He moved to her and put his hands on her shoulders, leaning down to look her in the eye. "Casey, what's wrong? Are you OK?"

"I always thought. . .I didn't really believe. . .I'm so sorry, Harry!" she cried as she fell into his arms.

He was dumbfounded. "Sorry for what?"

"For not really believing your situation was as bad as you said it was. It's worse!"

"Don't worry about it. It's OK now. I only have to live here one more summer and I'll be Dursley-free." Harry comforted her, glad in a way that she needed it, since it gave him a distraction that helped him curb his temper. He couldn't be angry and comforting at the same time, not very easily anyway. He gently rubbed her tears away with his thumbs, then held her close until she calmed down.

After a few moments, Casey looked up at him. "And they spoiled our birthday outing. That's so unfair."

Harry took in a deep breath and blew it out. He'd been watching Doug, who was staring Vernon down and appeared to be weighing his options. Harry came to a decision. "Mr. Asher?"

"Yes?"

"I was so looking forward to our day at Thorpe Park, and I know Casey and Patricia were too. Would you mind awfully if we let all this go for now and went on to enjoy our day?"

Doug looked at him in disbelief. "You want to let this go?"

"For now," Harry assured him. "Uncle Vernon will still be here when we get back. You can decide what to do then. I don't think he'll ever bother Casey again, and if he does," he stopped for a moment, glared again at his uncle, and said very deliberately, "I will take care of him myself." He stared at Vernon for a few moments. "Got that, Uncle Vernon?"

Doug looked uncertain. "He should be punished for what he's done."

"You can press charges later if you want," Harry assured him. "I'll even be a witness for you."

Doug sighed. The boy was right. It wasn't like Vernon was a "normal" criminal who might run away and hide. Hell, if Vernon did take off, it would be a blessing to everyone he left behind. "OK, Harry. Let's go."

"Erm. . .would you mind if I got cleaned up first?" said Harry. He pulled back from Casey and brushed cobwebs out of her hair that had come off his clothes.

"Of course, lad, go ahead. I'll wait for you right here. And the Dursleys won't move a muscle, will you? Not any of you. You'll let that boy have the chance to get cleaned up without bothering him. Right?" The Dursleys all just nodded, eyes wide. Doug turned to Casey as Harry headed up the stairs. "Sweetheart, go tell your mother there's been a slight delay, but Harry and I will be there soon. Don't go into any details or Patricia will get upset. We can fill your mother in later, OK?"

"Yes, Dad," Casey said, then went out to the car where her mother and sister sat waiting.

"Dursley," Doug said to Vernon. "Young Harry just kept you from being hauled into jail this morning. I will leave it up to him what to do next, but if he agrees to my pressing charges, I will certainly do so. You'd all do well to start treating Harry like the good-hearted, responsible young man he is. If I hear that you've mistreated Harry or Casey again, his wrath isn't the only thing you'll face."

Dudley cowered against the wall as Harry came bounding down the stairs a few minutes later, rubbing his hands over his hair to see if he'd missed any dust or cobwebs. "I'm ready," he said, still grim-faced from the confrontation.

"OK, lad, go on out to the car," Doug said, then stopped him, put his hand on the boy's shoulder and smiled at him. "You look very nice today," he said fondly.

Having been through trying to tame his hair and put on a coordinated outfit twice in one morning, Harry felt warmed by Doug's compliment. "Thanks." He went out and got in the car with the rest of Doug's family.

"Mr. Dursley, I suggest you get a broom and dustpan and clean up your hallway," Doug said, pointing to the remains of the cupboard door. "And if I hear you've replaced that door. . . . I think that should be an open cupboard, don't you? And it's not made for storing young men." Doug scowled at the Dursleys again, then turned on his heel and left.

On the way to Thorpe Park, Harry sat in the back seat with his head resting against the back of the seat, his eyes closed. Casey held his hand and watched him, at a loss for what to say or do. Eventually, he sighed and straightened up, glancing at her. When he saw the uncertain look on her face, he put his arm around her and pulled her head onto his shoulder. "It's OK," he murmured. "I'm fine." He tilted her chin up so she was looking in his eyes. "Thank you for rescuing me."

Tears sprang into Casey's eyes. "I wish you hadn't needed it," she whispered, glad her parents were being distracted by Patricia's excited young voice. "I'm just glad we got there when we did. How long were you in there?"

"Let's see now, ten years and I don't know how many hours," Harry said, trying to joke and failing.

Casey's face fell. "That was where you lived growing up? In that cupboard?"

"It wasn't full of stuff then, not like it is now. They only stored a few boxes in there, and my cot. They didn't want me to have too much at hand to play with." Harry said it in a matter-of-fact voice, but that simple statement cut Casey to the heart.

She swallowed, determined to be as strong as Harry was being. "How long today?"

"I dunno." Harry looked at his watch. "An hour or so, I guess. Far too long, as big as I am now. I don't fit in there anymore. My legs are still cramped." He gazed down into her golden-green eyes. "Don't worry about it. It's over. Let's have a nice day, shall we?" He kissed her forehead and tightened his arm around her shoulders in a soft hug.

"OK, if you say so."

"That's my girl," he replied, leaning his head against hers and relaxing in his seat at last.

Thorpe Park was wonderful. Harry was thrilled with the scariest rides, which whipped him around like riding the Firebolt in a storm with high winds. The best part was, Casey was nervous enough about some of them to cling tightly to him.

That afternoon, Harry and Casey met her parents and sister on the main thoroughfare of the park. "There's a parade in a few minutes," Margaret said, reading from the tourist guide.

"Oh boy!" Patricia squealed, jumping up and down. "A parade! A parade!"

As the crowd gathered along the paths, the Ashers and Harry got pushed back away from the thoroughfare until Patricia couldn't see a thing. Harry had lifted Casey onto his shoulders so she could see.

"I want to see!" Patricia cried as the music of the parade approached. "Harry, lift me up!"

"I've got you, poppet," Doug said, reaching down to pick her up.

"No! I want Harry!" the child squealed.

Casey tugged gently on Harry's hair, getting him to look up at her. "I can see from the ground. I think Patricia needs a turn," she told him.

"OK," Harry agreed with a grin, setting Casey down carefully, then squatting in front of Patricia. "You want a lift?" he asked her.

"YES!" she said excitedly, holding up her chubby little arms. Harry picked her up gently, turning her around so she was sitting on his shoulders as Casey had just been.

"You OK up there?" he asked the little girl.

"Super! This is perfect!" Patricia replied.

Doug turned to Margaret. "I didn't think I'd be replaced by a young man in Patricia's heart quite so soon," he said with a bemused smile.

Margaret smiled at the picture of Harry with Patricia on his shoulders, with Casey holding on to his arm so she could stand on tiptoe to see the parade. "I'm just glad she has such good taste in men. Now if she can find one closer to her own age. . ." she said with a chuckle.

Sunday at Grimmauld Place was terrific. The Weasleys joined Remus and Harry in a party. Harry received owls with cards and presents from Hagrid, who'd had to stay at Hogwarts, and Hermione, who was out of the country on holiday with her parents.

Stuffing his face with chocolate cake, Ron said, "You made quite a haul this year!"

"Yeah," Harry answered with a delighted grin. "But the best thing is this party!"

"I'll remember that next year and not buy you a present, then!" Ron teased.

Harry threw a chocolate frog at Ron's head, and Fred and George joined them in a spirited but brief food fight before Molly put an end to it.

Harry looked at the row of cards along the kitchen mantle, and the pile of opened presents lying untidily on the floor by his chair. Ron had given him a new book on Quidditch tactics, absolutely certain Harry was going to be team captain next term. The Weasleys had provided the food for the party, and given him a windbreaker on which Molly had embroidered the Gryffindor lion. Hermione had sent Harry a cargo net that would attach to his broom. Ginny had given him a hand-made card that sang "For Harry's A Jolly Good Fellow" when it was opened, and a new poster for the Chudley Cannons. Hagrid had sent a box of his rock cakes and treacle fudge, as well as a new book on flying creatures.

"Wonder if that's what we're studying in Care of Magical Creatures this year?" Ron said as Harry opened the package.

"Dunno," said Harry. "At least this book doesn't bite!" Both boys laughed.

Remus had given Harry the best possible gift: a box of his parents' things, and photos of them and Harry that Remus and Sirius had put away years ago, and Remus had just found in the final cleanup of Number 12 Grimmauld Place. "I thought you'd like to have these," he said as

he offered Harry the package. "It's not much, but. . . ." Remus had made a new photo album for Harry with the pictures he'd found. Some showed Lily, James, Sirius, Remus and Peter in their school days, others showed them as adults. There was a photo of Harry toddling along, holding his mother's finger, a big grin on his face showing just a few teeth, some of Sirius and Remus tossing baby Harry up in the air and catching him, of James playing "horse" and piggyback with little Harry, of Lily dancing with her baby, and many others as well, stopping abruptly when he was just over a year old. So many happy memories – if only he could remember them. Harry was touched to see how much Remus and Sirius had loved him when he was a baby.

"I think it's brilliant," Harry told his godfather, his eyes shining. "Thanks!"

To top things off, he and Ron got their O.W.L. results that day. Both of them were pleased to have received a decent number of O.W.L.s – Harry had earned 8 and Ron had earned 7. Both did miserably in their History of Magic exam (Harry getting any points at all was remarkable, since he missed half the exam period due to his scar hurting), barely passed their Divination exams, did reasonably well in Astronomy (despite the fact that exam had been interrupted by Umbridge attacking Hagrid and Professor McGonagall), quite well in Charms and Transfiguration (both of them earning extra O.W.L. credit in each exam, Harry for the speed and accuracy of his work, Ron for his originality – his results weren't exactly what the professors had asked for, but they were within the range of acceptability and rather amusing, so he got marks for making the examiners laugh), and exceptionally well in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry got extra marks for his Patronus, which put him one O.W.L. over Ron, whose Patronus was wishy-washy at best. The biggest surprise was both of them passing Potions, Harry with extra credit points for the quality of his work. "Wow, without Snape around, we're actually not bad at this stuff!" he told Ron.

"Yeah, now if we could just work out how to have the class without him," Ron agreed as he stuffed the last piece of Harry's birthday cake in his mouth.

That night, as he lay smiling in his bed remembering two whole days of celebration, Harry Potter decided sixteenth birthdays had to be the best of all.

Chapter 5 – Flying Gnomes and Broomsticks

On July 31st, Harry's 16th birthday, Casey brought not only lunch, but a small, brightly wrapped present for Harry.

"What's this?" he asked as she handed him the gift. "I thought the trip to the amusement park was my present. That was amazing enough for several birthdays!"

"This is just something I saw and thought you should have," Casey replied, her eyes twinkling. "You'll understand why when you open it, I think. I hope you like it."

Harry turned the small package over and over, examining it from every side, then held it by his ear and shook it, prolonging the anticipation, and making Casey a bit uneasy in the process, which was all part of the fun of the whole thing, after all. Finally, he began to open the wrapping ever so slowly. He glanced up at Casey, who was obviously anxious for him to like the present, then he ripped into the paper gleefully, having teased her long enough. A maroon leatherette box appeared. He opened it and saw a beautiful pocket knife inside, with a small owl on a tree branch carved into the bone handle.

"Wow! This is beautiful!" he said with a huge grin. "Thanks!"

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it!" Casey replied. "I remember you saying that you like owls, and I've seen you with scratches on your fingers from taking thorns off the roses you've given me too many times. I thought maybe you could remove the thorns with a knife more safely. Always cut away from yourself, that's what Dad says, so you don't cut your fingers."

Harry chuckled. Quite often, he'd seen Doug cutting something with his pocket knife, and he always had the sharp edge of the blade pointed toward his own thumb – but he never cut himself. Doug must have learned the hard way how to manage that feat. "I'll remember. Thank you," he said, leaning over and giving her a kiss, then sliding the knife into his pocket.

Another day, another lunch. "Harry, what do you think love is?" Casey asked.

"Why do you ask philosophical questions every lunch time?" he teased.

"You know I enjoy research," she said with a smile. "Don't evade the question. What do you think love is?"

"There are all kinds of love, I suppose. What kind are you talking about," he asked as he scratched Sirius's belly. "I mean, there's the love of a person for his pets, the love of a dog for its master, the love between friends, between parents and children, love of country. . ."

"And love between two people who may be a couple?" she added with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, that too," he agreed, blushing slightly.

"Avoiding the question again, Mr. Potter?" she said in her best professorial manner.

"OK. Erm. . .love. Well. . ." Harry didn't know where to begin. He was unsure where she was going with this line of questioning, uncertain if he wanted to know what she meant, scared at

the thought he actually did know what she meant. He sighed, and gave it his best shot. "I haven't much experience with love – you know how I grew up. But I think if two people love each other, they. . .um . . . care more about the other person than themselves. If two people love each other, they want the other person to have the biggest helping of ice cream, the best seat in the theatre, the most comfortable chair. They do whatever they can to keep the one they love warm when they're cold, to comfort them when they're unhappy, to. . .," he thought a moment, "to share their laughter and tears as needed. I think if someone truly loves someone else, he'd be willing to die for that person." He paused, considering what he'd said. "Yes, that's it. If you really love someone, you'd rather die in their place than see them hurt."

Casey was silent a few moments. "Wow. That was profound. It was deep. Wonderful, even. And I agree with it wholeheartedly. Well done, Mr. Potter! Full marks!"

They laughed together and their conversation ranged over many other topics, as it usually did.

"Remus," Harry asked as they sat together in the quiet sitting room at Grimmauld Place. "Have you ever been married?"

Remus looked at his godson in surprise, and then a sad look came over his prematurely lined face. "No. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered," Harry replied. He fidgeted with the fringe on the rug at his feet. "Have you ever been in love?" He hesitated. "I don't mean to pry. You don't have to answer if you don't want to," he added hastily.

"No, it's all right. You need to ask such questions, and since I'm your godfather now, I need to answer them," Remus responded with a smile. "Yes, Harry, I was in love. We were even engaged."

Harry leaned forward. "If you don't mind my asking. . .what happened?"

Remus rubbed his eyes and bit his lip, breathing heavily before answering. "Voldemort had her killed."

Harry sat back, appalled. "Oh no! I'm so sorry!"

"It was a long time ago. She died just before your parents did, actually. I felt like I was being beaten up from every side, losing Simone, then James and Lily, then Peter, then Sirius . . . ."

"Simone? That's a pretty name."

"She was French. I met her just after we got out of Hogwarts. She was an Auror in the French Ministry of Magic sent here in an exchange program they'd started when Voldemort was increasing his power. We would've been married just a few weeks after she died," he mused, his mind obviously in the past. He smiled sadly up at the boy. "James was going to be my best man."

Harry didn't know what to say.

Remus took a deep breath, then sat up straighter, shaking off the ghosts of his past. "Is there a reason for your asking?"

"I, erm, I. . .I was wondering. . ." He swallowed hard. It felt as if there was a log in his throat keeping him from getting words out easily.

"Wondering what?"

"Um. Is it possible, you think, to be in love with someone, the 'right one,' when you're only sixteen?"

"James had pretty much decided Lily was the girl of his dreams when he was 15 or 16 – Lily didn't agree with him for quite a while, but James had his eye on her early on. They were in love by the time they were halfway through their sixth year."

"So it is possible."

"It doesn't happen often, that a . . .shall we say 'young love' . . . turns out to be true love. But yes, it does happen." Remus studied the boy before him for a while before continuing. "So are you?"

"Am I what?"

"In love with Casey? And does she love you too?"

The boy smiled shyly, then dropped his eyes to study his trainers again as the blush raced up his cheeks. "I think so, honestly. At least, I'm pretty sure I love her. She hasn't said anything yet. But I can tell she cares about me a lot."

Remus smiled at this, then leaned toward the young man. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I'm very happy for you. She's a lovely girl."

He grinned. "Yeah. Thanks."

"And Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I think it's time we had a little talk. . ." Remus began uncomfortably. "Um. . . When a man and woman love each other, well, even when they just like each other a lot, certain emotions and hormones can. . .um. . ."

He chuckled. "Is this the 'little wizards' talk?"

"'Little wizards?' That sounds like Sirius," Remus said with a fond smile.

"That's where I got it. He gave me the 'little wizards' talk last year."

Running a hand through his prematurely grey hair, Remus heaved a dramatic sigh of relief. "Whew! I'm glad he did!" He laughed. "Honestly, I didn't think I'd ever have children, and suddenly I have one who's already almost an adult. I haven't had time to practice any parenting yet, and here I am, starting out in the middle of the 'heavy stuff.' It's a daunting task, let me tell you!"

"I'm trying not to be too much trouble," Harry said with a grin, knowing Remus wasn't truly complaining.

"Well, anyway. . .do you have any questions about the 'little wizards' thing, or did Sirius cover it pretty well?"

"Actually, I do have a question."

"OK."

"Is there any difference between witches and Muggles? In that area, I mean."

"You mean, in preventing the creation of 'little Harrys'?"

The boy's face was absolutely scarlet. "Erm. . .yeah."

"Best prevention is to not do anything. You know that."

"Yeah, but in case. . ."

"Witches can get a potion that keeps them from having babies for up to a year at a time, and they can take it before or after the . . .erm. . .event. In the Muggle world, they have some kind of potion – no, they call it 'medicine' – to prevent it, but, as I understand it, the young lady needs to be taking that precaution for quite a while before she . . .um. . .you know. . .for it to take effect. You do know how men protect themselves, right?"

Harry was relieved, in a way, that Remus was nearly as uncomfortable with this talk as he was. "Yes."

"It's important for you to know that no one method is foolproof, not Muggle methods anyway. Using the man's and woman's methods together is best, but even then, mistakes happen. The potions witches use work just fine, as far as I know. But still, doing nothing is safest in every respect."

"I know. I'm trying to keep it that way. I just wanted to know. Thanks, Remus."

Remus heaved a big sigh. "I honestly never thought I'd have a father-son talk with anyone. How'd I do?"

"You were brilliant!" Harry said with a grin.

"You should know, Harry – Muggles are more, erm, straight-laced than wizards are. They take life much more seriously than we do. If you do make the choice to follow your feelings with Casey, her parents. . ."

"Yeah, I thought of that. I don't want to hurt anyone. And I think Professor Dumbledore would be very disappointed in me if I got her in trouble."

"Actually, I would too," Remus said seriously. "You need to consider that."

"I know."

"I trust you to choose wisely most of the time, Harry," Remus said, patting his godson on the knee. "You'll be fine as long as you keep your head."

"Yeah, that's what I'm having trouble with," the young man laughed.

"That's usually where the trouble starts. Be careful."

"I will. Thanks."

Late the next Friday evening, Harry and Casey were walking home from the cinema. They'd been to see a science-fiction film with lots of special effects, and were happily discussing that aspect of the film.

"The monsters were so scary!" Casey said with a shiver. "I had to remind myself it was a film!"

"Yeah, they were cool, weren't they?" Harry said with a grin. "And when you're scared, you snuggle up against me so nicely. I love scary movies for that very reason!" He laughed, gazing down into her eyes.

"Yeah, that's pretty much why I agree to go to them. Gives me a good excuse," she teased. She stopped, smiling up at him and sliding her arms around his neck. "I've really enjoyed this evening, Harry."

He smiled fondly at her. "You sound as though you're saying goodnight and we're still several streets from your house."

"I'll take as many chances as possible at getting goodnight kisses out of you – and I'll take as many goodnight kisses as you can dish out!" she murmured as she stood on tiptoe to kiss his chin, all she was able to reach unless he bent down.

"If that's what you want, that's what you'll get," he grinned and leaned down to kiss her. A few moments later, when they broke the kiss, Casey buried her face in his neck and said, ever so quietly, "I love you, Harry."

He stood absolutely still, hoping he'd heard what he thought he'd heard, but afraid to hope at the same time. "Erm. . .excuse me?" he said as he pushed her back so he could see her face.

Pink with embarrassment, Casey glanced up at him warily, saw the hope in his eyes, then said in a stronger voice, "I love you, Harry Potter."

His face was a study in delight and amazement. "You do? Honestly?"

She nodded, a smile spreading across her face at his reaction.

Harry's face stilled and he quieted, hesitating long enough for Casey to start looking uncomfortable, then his words came out in a rush. "I've loved you for ages. I was afraid to tell you. I didn't want to rush you," he said breathlessly. "I love you, Casey." He pulled her to him in a tight embrace, elation racing through his body. He leaned down to kiss her, seeing his joy reflected in her eyes. They kissed, and as the kiss deepened, they wrapped their arms around each other as if they'd never let go.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up, and he straightened, listening, sensing his surroundings.

Casey shivered. "Why is it so cold all of a sudden?" she said. "Brrrr." She snuggled against him, but instead of him wrapping her warmly in his arms as she expected, he pushed her roughly back against the wall beside them, and turned his back on her.

"Stay there, and stay quiet," he warned in a scarily serious voice she'd never heard from him. "Whatever you do, don't open your mouth."

"What?" She was completely baffled by his behaviour. She noticed he had his stick in his hand. He always had it nearby, saying it was just a trinket that had belonged to his parents. But now it was in his hand and he looked as if he planned to use it somehow.

The street darkened quickly, to the point where they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces. "Harry, what's going on?"

"You must stay quiet. Hold on tightly to me, wrap your hands around my belt and no matter what happens, don't let go. I'll take care of you. Close your eyes and your mouth. I'm serious."

"What. . .?"

"Shhh!" he insisted.

She felt him back into her, pressing her against the wall even more firmly. He reached around to make sure she was fully hidden behind him. She leaned around his arm to see what he was looking at, and he pushed her back. She couldn't see anything but blackness, but suddenly she felt as if she'd never be happy again. She hadn't a clue what was wrong, but Harry seemed to know what was going on, and what to do. She clutched at the back of Harry's shirt, hiding her face in his back, trembling with an unnamed fear. She'd just have to trust him.

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!"* Harry cried, and a tremendous silver stag leaped out of his wand tip, racing toward the Dementors. A second huge group of Dementors came at them from the other end of the street. *"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"* Harry commanded again, and another stag, bigger than the first, leapt forward to attack the oncoming threat.

Casey peered nervously around Harry, wondering what he was doing, and saw two huge silvery stags tossing their antlers, looking as if they were attacking something, but not each other. The violence of their attacks at what appeared to be nothing unnerved her, and she squeaked as she stifled a scream, remembering Harry had said to be completely quiet.

Some of the Dementors apparently heard Casey's small noise and circled around the stags, coming swiftly toward Harry and Casey. *"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"* he called once again. Now three stags, each at least twenty feet high, were tossing around the three hundred or more Dementors who had massed themselves shoulder to shoulder, trying to get to Harry and Casey. The stags drove the Dementors away and chased after them, disappearing around curves in the road in both directions.

With varying cracking sounds, a group of people appeared on the road before them where the Dementors had just been. Harry stiffened, seeming more wary of them than of the creatures who'd just tried to attack.

"Mr. Potter," one of the people began, "we meet again." It was Kingsley Shacklebolt, an Auror Harry knew from the Order, as well as from the confrontation with Dolores Umbridge at Hogwarts not that long ago.

"Hello," Harry began cautiously. There were friends, enemies and unknowns in this group of Aurors. He had to be very careful.

"What just happened here, Mr. Potter?" Shacklebolt said.

"There were Dementors. Hundreds of them, completely surrounding us," Harry answered truthfully.

"And you did three Patronus charms in a row to fight them?" Tonks asked incredulously.

"Yes, three. I thought there were too many for just one to deal with."

"Those were some very powerful Patroni, Mr. Potter," Shacklebolt said admiringly. "Each one went off the charts on our detectors."

Harry was amazed. "They did?"

"Yes. So you can imagine how keen we were to see how an underage wizard like yourself managed such a feat," sneered one of the Aurors Harry didn't know.

"I had to protect myself," Harry replied.

"Yes, yes, we know that. How did you manage such large ones, and three in close succession at that?" insisted the unknown Auror.

"That's enough, Bainbridge," Shacklbolt warned. "We all know Harry Potter's reputation. I'm amazed at what I saw, but not that surprised."

"Come out of there, girl," one of the other Aurors commanded Casey.

She held tightly to Harry's shirt but started to peer around his shoulder.

"No," said Harry, pushing her behind him again. "She's staying where she is."

"She's a Muggle, Potter. We need to Obliviate her."

At the sound of these words, Casey let out a small moan and buried her face in the back of Harry's shirt again.

"You will leave her alone," Harry said in a voice ringing with authority. They would not get to Casey, no way. They'd have to go through him first, and he wasn't budging.

"Who are you to tell us what to do, you young brat?" sneered the aggressive Auror.

"Shut up, Claypoole," Shacklebolt commanded. "Potter may be young, but I don't think you'd really like to duel with him." Kingsley must have realized he sounded too familiar with Harry, because he went on, "I've heard he's close to being a duelling master already. You, as I recall, are not so brilliant at duelling. And by the way, which of the two of you has faced Lord Voldemort five times, with him intent on murdering you, mind, and lived to tell the tale?"

Claypoole subsided, but then spat out, "She needs her memory altered. She's seen us, she's seen what Potter can do. . ."

Shacklebolt sighed, and turned to Harry. "He has a point, Potter. Get the girl out here."

"NO! Professor Dumbledore said I could tell her I'm a wizard when the time was right. The time is right now, and if you'll all please leave, I'll get on with it!" Harry held his wand out threateningly, and was amazed that his hand didn't shake at all despite his facing a large group of professional, experienced Aurors, only a few of whom were friends of his.

Bringing Dumbledore's name into the situation changed the attitude of the assembled Aurors. "You have permission?" Tonks said.

"Yes. You can ask him yourself."

Tonks looked around at the other Aurors. "I'll just go and do that then, shall I? Then this matter can be cleared up and we can worry about where those Dementors went." She Disapparated with a loud pop.

"This task doesn't require all of us. Tonks and I will take care of this situation and the rest of you go find those Dementors," Shacklebolt said. Some of the Aurors Disapparated, while others just ran in the direction the Dementors had gone.

"OK, Harry, it's just us. Do you honestly have that permission from Albus?"

"Yes!" Harry insisted.

"Then go ahead and talk with your young lady. If it goes badly, I'll be here to take care of things."

"It won't go badly," Harry insisted, hoping he was right.

"Good luck. I'll wait over here for Tonks," Kingsley said, then moved to the other side of the street and leaned against a building, his stance casual, but his eyes watching sharply for more trouble.

Harry breathed deeply, relaxing for the first time in several long minutes. He pocketed his wand as he turned to face Casey. "Are you all right?"

Casey mouthed soundlessly, unable to come up with a coherent thought. Finally, she gasped and said, "What.. .what happened?" Once the questions started, they came tumbling out in a panicked flood. "And who were those people? And where did those stags come from, what were they made of? What were they fighting – I couldn't see anything! That stick isn't just a keepsake from your parents, is it? How did you do that? What were those people talking about, 'obliviating' me?" Harry tried to embrace her, but she shoved him back impatiently. "Answer me!"

He sighed. He'd thought many times about how he'd tell her he was a wizard and explain his world to her, but he'd never thought he'd have to do it under such stressful conditions, and with an Auror watching from across the street, even if that Auror was a friend. "Casey. Those people and I. . .we're all wizards well, except for Tonks, she's a witch. Magic is real. This stick is my magic wand. The things the stags were fighting were Dementors. You couldn't see them because you're not a witch. They were the reason it got so dark and cold. They make you feel as if you'll never be happy again." He watched her face and saw her nod in astonished understanding, her gold-flecked green eyes huge in her face.

"Yes, exactly. I thought I'd never be happy again," she said in an awe-struck voice.

"They suck the happiness out of people. That's how they feed; they feed off our joy and good feelings. The stags were guardians I produced with a Patronus charm – three charms, three Patroni. The people are Aurors – I told you I wanted to be a detective when I grow up. In the wizarding world, Aurors are the detectives. I want to be an Auror. And as for obliviating you – that means altering your memory so you won't remember any of this, or that I'm a wizard. I have permission from my headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, to tell you I'm a wizard. They won't obliviate you. I won't allow it."

Casey swallowed hard, trying to take in all he was telling her. After a few moment's thought, she said, "You. . . won't. . . *allow* it? You're a student! That makes you *nothing* to people like them! Why should they listen to you? And what do you mean, you're a wizard, and that woman's a witch? What do you mean? "

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, not happy with how he was going to have to answer this question. I mean exactly what I said. Magic exists. I'm a wizard, Tonks is a witch. And these people listen to me because . . . ." He sighed and scratched his head, wondering how best to approach this explanation. "Erm. . .when we first met, I told Patricia I was 'the famous Harry Potter,' remember? I AM 'the famous Harry Potter.'" He shook his head, not believing he was going to use his fame to help convince her of the truthfulness of his story. "The Aurors listen to me because I am Harry Potter. If this same thing had happened with another wizard my age, he would probably be talking to an Obliviated girlfriend by now, and would also be in trouble with the Ministry of Magic for performing underage magic." He studied her face before going on. "I didn't ask to be famous. Most of what I've told you about myself is true. I left out a few details here and there to keep from revealing the wizarding world to you and your family."

"Such as?"

"Such as what?"

"Details, Harry."

"Oh. Well. . ." He wasn't quite where to start.

Casey saw his confusion. "Why are you famous? Start there."

Harry sighed, straightened his shoulders as if bracing for a blow, and then said, "I'm famous because I'm 'The Boy Who Lived.' My parents were murdered by Lord Voldemort, the most evil wizard of the age. He tried to murder me as well, but somehow his spell bounced off me and hit him, making him lose his powers and his body. It took him thirteen years to recover, but he's back now, and killing me is at the top of his list. I'm 'the one that got away,' you see. When he fell, it broke the hold he'd had on the wizarding world for many years, and the good people of our world celebrated for a long time. They told their children stories about 'little Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.'" He stood very still, watching her reaction.

Casey was trembling visibly now, her eyes wide. "That's who they said you faced five times and lived to tell about it."

"Yes."

"You've just turned sixteen, and you've fought an evil wizard five times already? How is that possible?"

Harry shrugged. "Just lucky, I suppose." He tried to give her his crooked grin, but he was too nervous about how she was taking this news to manage it.

"Lucky? LUCKY? You have a maniac trying to kill you, and you've had to actually fight him *five times* while you're still a child, and you say you're lucky?"

"I'm still here," he said with a shrug. What else could he say?

"Are you in danger here?" she asked, looking nervously around.

"I'm as safe here as anywhere, I suppose. There are spells on this area to keep me safe. The fact that the Dementors came here means someone sent them on purpose. But you can see they have Aurors watching over me. If I couldn't have handled the Dementors myself, they would've been here to help pretty soon." He was trying to reassure her, but he realized he wasn't really safe anywhere, and she might as well know that up front.

Her face was very pale, her eyes huge and staring as she tried to make sense of all he'd told her.

"Are you OK?" Harry asked in concern.

"I'm . . .I'm . . .I don't know."

"Here, sit down. It is rather a lot to take in," he said as he tenderly helped her sit on a nearby garden wall, and then pulled out two chocolate bars. "Eat this, it will help. Honestly, it will," he insisted as he unwrapped one and put it in her hand, then unwrapped the other for himself.

"Why aren't these melted? It's been so hot, and they were in your pocket. . ."

"I kept a cooling charm on them so they wouldn't get all messy," he said matter-of-factly.

"A cooling charm?"

"Yeah," he said with a shrug.

"What's a cooling charm?"

"A magic spell that keeps things cool." He couldn't think of any better way to explain it.

"Like a cooler in your pocket?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Does it make you cold?" she said, trying to understand, her face perplexed as she touched nervous fingers to the outside of the pocket from which he'd pulled the chocolate.

He laughed. "No, I put the charm on the sweets, not on my pocket. It would make me cold if I put the charm on my pocket."

"This is all just so hard to believe," she said, shaking her head.

"Yeah, that's what I thought when I first heard it, but it's the truth," he said simply. "Eat your chocolate. It really will make you feel better." He watched her bite into the chocolate, bit into his own chocolate bar, then breathed a sigh of relief as colour came back to her face. The chocolate was obviously doing its job. "Better?" he asked.

She nodded.

"OK, then. I'll tell you everything, anything you want to know. There is one catch," he added.

"A catch?"

"Yes. You cannot tell anyone, not your parents, Patricia, your best friends, strangers, anyone at all that I'm a wizard and that the wizarding world exists, that magic is real – you can't tell. It will endanger all of us, and you'll be Obliviated."

She thought about it a moment, making as careful a decision as she could. "OK, I won't tell," she agreed.

"Casey, I'm still the same person you've gone out with all summer. I'm just Harry. But I'm just Harry with a few more. . .talents. . .than you thought."

"Is that what Remus meant when he said you were talented? Something about magic?" she asked.

"Yes. Apparently I'm a rather powerful wizard. I don't take any credit for it. I've been lucky a lot of times, and help shows up when I need it, but still – I'm told very few students and not many grown wizards can conjure a corporeal Patronus. Conjuring them takes a lot of power, a very strong happy thought, and I just made three absolutely huge ones." He was amazed himself at what he'd done. "You know why that is?"

"Sorry. Haven't a clue."

"To create a Patronus, you have to hold on to a really happy thought as you do the spell. All I could think of was you. You make me so happy. That's why I was able to do three of them, and with such power." Harry gently stroked her cheek with one finger, noticing the tear sliding down her face. "Casey? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said as she sniffed, trying to stop the tears that were beginning to flood her eyes. "I guess. . .I thought I was in love with sweet, neglected, abused, precious, wonderful Harry Potter. Instead, it seems you're like. . .a prince or something. It's sort of unnerving."

Harry sat back in shock. "A prince?"

"Well, somebody really famous, powerful, you know."

It took Harry a while to reply. "Does it make a difference to you?" he said uncomfortably.

"I don't know. It shouldn't. But you're right it's a lot to take in." She chuckled, a sad sound behind it. She wiped her face and drew a deep, shuddering breath, calming herself. "May I. . .may I see your magic wand?"

"In certain contexts, that could be considered quite suggestive," Harry teased, trying to get a laugh out of her. He quickly gave up trying to amuse her. ". Here."

She took the wand in her hand wonderingly. "How do you make it work?"

"It concentrates the magic in the wizard's body, and directs it. It has a magical core. Mine has a phoenix tail feather. There are lots of variations in wood, core material, length and so forth. The wand chooses the wizard. It takes a powerful wizard to be able to perform magic properly with someone else's wand."

"Can you do that?"

"I have a few times, but it's much easier with my own wand. Other wands don't feel right. This one," he smiled, "when I hold it, I feel. . .complete. I can't explain it any better."

"You said a phoenix tail feather? Phoenixes are real too?" she said, her eyes widening as she realized what she was saying.

"Oh, yeah! They're brilliant. This tail feather came from my headmaster's phoenix, Fawkes."

"And does he burn up and get reborn from the ashes?"

"Yes, and his tears have healing powers, and he can carry very heavy loads. He's fantastic. His song makes me feel. . .I don't know, it's just very uplifting somehow. They're very rare, phoenixes. I wish I could have one someday."

"Why can't you? Can't you just go and buy one somewhere?" she said, giggling nervously. She was beginning to wonder if one or both of them were just a wee bit crazy.

"No, you can't buy phoenixes. They choose wizards, usually when he or she is a teenager. It doesn't happen often. Fawkes is the only phoenix I know about right now. They disappear somewhere, and just join a wizard when they feel like it. Nobody really understands them. They're very mysterious."

She pondered this information for a while, then said, "So if phoenixes are real, what else is real that we think is imaginary?"

"Unicorns, Centaurs, dragons, trolls, fairies . . . loads of things," he assured her.

"No way," she said, shaking her head. "They can't be real, no way."

"I've seen all of them, honest! Centaurs are arrogant. They think humans are beneath them. They study the stars all the time. They use bows and arrows to fight, as well as their hooves. They call human children 'foals.' Unicorns are unbelievably beautiful. The foals are born gold and don't turn silver until they're older. My friend Ron's wand has a unicorn tail hair as its magical core. I had to fight a dragon my fourth year as part of a tournament. There are lots of different kinds of dragons. I could show you a model of the Hungarian Horntail I fought. She was a nasty thing – she could kill you with the horns on her tail or with the flames from her mouth equally well. "

"You . . .fought a dragon?"

"Well, I outflew it, really. I flew all around it to get it dizzy, because I had to steal a golden egg from her that was a clue to the next task in the tournament."

"You out. . .flew?"

"On my broom. I love to fly. I play Quidditch, that's our sport. It's kind of like soccer on broomsticks, but it's a lot more violent. It's brilliant!" he said with a grin.

"You ride a broom?" Her eyes were huge with disbelief. His stories were getting wilder and more unbelievable the longer he talked. . .but then again, something had made her feel as if she'd never be happy again, and he'd made silver stags come out of his stick – wand – so he must be telling the truth, right?

"I ride a Firebolt. That's an international quality racing broom. The Irish National Quidditch team used them in the Quidditch World Cup a couple of years ago. It was a gift from my godfather Sirius." He knew he was getting her confused, but he didn't know how to answer her questions without giving her the details that proved he was telling the truth. His face furrowed in concern as he watched her trying to understand what he was saying.

Casey shook her head as if she was woozy.

"Too much information, eh? I'm sorry," he said, reaching out timidly to touch her cheek. "Are you OK?"

"Dizzy with information right now, I suppose," she replied, a nervous grin tickling her mouth. She sighed, shaking her head and trying to get back on a logical track. "OK, let's stop talking about things I can't see," she said briskly. "About your wand. . ."

"Yes?"

"If it's a real magic wand, can I do magic with it?" she asked.

"No. You're a Muggle."

"I'm a what?"

"A Muggle. That's what we call non-magic folks."

"Oh. Sounds a bit rude," she said with a nervous giggle.

"Sorry. I didn't invent the term, that's just what wizard folks call non-magical folks."

She'd been sliding the wand through her fingers as they'd talked. It just felt like a stick with a handle, with nothing 'powerful' about it at all. "How do you make this work?"

"Give it a wave," Harry said. "See what happens."

She waved the wand in a variety of ways, her gestures getting larger and larger. Nothing happened. "It doesn't work."

"I won't say I told you so," said Harry, giving Casey his cheekiest grin. "Here, let me." He took the wand in his hand, barely moved it, muttered something, and multicoloured butterflies came out of the end, fluttering around Casey's head, sparkling in the street lamps like gems.

Casey's face was filled with delight. "They're beautiful! Are they really alive?"

"They are until I make them go away," he said with a flick of his wrist, and the butterflies disappeared.

"Do something else!"

"Technically, I'm not supposed to do magic in front of Muggles at all, or even outside school until I'm seventeen. I'm underage, but since I'm in danger from Voldemort and his followers, my headmaster has got me a special dispensation to do magic for self-defence. As that Auror is watching us right now, it's OK for me to do this little bit, but I can't just play with it here. Wish I could. But there are too many Muggles about. Somebody could see."

Casey was disappointed. "Oh. OK. I understand."

"Tell you what," he said, excited by the idea he'd just had. "You can come with me to visit the Weasleys and you'll see magic everywhere. They won't mind, I'm sure."

"You mean Ron, Ginny, Hermione – all those people you've told me about – they're all Wizards and witches?"

"Yup."

"Wow. And the Weasleys would be willing for me to go and visit them?"

"Yes, I'm sure they'll agree. They've heard all about you."

"That would be great!"

Tonks reappeared with a loud pop, waved merrily at Harry, then walked over to Kingsley. They conferred a moment, then Kingsley cleared his throat noisily. "Ahem. Harry?" he called quietly across the street.

"Yes?"

"It looks like everything's OK with her now – am I right?"

"Yes, we're fine."

"OK, go home then. It's late. I'll take care of things at this end. Be careful out here, Harry. Nice butterflies," he added with a smile.

"Thanks! Bye! Bye, Tonks!"

"Bye, Harry. Take care!" Tonks called.

Harry and Casey headed toward her house, quietly discussing the evening's events and the world of magic. As he kissed her goodnight at her door, she gazed into his eyes.

"I always knew there was something different about you," she murmured.

"You did?"

"Yes," she said, cupping his face in her hand. "You are magical in so many ways, Harry."

He leaned down to kiss her again. "I love you, Casey," he murmured as he held her close to him.

"I love you too."

Harry nearly skipped home, he was so happy. She knew about him being a wizard and she still loved him. What a wonderful girl!

"Three hundred Dementors? They were probably the Azkaban guards," Dumbledore commented during the Order of the Phoenix meeting. "We've had no word of where they've

been since Voldemort called them away from Azkaban. Somebody sent them to find Harry. We need to guard him more closely, and find out who's been passing along information."

"The boy did three absolutely huge Patronus charms, one after the other, and showed no ill effects at all after doing them," Shacklebolt reported. "He didn't even need chocolate. He had some and shared it with his girlfriend, but Harry himself seemed to be just fine. When we got there, he was ready and willing to take all of us on," he added with a chuckle. "And I think he might have won!"

"His powers are increasing at an amazing rate," Dumbledore murmured. "We must keep him safe until he reaches his full potential."

Harry sent Hedwig with a note to the Weasleys asking if he could bring his girlfriend to visit them so she could meet a wizard family and see what things were like in a magical household. He'd told Ron a good bit about his developing relationship with Casey, and the Weasleys had already heard that Dumbledore had given permission for Harry to tell her he was a wizard. They agreed to the visit readily and the details were quickly arranged. That Sunday, Harry and Casey went to Mrs. Figg's house to use her fireplace to get to The Burrow. Remus was going to meet them there, as was Hermione.

"Is Mrs. Figg a witch?" Casey asked in a whisper as they approached the door.

"She's a squib. That means she's from a magical family but for some reason she isn't magical herself. She can do some magical things – she can see Dementors, for instance, where you couldn't. She was my babysitter when I was little. The Dursleys don't know she's magical or they would have never allowed it. I didn't know she was magical until last year." Harry knocked on the door and Mrs. Figg soon answered it.

"Harry! How nice to see you! And this must be Casey," she said, extending a friendly hand to the girl. "So nice to meet you, my dear. I've heard lovely things about you from Harry. Do come in."

"Thanks for letting us use your fireplace, Mrs. Figg," Harry said as they entered the sitting room.

"Oh, Harry, anytime you need it, you know my door is always open for you," Mrs. Figg answered graciously.

Harry and Casey stood before the small fireplace, the canister of Floo powder in Harry's hand. "Um, Harry?" Casey began hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"We're too big for that fireplace. And won't we get dirty?"

"The fireplace will expand to fit us once I throw some Floo powder in. I'll do a cleansing charm on us when we arrive. We'll get a bit sooty, but it's a fast, cheap way to travel, and Muggles can't see us use it. Since you're a Muggle, I'll have to hold you in my arms so you can travel through it – that's the way parents do it with children. You'll want to close your eyes and hold on to me as tight as you can. You'll probably get dizzy because we'll be

spinning around as we travel. Keep your eyes and mouth closed so you don't get soot in them," Harry explained calmly. He took her hand and led her onto the hearth itself. She was trembling. "Are you ready?" he asked gently.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she said shakily.

"I was afraid the first time too," he assured her. "Don't worry, I'll take good care of you." He pointed his wand at the fireplace and said "Incendio" starting a small fire. Then he tossed some Floo powder into the firebox and green flames emerged as the fireplace magically grew large enough for them to stand in. "Come on, it won't hurt, honestly."

"Are you sure?"

"You're safe with me, Casey, I promise."

She let him lead her into the fireplace, where she was surprised to find the flames just warm and tickling her legs a bit. Harry lifted Casey into his arms. Casey wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and her legs around his waist, as he pulled her face into his shoulder to protect her from as much soot as possible. He grasped the length of her hair tightly in his hand to keep it from flying around as they spun, then said, "The Burrow" in a firm voice and they began spinning rapidly. They soon arrived at The Burrow's fireplace, where Harry stepped out of the fireplace and set Casey down. She stumbled a bit from dizziness. Harry performed a cleansing charm on them as Mrs. Weasley noticed their arrival.

"Harry, dear! How wonderful to see you!" she said with great plea. "And this must be your Casey? Very nice to meet you, dear."

"Casey, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, smiling at each of them in turn.

"Hello. Thank you for letting me come and visit you," Casey said graciously. As she glanced around, Casey became uneasy. Mrs. Weasley appeared to live in a ruin of a house, with huge holes in the walls, half the roof gone, and no furniture.

Harry noticed the odd look in her eyes. "What do you see, Casey?" he asked, an amused gleam in his eye.

"Um. . .sorry?" she replied, trying to think of something logical to say. No way was she going to say Harry's friends lived in a hovel!

Mrs. Weasley chuckled. "You probably see a ruin instead of a home, don't you, dear? Let me do the revealing charm for you, so you can see how things really look. *Manifesto*," she said with a wave of her wand.

Casey's jaw dropped. Suddenly the ruin turned into an oddly shaped but perfectly sound home with colourful furnishings, a washing up bowl with a scrubbing brush busily cleaning dishes, and people visible through the windows playing a game where they appeared to be picking things up from the ground and throwing them over the garden hedge as hard as they could.

Harry smiled to see the change in her face. "Fantastic, isn't it?" he asked her.

"Amazing!" She turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Why didn't it look like this before?"

"Wizards use Muggle-repelling charms on our homes, businesses, schools, and so on. If you see one of our homes, you'll probably see a ruin, as ours appears to be. It will look as if it's been empty for a long time, with an overgrown garden, an unused drive, things like that. If it's a wizarding business, it will appear to have been closed for many years. This is one of the ways we protect ourselves, by concealing our world from Muggles."

Harry was looking around the house to see what changes had been made since he was last there. He looked at the magical clock on the wall that had a hand for each Weasley family member, showing if they were travelling, at home, at work, in mortal danger, and so forth. He grinned, noticing an extra hand had been added. "Mrs. Weasley! Thanks!"

Mrs. Weasley, noticing the hand with Harry's face on it pointed to "at home" said, "Oh, Harry, dear, you really are a part of the family. It only seemed right. It is a bit confusing when it says 'at home,' though – I think the clock isn't certain where home is for you. It shows you 'at home' when you're here, on Privet Drive, and at. . ."she glanced at Casey, "erm, at Remus's place."

"Oh, I didn't know your godfather had found a home," Casey said with a smile. "I thought you said he travelled so much, he didn't need a permanent place to live."

"Wherever Remus is staying, that's his home," Harry explained lamely. He didn't want to get into the Order of the Phoenix business – that should remain secret, at least for a while.

"Go on, then, the others are outside. I'm sure they're eager to see you," Mrs. Weasley said, shooing them out the door.

Outside, Harry and Casey were suddenly surrounded by a sea of red-haired men. Ron, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie and Mr. Weasley were all in the garden, where they'd been tossing gnomes over the hedge. Percy, as ambitious as usual, chose to spend his Sunday at work rather than have fun with his family. The rift between Percy and the rest of the Weasleys was still open.

"Harry! Good to see you!" "Harry, come help!" "Harry, who's the babe?" – this spoken, of course, by Fred. . .or was it George? Laughing introductions were made all around. "C'mon, Harry, join the fun! Casey, have a go!"

Casey followed Harry to the garden, leaning over to whisper to him, "What are those things they're throwing?"

"They're gnomes. The garden has to be de-gnomed every so often. You chuck them out, eventually they come back, but that's just the way it's done. They don't seem to mind being thrown. It's fun, really," Harry assured her. He caught one of the potato-shaped creatures and offered it to Casey. She flinched away from it, then bravely held out her hand for the gnome.

"Eauw," she said. "It's like a potato with legs. . .and a face!" She nearly dropped it in her shock at seeing a wizened little face grimacing up at her. "Are you sure about this, Harry?"

"Yeah, they seem to enjoy the game," he said matter-of-factly, catching another gnome.

"How bizarre! Now what do I do?"

"Fling it as hard as you can over the hedge." He hefted his gnome in his hand and demonstrated. Soon Casey was catching gnomes herself and throwing them with gleeful abandon. "You're right, this is fun!"

A few moments later, Remus arrived, with Hermione appearing not long after him. Hermione and Casey were as alike in their interests as Harry had thought, and they soon were deep in conversation.

Mrs. Weasley brought out a pitcher of pumpkin juice and some biscuits and everyone sat down at the tables to visit a while.

"Where's Ginny?" Harry asked Ron.

"Dunno. Reckon she'll show up when she feels like it," Ron answered, a bit evasively.

"What's up with her?" Harry said.

"Oh, you know," Ron replied quietly. "She's. . .nervous."

Harry was stumped. "About what?"

"About meeting your girlfriend, I suspect."

"Don't tell me. . ."

"OK, then," Ron said with a shrug and a smile, "I won't."

"You don't think she still fancies me?" Harry said with a sinking feeling in his stomach. "I thought she was going out with Dean Thomas now."

"She broke up with him soon after we got home. She said he was just a 'passing fancy.'"

"But I'm not?" Harry asked a bit nervously.

"Yeah, I think that's it. I thought she was over her crush on you until Mum said you were coming to visit and bringing your girlfriend. And a Muggle girlfriend at that. Ginny ran to her room and hasn't been seen since."

"Erm," Harry began, then hesitated. The Weasleys were a pure wizarding family, but most wizarding families had intermarried with Muggles at some point or the family lines would have become too inbred or died out entirely. Mr. Weasley, in particular, was quite fond of Muggles. Surely the Weasleys weren't prejudiced about wizards dating Muggles?
"Um. . .does it bother you that she's a Muggle?"

"Me? Nah, it's OK with me. As long as you're not with a Slytherin, I don't care who you go out with." Ron studied his friend a moment and then leaned close to Harry's ear. "Have you. . .erm. . .you know?"

Harry sat up straighter, bewildered. "Have I what?"

Ron leaned in to whisper again. "Have you. . .you know. . .done the deed?"

Appalled but blushing, Harry punched Ron hard on the arm. "No! Where'd you get that idea?"

"You just look. . .different somehow, I thought maybe. . . ." Ron shrugged, not really knowing what to say next.

Harry glared at Ron a moment, turned and looked at Casey where she sat talking with Hermione. "Ron, if we'd done it, I wouldn't talk about it. That wouldn't be right. But we honestly haven't. I will tell you this, though," he said softly, still watching Casey's animated face. "I love her. I really, truly love her. I can't stop thinking about her. She amazes me."

Ron sat back, astonished. "Really? Blimey!" He looked from Harry to Casey then back to Harry again. "D'you think you're going to marry her?"

Harry laughed. "We're sixteen – well, I'm sixteen, and she'll be fifteen for little while longer, anyway. We haven't talked about stuff that far in the future. I don't know. But if that were to happen. . .I think it would be brilliant. Just not for a while. I'd like to finish school and grow up a bit first, you know?"

"Yeah, me too," Ron said with a sigh.

"You too, what?"

"I'd like to finish school first. . ." Ron began, then turned beet red.

"Have you finally noticed you fancy Hermione?" Harry asked with a laugh.

"Fancy her? I wish that were all!" Ron said, shaking his head. "I'm obsessed with her!"

"You've always been obsessed with her. You were just too thick to realize it!" Harry said, grinning as he thumped Ron's head with his knuckles. "So does she know yet?"

Ron blanched. "Bloody hell, you don't think I'd *tell* her, do you?"

"If you don't tell her soon," Harry answered reasonably, "somebody else will snap her up and then where will you be? Don't forget the Yule Ball and Viktor Krum."

"How could I?" Ron said, cringing and wrinkling his nose. "Vicky. Eauw."

"So when are you going to tell her?" Harry pressed.

"Have you told Casey how you feel about her?"

"Of course."

"Of course? Whoa, Harry, I knew you were brave, but that takes the biscuit. When did you tell her?"

"Two nights ago, when the Dementors attacked and I had to tell her I was a wizard."

"And she didn't laugh or anything?"

Harry grinned at his friend, then turned to look at Casey. She felt him looking and looked back at him. A warm smile spread over both their faces. "No, Ron, she didn't laugh. She actually started it."

"She did?"

Harry turned back to Ron. "Yes, she did. Hermione might start it if you'd stop bickering with her long enough to let her know you care about her."

"I'll think about it," he agreed with a lopsided grin and pink ears.

Harry gave him a serious look. "But there's something else. I want both you and Hermione to be happy. I know you fancy each other and I think you'll be good for each other. I'll be glad to listen to you when you want to talk about her. But I really do not want to hear any details about your 'doing the deed,' if you two do it, OK? That should be private."

Ron was beet red. He gulped. "Erm. OK," he agreed in a strangled voice.

Ron's obvious distress at the thought of him and Hermione. . .erm. . .well. . .had Harry in stitches. He punched Ron playfully in the shoulder. "And by the way, has your dad had the 'little wizards' talk with you?" he teased.

Ron gulped. "The what?"

"Sirius called it the 'little wizards talk.' Remus called it the 'little Harrys' talk. You have had that talk with your dad, haven't you?" Harry said, laughter in his eyes.

"Erm. . .well. . .kind of." Ron blushed even more. "And Fred and George. . ."

Harry laughed out loud. "I'd take whatever they said with a pinch of salt if I were you."

A rueful grin creased Ron's face. "Yeah, you're right. What they said was nearly the opposite of what Dad said. Trouble is, I don't know who to believe. None of what they said sounded very. . .erm. . .believable."

"Tell you what," Harry offered. "I won't talk about Casey and me like that, but we can talk about 'little wizards' sometime if you want. If we compare notes, we might actually understand it at some point."

"Yeah! Great!" Ron laughed, looking relieved. "Hey, how about a game of Quidditch? Did you bring the Firebolt?"

"Right here in my pocket. I put a Shrinking Charm on it."

"Gosh, I wish I was allowed to do magic like that at home," Ron said wistfully.

"You live in a magical world all the time. And you'll be old enough before too long," Harry assured him.

Ron rounded up his brothers and Harry called Casey and Hermione over, then started explaining Quidditch to Casey.

"Harry, did you bring your Firebolt?" Fred – or was it George? – asked.

"Of course!" Harry answered, then pulled a small wadded up bundle out of his pocket. Wrapped in a napkin, not a lot larger than three toothpicks together, was his Firebolt.

"Hey, nice shrinking charm, Harry," Remus said in delight. "Full marks!"

Harry laughed and took the broom out of the wrapping. "Watch this, Casey," he said as he held the tiny broom out in mid-air. He let go and it hovered where he'd left it. He did the restoration charm and the broom became full-size with a small "pop." Casey's mouth dropped open in amazement. "Want to go for a ride?" Harry offered.

"Uh. . .there's no. . .um. . .saddle," Casey said hesitantly. "How do you sit on it?"

"It has a Cushioning Charm on it. It's actually pretty comfortable, like riding a bike," Harry said. He straddled the broomstick and held out his hand to her. "Come on, jump on behind. I'll stay low and slow until you feel comfortable on it."

"Promise?" she said nervously as she got on the broom behind him.

"I told you you're safe with me," he assured her. "This isn't really a two-person broom, so shift up behind me and hold on tight, OK?"

"No problem!" Casey agreed as she snuggled up against his back and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Oy! Hermione," Harry called. She was walking toward them helping Ron, Fred and George carry brooms. "Could you plait Casey's hair so it doesn't get all tangled?"

"OK," she agreed with a smile, getting out her wand.

"Harry! What's she going to do? She's. . ." Casey whispered nervously in his ear.

"Pointing her wand at you so she can charm your hair into a plait," he answered.

"Oh," she replied in a small voice, then trembled as she felt her hair moving on its own into a neatly done braid down her back. She reached behind her and felt the plait. "Wow! Thanks, Hermione!" she called with a smile to her new friend.

"No problem!" Hermione replied with a grin as she sat down to watch the Weasley boys getting ready to fly off to the Quidditch pitch.

"Ready?" Harry asked Casey. He felt her nod against his back. "Here we go!" He kicked off gently, getting the Firebolt to move as slowly as possible, and staying close to the ground.

"Wow!" Casey breathed. "This is so cool!"

"Are you having fun?" Harry asked her.

"Oh yes!"

"Ready for some speed and height?"

"Uh. . ."

"I'll take care of you. Hang on, we'll do it gradually," he assured her as he started to climb and put on just a little speed. Soon they were making lazy curves in the sky, Casey whooping with each turn.

"This is great!" Her voice was full of laughter. "Better than an amusement park!"

"Ready for more?"

"What?" she asked, then squealed as he sped up rapidly. She wrapped her arms even tighter around his waist, burying her face in his back at first. Then as she got used to the speed, she lifted her head and looked around, watching the wind whip Harry's black hair around, looking down at the trees twenty feet below them, gazing at a bird flying at the same height they were.

"Oy! Harry! Are you going to play?" one of the twins called.

"Yeah, I'll be there in a minute," he answered.

"I'm turning the balls loose now. Catch the Snitch when you get a moment, all right?" Ron teased. "Hey, Hermione! We need one more up here. D'you want to play?"

"No, thanks, Ron, you know I'm not as good a flier as you lot are," she answered with a smile. "I'll just sit here with Casey and watch, all right?"

"So Harry, we're playing four to a side, but our side has three – I'm Keeper, Fred's Beater, and you'll be Chaser as well as Seeker, since you're the last on the pitch – last one in gets the bum jobs, y'know!" Ron laughed. "Charlie's Seeker, Bill's Keeper and George is Beater on the other side."

"Who's their Chaser?" Harry asked as he started to descend.

"I am!" a voice called from the ground, and Remus soon zoomed past them on his way to join the game.

"Cool!" Harry grinned as he spiralled down to the ground, landing next to Hermione. Casey got off and sat down, breathless from her flight. Harry took off in a rush, showing off with barrel rolls, loops, and a huge burst of speed with a captured Snitch at the end of it. He released the Snitch and raced off again, just playing with the broom, and showing off for Casey before getting serious about his Chaser duties.

"Boy," Casey breathed, "I'm glad he didn't fly like that with me on the broom!"

"He's amazing, isn't he?" said Hermione. "He's probably the best flier Hogwarts has ever had."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. He was the youngest Seeker in a hundred years, and he's won nearly every game he's been in. Once he caught the Snitch just a few seconds into the game, which is very rare because the Snitch likes to hide, and usually isn't seen until a game has been going on quite some time. He'll probably be Gryffindor's Quidditch Captain this year. I imagine the professional Quidditch teams will be recruiting him in his last year at Hogwarts, too."

"So you think he's going to be a professional Quidditch player?" Casey asked.

"I think he'd be brilliant at it," Hermione said with a smile. "But he says he wants to be an Auror, so he has more studying to get through after Hogwarts. I don't know if he'll play Quidditch first or just go on with his training. I've read that his dad was a brilliant Quidditch player, too."

Casey cringed, watching Harry dodge the Bludgers as he charged a goal post with the Quaffle in his arm. He tossed it through for a score. The girls cheered before Casey continued. "It looks like a dangerous game."

"Oh, it is. There are injuries nearly every game. But Madam Pomfrey – she's our school nurse. She's brilliant. She can repair broken arms in seconds. She re-grew all the bones in Harry's arm overnight one time."

Casey turned to face Hermione, uncertain if the young witch was teasing her or not. "Sorry?"

Hermione went on to tell her the circumstances of Harry's losing all the bones in his right arm and how Madam Pomfrey re-grew them with Skele-Gro, then went on with other stories about Quidditch games in Harry's past, and how Ron had become such an excellent Keeper during the past school year.

Fred was doing the commentary on the game as he played. "And it's Lupin with the Quaffle, bearing down on Weasley's goal. C'mon Ron, he's not your professor now! OH NO! The goal is good! Nice, work, Professor! The Quaffle is back in play. And it's Potter with the Quaffle again, racing down the pitch to the goal defended by Weasley. Bill Weasley was one of Hogwarts best Keepers at one time, but he appears to be rusty! Then again, Potter's a great Quidditch player! Look out Bill, here comes Harry again! And it's Weasley doing nice Bludger work, but he missed! And Potter is at the goal now, Weasley defending. And it's GOOD! The score now stands Weasley/Potter 30, Weasley/Lupin 10. Too bad, Bill! And it's Weasley after the Snitch! Go Charlie! No, wait, Harry's on my team! HARRY! GO! GO! GO! Potter's all the way across the pitch, but look at that Firebolt go! And Potter does one of his trademark dives, then stands on his broomstick as it skims along the grass, and ALMOST catches the Snitch! But Weasley comes in from the side and nearly knocks Potter off his broom! Nice move, Charlie, but don't hurt Gryffindor's Seeker! And the Snitch has escaped again. Weasley with the Quaffle, racing toward Weasley's goal. And Ron saves it! Well done, Ron! The Quaffle is put back into play and it's Potter carrying the Quaffle – but there's the Snitch! Potter's after the Snitch, with a Quaffle in his arms! He passes to Weasley – that's me! then dives. Charlie Weasley is after the Snitch as well. What a spectacular dive! Weasley

attempts a goal, but is stopped by Weasley – it's hard to shoot well when you're commentating on a match! The two Seekers are neck and neck. Harry's grown a lot this summer, Charlie, look how long his arms are now! Look out! Weasley pushes Potter's arm out of the way and goes for the Snitch, but Potter rolls upside down and goes UNDER Weasley, grabbing the Snitch as Charlie's distracted by his manoeuvre! And it's Potter with the Snitch, winning the game for Weasley/Potter 180 to 10!" Harry zoomed around the pitch, pumping his Snitch-filled fist in the air, then joined Fred and Ron in a back-thumping hug.

"Harry, I knew you were a fantastic Seeker, but that was just an amazing move," Charlie said with great admiration. "Well done!"

Ron elbowed Harry. "You do know Charlie was Hogwarts greatest Seeker – until you came along," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, I've heard. You've only told me about a million times," Harry laughed.

"Harry, are you going to go professional?" Charlie asked as they all flew lazy circles in the centre of the pitch, catching their breath.

"Nobody's asked me," Harry replied. "But I want to be an Auror. If a team recruits me, I'll have to work out how to manage both Quidditch and school."

"You do that now!" Ron teased.

"Yeah, but Auror training, that's a lot more intense than Hogwarts, I suspect," Harry replied. He rolled his eyes suddenly. "MORE intense than Hogwarts! How will I ever manage without you and Hermione to help me with my homework? We should all go to school together again!"

"I dunno, Harry," Ron said hesitantly. "I'd probably pick Quidditch if a team recruited me. Tough choice."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"Who said we could get into serious discussions here?" said Fred in a mock-stern voice. "Shall we have another go, then?"

"I should get back to Casey," Harry answered, then started to descend. "Casey, want another ride?" he called as he headed toward her.

"Yeah!" she agreed, getting up and brushing the grass off her jeans.

Ron was flying right on Harry's tail. When he neared the ground, he hovered next to the girls. "Hermione," Ron said with his cheeks reddening and his voice cracking, "would you like a ride?"

Hermione looked up at him, surprised at the offer. She could fly by herself when she wanted to, but she rarely wanted to. She honestly wasn't very fond of flying. Yet here was Ron, making an offer. . . . "Yeah!" She climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, snuggling up against him as Casey was doing with Harry. Ron's ears turned

bright red, especially when his twin brothers started whistling at them. Charlie and Bill chased Fred and George off, Remus landed and headed for the house, and Ron, Hermione, Harry and Casey cruised happily over the Quidditch pitch and the Weasley garden for quite a while.

Chapter 6 – Rita Skeeter Bites Again

"Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said as the boys started up the hill to the Quidditch pitch, getting ready for their game, "why don't you go out and play too? They're short of a player."

"No, I'm going to stay here," Ginny said, sitting on her bed with a book in her lap. "I don't feel like playing today."

"Do you feel all right, dear?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Ginny replied grumpily. "I just don't want to play Quidditch today."

"You're not happy Harry brought that girl over, are you?" her mother said wisely.

"What . . .why. . ."

"You still fancy him, don't you," her mother said kindly as she sat on the bed by her daughter.

Ginny dropped her eyes and didn't answer, but the flush on her face said all that was needed.

"She makes him happy, Ginny. Harry has had a very hard life, and he still has so much to deal with. Please don't begrudge him this happiness," Mrs. Weasley asked, taking her daughter's hand.

"But what about my happiness?" Ginny burst out. "Nobody seems to care about that!"

"Ginny! Of course we do! But Harry's not ready for you yet."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You've gone out with lots of boys since you started Hogwarts," Mrs. Weasley reasoned. "Casey came into Harry's life when he needed someone to care about him, what with Sirius's death and all. She's helped him get past that. They suit each other well. You've had several chances to explore relationships. It's Harry's turn. She's his first real girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Yes," Ginny snapped grumpily.

Molly rubbed her daughter's arm comfortingly. "Give him time. Be glad for him, Ginny. I believe this is the happiest I've ever seen him. He deserves some joy in his life. Stay friends with him, and if you and he are meant to be together, it will happen at the right time."

Ginny searched her mother's face, hoping she was right. "You honestly think so?"

"I know it."

Ginny sighed. "OK, then," she said as she put her book aside. "Do you need help with anything?"

Molly thought a moment. Giving Ginny a job to do would be a way of covering for her staying away from the others for so long. "Certainly, dear. Why don't you go and set the dishes out? I could do with some help with the potatoes, as well."

"OK," Ginny agreed, then followed her mum down the stairs.

Ginny carried dishes outside to set the table, but as often happened when they ate outside, her brothers had the tables flying in mid-air fighting each other. One table beat the other with a leg, the second table spun around and bashed the first with the four lion's feet of its pedestal base. They crashed together repeatedly until the pedestal fell off the second table and the first table, which was down to one leg, zoomed around the garden in a victory lap. Everyone cheered the victorious table, amid much laughter.

Seeing Ginny with her arms full of dishes, the boys repaired the tables and set them where they knew their mum wanted them. Arthur Weasley, who had been as much a part of the table warfare as his boys, headed for the kitchen to help his wife. Remus, Harry, Bill and Charlie went to help Ginny with the dishes. Hermione and Casey had seated themselves a bit away from the table fight and were deep in conversation again. Ron was hovering around Hermione, wanting to sit next to her but embarrassed to do so.

"It's good to see you, Ginny," Harry said with a warm smile as he took a pile of plates from her.

Ginny blushed, cursing herself inwardly for still blushing whenever Harry Potter looked at her or spoke to her. "Nice to see you, too. Sorry I'm late coming out. I was busy."

"No problem," Harry assured her.

Hermione and Casey helped the rest of the family set the table, then the girls started toward the house to see if Molly needed any more help. "That's OK, we can manage," Ginny told Hermione, then ran back into the house without speaking to Casey. Casey noticed, and glanced at Hermione who was watching Ginny with an odd look on her face.

"Is she. . .angry with someone?" Casey asked.

Hermione hesitated. She didn't want to upset Casey, nor to reveal Ginny's feelings. "Oh, you know redheads," she said with a smile. "They have short fuses. Even a little thing can set them off sometimes. She'll be all right."

As everyone sat down to eat, Ginny and Molly carried the last load of food out to the table. The only place left for Ginny to sit was right opposite Casey, who was next to Harry.

The conversation flowed easily around the table, except for a noticeable cold zone between Ginny and Casey. Ron and Hermione, who were next to Ginny, tried to get Ginny involved in conversation, but she was stubbornly silent. Harry noticed the problem, but hadn't a clue how to improve things.

Charlie was regaling the family with stories of the dragons he'd been working with. He finally told one funny enough to get Ginny laughing, and after that, she relaxed a bit.

Casey was quiet, only speaking when someone asked her a direct question, trying hard to absorb all she could from the conversations flowing around her.

Harry squeezed her hand under the table. "Are you having a good time?" he asked softly.

"Wonderful!" she said with a warm smile, squeezing his hand in return. Their eyes caught and they gazed at each other hungrily for a moment.

Ginny's face flushed, and her eyes showed her hurt. *Bloody hell!* she thought, *he really does care for her.* Tears stung her eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. Her nose reddened with the effort to keep from crying.

Casey glanced at Ginny, noticing her discomfort. "Are you all right, Ginny?" she asked with real concern.

"I'm fine," Ginny snapped.

Casey decided to try another stab at conversation. "You're a year behind Harry, Ron and Hermione, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you like Hogwarts?"

"Yes."

Casey sighed. Ginny wasn't making this easy. "What are your plans after you finish school?"

Ginny wanted to shout, *I plan to marry Harry,* but managed to keep her mouth shut until the urge passed. "I don't know yet. We get our career counselling next term."

"What kind of jobs are there? Harry's told me about Aurors. What else do wizards do as careers?"

Ginny bit her tongue, trying to avoid a rude response. *What do Muggles do as careers? Don't you think wizards require the same kinds of services? Medical people, teachers, law enforcement, researchers, all that?* She took a deep breath. "There are lots of careers available. I rather like taking care of people. I might like to be a healer."

"Is that like a nurse? Or a doctor? I'm confused."

I'll just bet you are, blondie! Ginny fumed. "A doctor."

"How many more years of schooling does that require after Hogwarts?" Casey asked, genuinely interested. "I want to be a vet, and that takes eight more years of study after I finish school. I enjoy chemistry and biology, and I love taking care of animals. I suppose chemistry is similar to your Potions course?"

"I guess," Ginny replied, a grudging respect starting to rear its ugly head in her heart. This girl had similar interests to Ginny's, was serious about schooling, and wanted to help animals the

way Ginny wanted to help people. She wasn't all bad. And Harry truly cared about her, which meant she had to be a nice person, as well. *Blimey! That's not the way I want to feel about her!* she grumbled inwardly.

The conversation flowed a bit more easily after that. Ginny had thawed somewhat toward Casey, and Casey was so delighted with everything she was learning about Harry's world, and his wonderful, loving friends, that she was easily able to ignore Ginny's bad tempered moments.

As the group started to leave the table, Casey turned to Hermione. "May I speak to you for a minute?"

"Certainly." They walked away from the group, curly brown hair and long straight golden hair nearly mingling as they had their heads together talking.

"Ginny," Casey began hesitantly. "Um. She fancies Harry, doesn't she?"

Hermione wasn't certain how to answer. "Why do you ask?"

"It shows every time she looks at him. And she looks daggers at me."

"She's fancied him since before she met him," Hermione agreed.

"How is that possible?"

"You do know Harry is 'The Boy Who Lived' and has been famous all his life, right?" Casey nodded. "Like most children from wizarding families, Ginny grew up hearing Harry Potter stories and created this image of Harry in her mind before she met him. When she did meet him, he was all she'd thought he would be and more. And he saved her life her first year at Hogwarts. Harry's a true hero, even more so to Ginny. He has 'fans,' like film stars do, all over Hogwarts, well, all over the wizarding world, really. Drives him mad. Ginny's not a 'fan' like the others, but her fancying him so long before he was interested in girls bothered him."

"Have they ever. . .gone out?"

"No. Harry was embarrassed by her crush on him. He's nice to her in a brotherly way, but stays away from her otherwise. He's never had a real girlfriend before, nor has Ron. I think their attitudes about many things are starting to change."

"Ron seems to be quite interested in you," Casey observed.

"He's just beginning to show it," Hermione agreed, her cheeks turning pink.

"I see. And do I also see that you're happy about his interest?" Casey replied with a grin.

"Well. . .yes, you could say that!" Hermione said, her face shining with pleasure. "He is a bit thick about some things, but I've cared about Ron for years. It's about time he woke up!" Both girls laughed.

"What are you two laughing about?" Harry said as he came up behind Casey and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Hermione said with a teasing twinkle in her eye.

Harry looked at her and grinned. "Let's see now. You're blushing, Hermione, so I'm guessing it's about Ron?"

She smacked his arm playfully. "Harry!"

He laughed. "I know you too well, don't I?" he said with a cheeky grin.

She just blushed brighter red, then startled when Ron came up behind her and gingerly put his hands on her shoulders. She and Casey exchanged a look, then giggled.

"What'd I miss?" Ron asked, his ears pink as he saw Harry looking pointedly at his hands on Hermione and grinning. Ron swallowed hard but stood his ground, holding Hermione's shoulders in a more determined grip.

"Erm. . .nothing," Hermione answered, enjoying his awkward attention. "Just girl talk, you know." As she expected, that stopped Ron's line of questioning.

"Oh, uh. OK," he muttered. He started to remove his hands, then was shocked when Hermione put her hands over his and kept them in place, leaning back against him a little. He grinned in surprised pleasure at Harry over her head. This girlfriend stuff was easier than he thought it would be!

"Ron, have you ever been to a film?" Casey asked, snuggling back into Harry's arms.

"What's a film?"

"Moving pictures, kind of like wizarding pictures, but with a story," Hermione explained.

"No, never heard of 'em," Ron replied.

"Since Hermione lives in the Muggle world, I thought you might have," said Casey. "Why don't we all plan to go to one together? It would be loads of fun!" She winked at Hermione, whose face was astonished and delighted at the same time.

"What a lovely idea!" Hermione said hopefully. "Ron?"

Ron looked down at Hermione's shining face, glanced up at Harry and saw him nod. Nervous but determined, Ron answered, "Yeah! That sounds like fun."

Harry leaned down and nuzzled Casey's cheek affectionately. In one afternoon, she'd managed what he hadn't been able to sort out how to do for years. Ron and Hermione were going out together, and both of them seemed happy about it. Amazing!

Hermione held one of Ron's hands in place on her shoulder and moved back until she had his arm around her shoulders, then she slipped her arm around his waist. Both of them were

blushing furiously. Harry and Casey each put an arm around the other and walked with Ron and Hermione for a while, talking about the movies that were coming out soon, trying to work out which one would appeal the most to all four of them. It was a lovely end to a wonderful afternoon.

Early Monday morning, Harry got an Adfero message from Dumbledore. "Come to Grimmauld Place right away," it said.

"OK," Harry sent back, then hurried down the stairs, grabbed a piece of toast and ran over to Mrs. Figg's.

"Harry, dear, you're up early," Mrs. Figg said in a sleepy voice, pushing her curler cap out of her eyes and tightening her house coat. He'd had to pound on the door for quite a time – she must have been asleep.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Figg," he began, "but Professor Dumbledore wants me at headquarters right away."

"Do come in," she invited.

"You haven't heard anything?" he asked.

"No, dear. One of my cats was sick most of the night and I didn't get much sleep. If they tried to send me a message, I just slept right through it. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," he asd her kindly as he picked up the blue floo powder canister. "I do hope your cat's feeling better."

"She'll be fine. Massive hairballs, you know," Mrs. Figg began.

Harry knew where that conversation would go if he wasn't careful, so he stepped into the fireplace and tossed down the floo powder. "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place," he said in a determined voice. Soon he was stepping dizzily out of the fireplace in the kitchen at Order of the Phoenix headquarters. "Good morning, Professor Dumbledore," Harry said with a nervous smile. "Good morning, Professor Snape, Remus," he added, seeing them also at the table.

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore greeted. "Have you eaten?" He offered tea and a plate of fresh toast.

"Thanks. What's up?" Harry asked as he buttered a piece of toast and smeared it with marmalade.

Snape sneered in disgust as he shoved a newspaper at Harry. "This is 'what's up.' He's found you." On the cover of the *Daily Prophet* were several large pictures of Harry as he walked down a street, Harry at work in the tile shop, and Harry and Casey in swimsuits. All were taken with a telephoto lens, from the look of them.

"What. . .who. . .?" Harry stammered as he looked at the photos and glanced at the headline. "*Harry Potter's Summer Holiday* by Rita Skeeter," he read. His face fell as he skimmed the article. "Rita Skeeter? How did she find me?"

"That's what we'd like to know, Mr. Potter," Snape hissed. "After all we've gone through to protect you. . ."

"Severus, leave him alone. The photos show he wasn't aware he was being spied on," Remus chided Snape. He put a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder. "What do you know about this, Harry?"

"I. . .I . . .I dunno." Harry screwed his face up in concentration, and then realization hit him. "That reporter. Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn." With each "damn," he pounded his head on the table.

"Stop! You'll hurt yourself!" Remus said as he grabbed his godson's shoulders and pulled him upright. "Tell us what happened. What reporter?"

Harry angrily shrugged off Remus's hands and slammed his forehead into the table again, grabbing his hair with both hands and grumbling furiously to himself a while before lifting his head and answering. He told them about Doug's being contacted by a reporter who was interested in Harry's mosaics, and that Harry had refused to be interviewed, asked Mr. Asher to protect his privacy, and even left the shop for the time when the reporter was there. "It must have been Rita Skeeter. She said her name was Ruth Spectre. Somehow she must have figured out it was me. Maybe she was stalking me or something."

"How could she have known it was you doing those mosaics, Harry?" Dumbledore said with concern.

"I just don't know, Professor," Harry replied miserably.

"What do your designs look like?" asked Remus, who still hadn't seen them. "Maybe something about them points to you. Or. . .do you sign them?"

"They're geometric or abstract patterns, mostly. I just put a small 'H.P.' on them. You'd think those were fairly common initials." Harry thought a moment more, then slammed his fist on the table.

"What?"

"I had nearly completed a Gryffindor lion just before she came to do the interview. I thought it looked enough like a medieval lion that nobody would notice. I didn't think any wizards were going to buy tables from Mr. Asher. Bloody hell!"

"Language, Potter!" Snape growled.

Harry glared at him, then glanced up at Dumbledore. "Erm. . .sorry, Professor," he murmured.

"I cannot blame you for venting your frustration, dear boy. You had no idea this Skeeter person was working for the Muggle press, and you did everything you could to avoid being interviewed. You're correct in thinking the Gryffindor lion is very like the medieval lions portrayed in art. I sincerely doubt there would have been a problem if no one from the wizarding world had seen them," Dumbledore assured him.

"Why were you making wizarding designs?" Remus said.

"I honestly didn't think it was dangerous," he began.

"'Didn't think' is the operative term here," Snape snarled derisively.

"Severus," Dumbledore said in a warning tone. He turned back to Harry. "Do go on."

"Casey and I went to see a film about Merlin, and I saw things in the film that looked a lot like wizarding designs – the lion, unicorns, dragons, on tapestries, banners, that sort of thing so I thought it would be safe to do them," he explained. "I was making the lion as a Christmas present for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. I worked on it after hours." He was quiet a moment. "I'm making some others as presents, as well. There's a dragon – that's for Hagrid – and erm. . .well, if I tell you, I'll spoil Christmas for some of you," he said, glancing around with a crooked smile. "I thought I was being clever, making Christmas presents. . . . Mr. Asher likes those designs and has orders for a couple of them already. Damn!" He glanced at Dumbledore and muttered, "Sorry, Professor."

Harry sat staring miserably at the front page of the newspaper a few more minutes, then sighed and looked at each of the men facing him in turn. "OK. So what do you want me to do now? Stay in the Dursleys' house and not go out anymore? Stay here? What? "

Dumbledore watched Harry's face as the boy stoically resigned himself to whatever restrictions were about to be put on him. "I think not," the old wizard mused.

All three of the others were surprised. "Not what?" Harry asked, mystified.

"I don't think restricting you to the Dursleys' or here will be a benefit. You are very much like both your father and Sirius. You will not suffer that kind of confinement well. At some point, you will probably try to get at least a little more freedom. The manner in which you do so could be more harmful than just letting you continue your summer as it has been so far, but with more care."

Harry felt a tiny shimmer of hope bubbling up in his chest. "You're not going to lock me away somewhere?"

Dumbledore reached across the table and patted Harry's hand. "No, dear boy, I don't want to lock you away. You are having such a lovely holiday. You're enjoying your work, your play, your new friends," Dumbledore tilted his head, his blue eyes twinkling at Harry from above his half-moon spectacles, "particularly one young lady. I don't want to take that away from you."

"Thank you, sir," Harry breathed with great sincerity. After a moment, he asked "But why didn't the wards and instruments you added protect me from Rita Skeeter?"

"She isn't a Dark witch, Harry," Remus replied. "She's a horrible, unscrupulous person, but she's not Dark, so the wards and instruments didn't detect her."

"That was my fault, Harry," Dumbledore replied sadly. "I thought that by now, the Skeeter woman was under control where you're concerned, but I can see she's still a threat. You will

need to be more cautious. I will put some new wards in place to help protect you, and we will have Order members watch over you. And we'll send some people out to deal with this woman. She has no right to stalk you."

"Order members following me around? That means no more privacy," Harry said miserably.

"Better that than being kept inside the Dursleys' or here for the rest of the holidays, right?" Remus consoled him, squeezing his shoulder companionably.

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out. "OK, then, if that's how it has to be. Thanks, Professor."

"Oh, no!" Arthur Weasley groaned over his breakfast that morning.

"What's wrong, dear?" Molly said calmly, used to Arthur's grumbles over newspaper stories.

"It's Harry," he said ominously.

"What about Harry?" "What's wrong?" "What's happened?" "Is he all right?" the entire family clamoured, some of them glancing to the family clock to see where his hand was pointing. It saying he was "at home" wasn't much help, but at least he wasn't in immediate "mortal peril."

"It's that horrible Skeeter woman. She's been stalking him. *Harry Potter's Summer Holiday* by Rita Skeeter," he read. "'How does the Boy-Who-Lived spend his sixteenth summer, you may ask? He spends it frolicking in the sun at a water park, doing manual labour in a Muggle shop, and gasp dating a Muggle girl! What kind of girl appeals to the boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? She's a smallish girl, not much to look at, long dirty blond hair, greenish eyes, and she can't seem to keep her hands off him. Apparently, Harry Potter enjoys snogging quite a bit. At his age, that's not so unusual, but with a Muggle? I ask you. The hero of the wizarding world has stooped to such depths of degradation, it's appalling. . . ." Arthur stopped reading, wiping his face with his napkin. "It just gets worse from there," he added. "And there are photos, lots of them. It's continued inside, too."

"That's awful!" Molly replied. The rest of the family burst into spirited conversation about things they'd like to do to Rita Skeeter – Fred and George had some particularly creative suggestions and what in the world was Harry going to do now?

Errol arrived just then and flopped in exhaustion on the table. "Here's your *Witch Weekly*, Mum," Ginny said, untying the package from the elderly owl's leg and handing it to Molly.

"Thank you, dear! They're supposed to have a new recipe in here for. . .oh no!" she gasped as she unrolled the magazine and saw the cover. "Harry's on the cover! With Casey! In swimsuits!"

The children all rushed behind their mother to see the photos, all for very different reasons. Fred, George and Ron goggled at Casey, while Ginny studied every muscle in Harry's body, then glared at Casey's picture. Unfortunately, it showed her coming off the slide with her swim suit top flying off. Her bare breasts had been 'fogged' by the magazine editors, but every detail was still there in living, moving colour, including the delight as well as horror on Harry's face as he watched the mishap.

"Oh, dear. The article is titled, 'How to Win the Heart of The Boy Who Lived.'" Molly said, then opened the magazine to the article itself. "'The top ten ways to win the heart of The Boy Who Lived: Number 10, Wear clothes that self-destruct on a moment's notice. Number 9, Expose as much of your body as possible when you're around him. Number 8, Save him from drowning.' What's that about, I wonder," Molly mused. "Number 7, Explore his tonsils with your tongue at every opportunity. Number 6, Rub him. . ." Molly blanched. "Oh dear, this is awful!"

Fred said, "Rub him what, Mum? Don't leave us in suspense!"

Molly bopped him on the head with the rolled up magazine. "This is a piece of filth. It just gets worse and worse."

"We're adults now! We want to hear it! At least let us read it!" the twins fussed.

"No. Go on with you," Molly told them. "I'm chucking this in the fire!" She tossed the magazine in the fireplace, shooting a flame at it from her wand, frowning as it caught. The flames surrounded Harry's smiling face on the cover, giving Molly and Ginny shivers as they watched. After the picture was charred beyond recognition, Molly murmured, "Poor dear Harry! And Casey as well – what an awful thing to have happen, much less to have it captured in pictures." She exchanged a look with Arthur. "What do you think Dumbledore will do about this?"

"I don't know, Molly," Arthur answered. "This is pretty serious. Harry is going to be so embarrassed, not to mention in danger of You-Know-Who finding him with all the information in this article. The newspaper gives the actual address of the business where Harry works!"

Moments later, Arthur's head appeared in the kitchen fireplace at Number 12, Grimmauld Place. "Ah, Albus, Remus, Severus – and Harry! I'm so glad I caught you together," he began.

"Good morning, Arthur," Dumbledore said warmly. "Everything all right at The Burrow?"

"Yes, we're all fine, but Albus, this morning's *Daily Prophet*. . ."

"Yes, yes, that's why we have young Harry here," Dumbledore replied.

"Did you know there's a similar, but nastier, piece in *Witch Weekly*?" Arthur said, his indignation showing. "I imagine they'll have the same kind of thing in *The Tattler* and *The Quibbler* very soon."

Harry moaned, banging his head on the table again and pulling at his hair.

Remus put his arm around Harry, squeezing his shoulders and trying to stop Harry from abusing himself any more. "Come on, Harry, it's not as if you haven't had bad press before."

"But they've involved Casey," he moaned. "Mr. Weasley, are there photos of Casey in the other article?"

Arthur turned beet red. "I'm afraid so, Harry. Molly didn't let any of us look. She was so distressed, she burned the magazine straight away."

Harry did his best to bang his head again, but Remus hugged the boy to him. There was no fighting werewolf strength when Remus chose to use it. Harry subsided and rested his head on his godfather's shoulder. "Why can't I have a break?" he groaned. "I didn't ask to be The Boy-Who-Lived. I want to be Harry, just Harry. Why can't I just be Harry?" Nobody had an answer for him.

Dumbledore turned back to Arthur. "Thank you, Arthur, for letting us know as soon as possible. We're working on what to do about it now."

"Harry can stay with us, if that would be any help," Arthur offered.

"Thank you, Arthur, and please give our thanks to Molly, too," Dumbledore said with a smile. "We're working on ways for Harry to continue with his life with as little disruption as possible. If we cannot manage it, having him stay with you would probably please him better than staying here or at the Dursleys." He turned to Harry. "Am I right, Harry?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry replied. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley." He tried to smile at his friend, but was just too miserable to manage it.

"You're welcome, Harry. You know you're like part of the family. We'll be glad to have you," Arthur replied kindly. "Well, that's all the news I needed to share, so I'll let you get back to your meeting. Good to see all of you. Take care."

"Thanks again, Mr. Weasley," Harry responded.

"Yes, Arthur, thank you. And give our best to Molly and the children, will you?" Albus said with a warm smile.

"I'll do that. Bye." Arthur's head spun quickly out of sight.

There was silence in the kitchen as the gathered men considered the best course of action. Harry finally relaxed as he leaned against Remus's shoulder, amazed at how quickly he and Remus had become family to each other. He closed his eyes and savoured the peaceful moment in the midst of all this misery, then sighed and straightened up. "So what do we do now? I suppose I should have known better than to think I could have a job over the holidays, a girlfriend, go out and have fun. . . ." He shook his head in resignation. "I'm sorry I've caused more trouble. I didn't think. . ."

Snape reacted sharply again. "That's right, Potter, you didn't think!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore snapped in a rare show of temper. "Harry has every right to lead a normal life. He needs to explore his world like any other growing child." He turned to Harry. "You've done nothing wrong. You kept me informed of what you were doing. You asked permission to tell the young lady you're a wizard. If I had wanted you to stay away from her and her family, I would have told you that. Since I did not tell you to stay away from them, if it's anyone's fault, it's mine. You have done nothing wrong," he insisted, his blue eyes boring into Harry's emerald green ones.

Harry gazed back uncertainly, but grateful for what Dumbledore was saying. He didn't know how he could anticipate the bad things that happened to him, so he could prevent them. He'd been as careful as he could manage, and still. . . .

Dumbledore was speaking again. "Harry, you cannot go to work again until I get new wards completed and arrange for Order members to keep track of you."

"I'll need to tell Mr. Asher I need some time off," Harry replied. "How much time should I ask for?"

"A day or so should suffice. You and Remus can go to the Dursleys, and you can contact Mr. Asher from there. Stay there until I send word to you, all right? Remus can watch over you there," the old wizard said.

Harry and Remus flooed to Mrs. Figg's, then walked over to the Dursleys'. Harry called the tile shop.

"Asher Tiles," the secretary answered.

"Hello, Mrs. Gable, it's Harry Potter. I needed to let Mr. Asher know that I can't come in to work today."

"Hi, Harry! Are you OK?"

"Yes, but I need to take a day off."

"OK, I'll let him know."

"Thanks," Harry replied, and they rung off. "Well, you're stuck here with me. What do you want to do?" he asked Remus.

"How about some chess?"

"Cool," Harry said with a grin. "Maybe I can actually win a game!"

"Are you saying I'm not a good chess player?" Remus teased.

"I'm saying I never win against Ron, at least not if he's paying attention. It would be nice to at least have a chance of winning once in a while," Harry said with a grin. They started up the stairs to Harry's room.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?" Vernon Dursley roared as he came in from the kitchen and saw them going up the stairs. "What are you doing here?" he demanded of Remus, "And why aren't you at work?" he sneered at Harry.

"I'm taking a day off," Harry replied with as much dignity as he could muster. "And my godfather is spending the day with me."

Vernon's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment as his face reddened. "I will not have more of your kind under this roof!"

"Mr. Dursley," Remus replied mildly, "I can arrange for the roof to be removed, if that would be any help to you." Harry chuckled at that, and they turned to go upstairs. Before they'd taken two more steps, an owl zoomed in the open sitting room window and dropped a red envelope at Harry's feet.

"Oh no," Harry groaned, knowing it was a Howler. He bent to pick it up, and a dozen owls in quick succession flew in and dropped similar envelopes all around him. Harry was frozen in place, the first Howler in his hand, looking helplessly at Remus as more and more owls arrived with Howlers.

"BLOODY OWLS! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN THIS HOUSE!" Vernon howled, as more owls flew past his rapidly purpling face on their way to where Harry stood on the stairs, transfixed by the growing mound of Howlers around him.

Harry muttered, "Sorry, Uncle Vernon," and with great resignation tore open the first Howler. "HOW DARE YOU CAVORT WITH MUGGLES! NOT ONLY A MUGGLE, BUT ONE WHO CAN'T KEEP HER CLOTHES ON, OR HER HANDS OFF YOU! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? STICK TO YOUR OWN KIND! 'BOY-WHO-LIVED,' INDEED! A FINE EXAMPLE YOU'RE SETTING FOR ALL THE PEOPLE WHO LOOK UP TO YOU! *SHAME* ON YOU!" Harry's face was white, with bright red spots of anger on his cheeks. "Remus, is there any way to get rid of these?"

"Not really," Remus said, shaking his head sadly. "You'd better open them so they don't explode."

With a huge sigh, Harry leaned down and gathered more Howlers in his hands, opening several at once to try to get things over with more quickly. Opening so many at once resulted in a loud series of *BANGS*, then multiple voices were shouting, cursing Harry, cursing Casey, making threats against Harry, and saying other things Harry couldn't make out because by that time, he'd covered both ears with his hands and closed his eyes, hoping it would all go away soon. He realized Vernon's voice was being added to the cacophony of noise from the Howlers, many of which were exploding with loud bangs and bursting into flames briefly, because Harry wasn't opening them quickly enough. Remus was using his wand to keep the Howlers away from Harry as much as possible, and to dowse any flames that got too energetic. In a momentary lull, Harry heard someone pounding on the door.

"Harry! HARRY! Are you all right in there? HARRY!" a voice called from outside the front door.

Harry raced downstairs and opened the door so quickly, Casey stumbled into his arms. "Hi, Casey. I'm fine."

"Why did you stay home from work?"

"My godfather's here and I wanted to spend the day with him. That's all," Harry said with what he hoped was a convincing smile.

"What's all that noise?"

"Oh." He sighed. "Those are Howlers. Come in," he replied, glad she knew already that he was a wizard. He took her into the sitting room, which was slightly quieter for the moment, and explained what Howlers were, and why he was receiving them. He was careful to leave out any mention of the photos of her that had appeared in the articles. Casey was horrified at the news, yet fascinated at the wide variety of owls still coming in through the windows Vernon had not managed to close. When he got the last one closed, Howlers came shooting down the chimney, flying into the room as Harry's first Hogwarts letter had done years ago.

"You know," Casey shouted over the noise of the exploding and screaming Howlers, "this is almost funny!"

"Funny?" Harry was shocked. How could she think it was funny? He was horrified.

"All these people thinking they can tell you what to do just because you're famous. It's like you're a rock star or something – or *Prince* Harry instead of Harry Potter. It is kind of funny if you look at it that way," she said with a smile, gently trying to smooth down his hair as it tossed in the wind of the flying Howlers. "I mean, really – screaming letters that explode if you don't open them, and it's just people giving you their unasked-for advice and opinions. What's so bad about that? Just ignore them!"

"If you ignore them, they explode," Harry said seriously, shaking his head.

Casey just laughed as more Howlers zoomed around the room, settling all over poor Harry until he was nearly buried in a sea of red envelopes. He tossed them away from him and Casey as quickly as possible so they wouldn't explode against their skin, which wouldn't really injure them, but would sting (not to mention how hard all the noise was on their hearing). He and Remus used their wands to keep the Howlers at a distance as much as possible. His hair was still blowing around in the blasts from the dozens of explosions all around him. Casey had pulled her long hair into a knot so it wasn't flying around so badly anymore. Casey thought Harry looked very silly, tossing Howlers away that zoomed right back at him like boomerangs just before detonating. Her laughter finally made Harry see the humour in the situation.

Vernon was jumping around like a madman, trying to close every opening in the house, resulting in the house becoming very hot and Vernon having sweat running down his face in rivers. Petunia just stood and wrung her hands, after giving up on sweeping the envelopes up and tossing them into the bin, whose lid blew off when Howlers exploded inside it. Dudley cowered in a corner, afraid that the huge amount of magic in the house might end up giving him another pig's tail. Remus was trying a variety of spells to quiet the Howlers, to no avail.

Actually, Harry realized, it was pretty funny if you didn't take it seriously. Who were these people, anyway? Who cared what they thought? He grabbed Casey and gave her a big kiss, then started tossing Howlers in the air, watching them explode. Before long, nobody in the house could hear anything from all the deafening noise they'd suffered, but Harry and Casey were still laughing.

Remus finally gave up on his efforts and joined the laughter. He came and sat next to Casey and told her, "You could be a witch – you have the right sense of humour for it."

Finally, the Howlers came to an end, but not before the sitting room was knee deep in red envelopes. When the house was finally quiet, Remus looked around at the mess, a smile tickling the corners of his lips. "Are you quite finished with your mail, Harry?"

"Oh, yes, quite finished," Harry replied with a wry grin.

"*Evanesco*," Remus said with a small wave of his wand, and all the evidence of the Howlers disappeared, with the exception of the ringing in everyone's ears.

Vernon was angrier than Harry had ever seen him. "You . . .you. . .you. . ." he sputtered. He took a deep breath and tried again. "POTTER! What is the meaning of this?"

Harry did his best to answer calmly. "Those were Howlers, Uncle Vernon. You've seen them before."

"I bloody well know what they are! Why did you get so many of them?"

"I guess a lot of people wanted to. . .express themselves today," Harry answered carefully, a snort escaping him as he tried to stifle the laugh threatening to burst out of him. Casey and Remus grinned.

Uncle Vernon was not amused. "Go to your room," he ordered.

"OK," Harry agreed quietly, taking Casey's hand and heading upstairs to his room, with Remus following close behind.

"You will go to your room ALONE! There'll be no hanky-panky in this house!"

Harry looked at Casey and blushed, but then he heard Remus sniggering behind him and smiled. "Uncle Vernon? What's hanky-panky?" Harry asked as innocently as possible, willing to live dangerously for once.

"*POTTER!*" Uncle Vernon had veins standing out all over his fat face, he was so enraged.

Harry laughed and ran upstairs, Casey and Remus following close behind him. When they got to his room, all three of them collapsed on his bed in giggles. "I never thought I'd find Uncle Vernon funny, or Howlers, either!" Harry said when he caught his breath. "I'm glad you two were here when all this happened!"

When their laughter died down, Harry got under his bed and removed his food supplies from under the loose floorboard. "Tea, anyone? Well, I don't really have tea, but I do have some snacks. As a good host, I must offer you some refreshments," he said with a cheeky grin. As they made their choices and settled down, all three of them sobered.

"Now what are you going to do?" Remus wondered. "Your uncle is sure to punish you for all this. There has to be a way to get you out of it. None of it was your fault." He paused for a moment. "Well, except for that 'hanky-panky' comment," he added with a chuckle.

Harry sighed. "I don't know. I guess I'm stuck here for a while." He turned to Casey and explained that he had to wait for Dumbledore to get some precautions set up before he could go back to his normal routine.

"Why?" she asked. "What's wrong with a newspaper article about you? Other than those wizards being mad at you for dating a Muggle, that is."

"Do you remember the man I said was after me?" Harry said. "His followers can tell him where I am now."

Casey's eyes were wide with shock. "Oh no! You're in danger! What are you going to do?"

"Professor Dumbledore says I'll be safe here for a while. He's adding some more protections that should hide me from Lord Voldemort."

Casey's jaw dropped and she shook her head in disbelief. "There was so much going on when you told me about your being a wizard, this little detail escaped me. This evil wizard is a lord?"

Harry laughed. "Hardly. He made an anagram of his name and came up with 'Lord Voldemort.' His real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle. But most of the wizarding world calls him 'You-Know-Who' or 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.' His followers call him 'the Dark Lord.' Dumbledore calls him 'Tom.' He taught Riddle at school."

Remus walked to the window and looked out. The owls that had delivered the Howlers had finally left Privet Drive and everything was quiet outside.

Harry watched Remus standing by the window, admiring the man's ability to be calm under all kinds of circumstances. Harry wished he had the even temper of his godfather. Even now, he was getting angry at being confined in his room, and his godfather and girlfriend being confined in a way, as well. "You two don't have to stay up here with me. I know you both have better things to do," he offered. "Although I'm sure it's annoying Uncle Vernon to death to think I have company up here," he added with a brief smile.

"Actually, I do have to do some errands for Mum this morning," Casey said. "I'd stay otherwise. I just came to see if you were all right when Dad said you were taking the day off."

"I'm going to stay with you at least for today, Harry," said Remus. "Once Dumbledore says it's safe to leave you unguarded again, I'll go. I do have some business to take care of, but it can wait. Besides, it will be much more fun to play Exploding Snap or chess with you."

"I'm afraid it will have to be chess," Harry said. "Uncle Vernon will have a fit if he hears us playing Exploding Snap up here."

"As if he hasn't had enough fits already," Remus said with a grin.

The three of them left Harry's room, Remus waiting on the landing while Harry walked Casey to the door. "I'll call you later," Casey said as she opened the door.

"They won't let me have phone calls," Harry replied with a shrug. "Don't worry about me, I'll be OK. I should be able to come back to work tomorrow."

"Are you sure?" she asked, worry furrowing her brow.

"This is my life. I'll get through it. I've done it before," Harry said with his lopsided grin. He held her close, kissed her forehead and whispered, "I love you. Thanks for coming to see how I was."

She looked up at him and whispered back, "I love you too. Take care of yourself." With another kiss, she was gone.

Chapter 7 - Flight

Dumbledore soon had new protections in place for Harry, and he was able to go back to living his life fairly normally. With Casey's birthday rapidly approaching, Harry worked feverishly on his present for her. It was nearly done – he just needed to install it in a frame and put a hanger on it. He'd do those jobs tomorrow. He was putting in a lot of overtime, making both mosaic tables and small mosaic wall hangings to fill orders Doug was receiving and to complete the Christmas presents he'd started for his friends. With only a few weeks left of his holidays, he wanted to have everything finished before he had to leave for Hogwarts.

Soon after their day at the Weasleys, Harry and Casey made arrangements with Ron and Hermione to go to a film together. Harry was delighted at how well his friends were getting along now that they'd finally admitted to themselves that they fancied each other. Ron flooed to Hermione's house and they rode the train over to the Little Whinging station, where Casey and Harry met them.

"This film looks like fun," Hermione enthused. Ron and Harry rolled their eyes at each other over the girls' heads. They were going to see a romantic comedy that sounded pretty silly. Hermione had shown Ron the ad in a Muggle newspaper. Hermione thought that it would be a good film to see, so he agreed, since he didn't know anything about films anyway.

Harry whispered to Ron, "It's a 'chick flick' so the girls will have to agree to go to an adventure film to repay us." He winked at his best mate over the girls' heads.

Ron grinned and winked back, but he honestly was mystified by all these terms and whatever it was Harry was talking about. However, if Hermione was going to hold his hand and lean on his shoulder as she had on the train to Little Whinging, he didn't care if they were sitting on a street corner in the rain. He'd be happy. When they entered the cinema lobby and Ron saw the sweet stand, his eyes lit up.

"Wow, Hermione, you didn't tell me they had sweets!" he said with his typical "trip to Honeydukes" sparkle in his eyes.

"I do like to keep some things as surprises," she said saucily. The four friends chose a variety of sweets but Ron was stumped at the list of drinks named on the menu board. "What are these?"

Harry answered, "They're drinks – trust me, you'll like them. Why don't you try Coke? Most people really like that. Or if you prefer a lemon-lime flavour, they have Sprite, then there's Tango, which is orange flavoured, but I think you'll like the fizziness and flavour of Coke."

"OK, then, Coke it is!" Ron agreed. He looked puzzled when he was handed a tall paper cup with a plastic lid and a straw. He watched his friends and soon figured out how to use the straw. When he took his first big sip, he was snorting with laughter about something Harry had said, and the fizz went up his nose. "OOooo, it burns! Cool!"

The others were all laughing. "It's not supposed to burn – it only does that if it goes up your nose. Be more careful," Hermione advised kindly, trying hard to stifle her giggles.

"Oh! I like it even better when it isn't burning my nose! Wicked!" Ron said with a grin. "Thanks for recommending this stuff, Harry!"

As they left the cinema, the two couples made plans to see a film of Casey's choice on her birthday. "Another chick flick, no doubt," Harry said to Ron over Casey's head, pretending to be long-suffering about it. Casey playfully smacked his arm and Harry acted as if he was mortally wounded, which lead to much laughter and several hugs.

On the way to a sweet shop to buy ices, Ron asked, "Anyone want a chocolate frog? Fred and George just brought me some from Honeydukes."

"Chocolate frog?" Casey said, her eyebrows raised. "Please tell me it's not a real frog covered in chocolate!"

The other three laughed. "No, it's just a spell," Harry explained. He led the way to a picnic table in the park they were passing. "They're good, and the cards are collectible."

Ron passed frogs to each of them and Harry showed Casey how to open the package carefully so the frog wouldn't get away. She laughed at the animated confection, amazed that it tasted like normal, rich milk chocolate when it acted like a live frog. Then she looked at her "Famous Wizard" card as she'd been told.

"Who'd you get?" Ron asked, leaning over to look, his mouth full of chocolate. "I got Merlin again."

Casey turned her card over, and squealed. "It's moving! How did they do that? And. . .oh, Harry! It's you!"

"Wizard pictures move," Harry began, then the rest of what she said sank in. "No, it can't be me." He looked at the card and said, "What the. . .?" There was simply nothing to say that would adequately express his amazement.

Ron and Hermione got up and stood behind Casey to see her card. "Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived" it said on the front, under a wizard photo of Harry flying on his Firebolt. When he caught the Snitch and waved it triumphantly over his head, a huge grin on his face, Casey grinned back at the picture, then turned the card over. The back read, "Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, is known for his defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the age of one. Since then, he saved the Sorcerer's Stone from You-Know-Who, defeated Salazar Slytherin's Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets while rescuing Ginny Weasley at tremendous risk to his own life, exonerated both Sirius Black and Rubeus Hagrid of serious criminal charges against them, rescued numerous people from Dementors on several occasions, won the Tri-Wizard Tournament and bested You-Know-Who in a duel. He is the youngest Seeker in a century at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he is beginning his sixth year of study. Potter is a flyer of astounding skill, organizer of Dumbledore's Army (a Defence Against the Dark Arts club at Hogwarts), capable of a fully corporeal Patronus since the age of 13, and is recognizable by the lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead. Great things are expected of this young Wizard. His hobbies include Quidditch, chess and Exploding Snap, and we hear he's quite fond of Chocolate Frogs."

"Whoa! Harry! That's fantastic! I don't think any student has ever had a Famous Wizard Card made of him before!" Ron was clearly impressed.

"This is amazing, Harry!" Hermione agreed.

Harry was frowning. "I wonder where they got all that information?"

"Every student at Hogwarts knows this stuff, Harry. That's a Colin Creevey photo. I'm sure I've seen it before. Colin's such a fan of yours, he probably provided all the information too," Hermione said reasonably. "As Dumbledore says, all those things were secret, so of course the whole school knew what happened very quickly. Funny they left out the story about Norbert."

"And they didn't know about Buckbeak, either," Ron added.

"Norbert? Buckbeak?" Casey said, confused.

"A dragon and a hippogriff Harry rescued," Ron answered offhandedly. "I wonder if they're going to start a series of student cards?"

Casey's eyes widened. *A dragon and a hippogriff?* she thought. *I'll have to get Harry to tell me those stories! And what in the world is a hippogriff?*

Hermione noticed Harry had been quiet too long. "Harry? What's wrong?"

Harry was quiet a few moments more, but they could tell he was upset. "All I need is more people angry at me for being famous," he grumbled. "I'd like to be 'just Harry,' y'know?"

"But Harry," Casey said, a puzzled look in her eyes. "Isn't this an honour? Won't it be fun to open a Chocolate Frog and find your own card?"

He thought about it, took a deep breath and blew it out, then his frown turned into a crooked smile. "Well, I guess," he said reluctantly.

"This is so cool! I can't wait to get one myself," Ron enthused.

"You're not turning into a fan girl, are you?" Harry teased, snorting with suppressed laughter.

"Yeah, why not?" Ron said with a laugh. "OOOooo, there goes Harry Potter! I think he's so hot! He's on the Famous Wizard Cards, too!" he said in a girlish simpering voice.

Harry shoved Ron's shoulder playfully and they all dissolved into laughter.

"I've got a few more," Ron offered. "Let's see if any of them have Harry!" No other Harry Potter cards turned up.

Casey had held her card the whole time as if it were a cherished treasure. She took a deep breath and held it out to Harry. "This is so special, Harry. You should keep it," she offered.

Harry smiled and gently closed her hand over the card. "No. You found it, so it's yours. Who knows, maybe it will be worth a lot of money someday. 'The first Harry Potter Famous Wizard Card, found by his girlfriend Casey Asher.' That could make it extra collectible, who knows?"

Casey smiled and put the card in her pocket. "I'll keep my Famous Wizard card, then, thank you! I'll also keep my Famous Wizard!" she laughed as she took his hand.

Harry smiled warmly at her and laced his fingers through hers. "You can keep both of us, then."

Ron laughed and said, "Oy! Get a room!" Hermione's response was to grab his face with both hands and plant a big kiss on him, which effectively shut him up.

Three days before Casey's birthday, Harry was running a board through the table saw to cut the base for a new mosaic when his scar exploded in pain. Fortunately, he was able to jump away from the saw before losing any fingers, but his board was ruined. Through the haze of pain, Harry could feel Voldemort laughing. Some plan was coming together, and Voldemort was delighted. When the pain passed, he looked around to see if anyone had noticed the incident. *Uh-oh, here comes Doug*, Harry thought. *Now what do I do?*

"Harry? Are you all right?" Doug asked in concern, having seen the boy grab his forehead and let go of the board he was sawing without turning off the machine.

"I, erm, uh, I have a headache. The noise of the saw just got to me," Harry explained lamely, hoping that explanation was good enough. "I'm sorry I messed up the board."

"I'm just glad you weren't injured," Doug replied, patting the boy on the shoulder in a fatherly way. "Casey would never forgive me if you got hurt in the workshop."

Harry grinned, knowing he was being teased. "Yeah, that's probably true," he said with a chuckle. "I'm fine now. I'll be more careful next time."

"If there's going to be a next time for that kind of headache," Doug cautioned, "you might want to go to a doctor and see what's causing it. Do you get those headaches often?"

"No, not really. I think it's just that I'm tired or something," Harry said, then thought *Oops, wrong answer – now he'll say I shouldn't be staying out so late with his daughter!*

Doug surprised him by chuckling. "I remember being sixteen – you think you can get by on no sleep at all. There are just too many interesting things to do to waste time sleeping. Or else you're growing so fast, all you can do is sleep. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground."

Harry grinned. "Too right." Doug patted him on the shoulder again and went back into his office, and Harry got back to work. As soon as he was certain nobody was paying attention to him, he sent an Adfero message to Dumbledore and Remus, telling them about his vision of Voldemort. They sent no immediate reply, but he didn't really expect one. They knew he'd be at work that time of day, and the sight of a small silvery object flying through the air and hitting him in the head might frighten his co-workers. If they needed to tell him anything, they would wait until he had gone home.

That evening, after yet another miserable dinner with the Dursleys, Harry went up to his room and got out his school books and parchment, intent on finishing the last of his required essays. Hours later, he screwed the cap back on his ink bottle, put his ink, quill, parchment and books back under the loose floorboard under his bed, put on the t-shirt and shorts he'd been sleeping in this summer, and went to bed, falling asleep almost immediately. It seemed he'd just closed his eyes when the hair on the back of his neck prickled stiffly, warning him to wake up. He grabbed his wand and slipped silently out of bed as he shoved his glasses on his face and warily moved toward his door. He heard the creaky stair squeak, and quiet movement in the hall. He cracked his door open and was surprised to see Remus approaching his door.

"Remus? What's up?" whispered Harry, relieved, as he rubbed sleep out of his eyes. "No, wait. Who are you really?" he demanded as he pointed his wand at the wizard. His scar warning him about Voldemort having some new plan coming together worried him.

"Harry, it's me," the man said impatiently. "You're in great danger. Grab your Invisibility Cloak and broom and come with me right now," Remus breathed, trying to push past Harry into the room. "We have to leave right away. Hurry!"

Harry stood his ground, a dangerous glint in his eye. "You will not move until I know who you are. Tell me something only Remus knows."

"Damn it, Harry, not now!"

"Yes, now, or I won't go!" Harry said stubbornly, his wand pointed at the other wizard's heart.

"OK, something only you and I would know. . .I can't think." The man scratched his head and looked confused.

"What happened the day of my class's first Hogsmeade visit?" Harry prompted.

"Oh! You couldn't go. I invited you into my office to see the grindylow I'd just received, and we had tea and talked about what shape your boggart would be."

"And what would it be?"

"A Dementor."

"Good enough. Let me get my things," Harry replied, crawling quickly under his bed.

"Well done making sure I was really who I was supposed to be," Remus complimented as he entered the room. "Tell me where to look for what you need."

"It's all under here. Hang on." Harry was already wriggling out from under his bed, dragging out his broom and his cloak. He pulled on socks and his trainers and stood up, then opened Hedwig's cage and set her free. "Wait – where are we going?" he asked Lupin.

"Grimmauld Place."

"Go to Grimmauld Place, Hedwig," he told her, then turned to Lupin. "OK, I'm ready, let's go," he said grimly as he followed his godfather down the stairs and out into the front garden. "Do I need to wear my Invisibility Cloak?" he asked as he mounted his broom.

"No, it's just not easily replaced, so I wanted you to have it with you."

Harry was shocked. "Not easily. . .? What? Is something going to happen to the Dursleys?"

"Not necessarily them, but Death Eaters are attacking nearby, so you have to come with me," Remus said. "There are scary things going on tonight, Harry. No matter what you see or hear, you have to come with me. You can't do anything to help."

"In *Little Whinging*?" Harry was appalled.

"There are Aurors and Order members out trying to stop them now. Your warning was a big help."

"And what do you mean, no matter. . ."

"That's enough for now. Let's go!" Remus cried, kicking off from the ground. The boy followed him and they soared over Privet Drive and off towards London and Grimmauld Place.

"Remus! Look!" Harry called, pointing to houses just a few streets over from his. "Dark Marks!"

"Yes, I know. Come on, lad, let's see that Firebolt's speed!"

Harry bent low over his broom, starting to fly faster as they headed toward London, but his eyes were scanning the ground, watching as the Dark Marks spread across Little Whinging, growing more uneasy by the moment. He suddenly screamed, "*CASEY!*" and turned his broom toward Casey's house, where a Dark Mark had just appeared.

"Harry, stop!" Remus tore after his godson with all the speed his old Shooting Star could muster, but it was no Firebolt. "Stop! Harry! No!"

Harry was racing to Casey's house as fast as the Firebolt could carry him. He was nearly unseated when he was hit from behind by both a Stunning spell and a set of ropes that tied him to his broom. Remus carefully summoned the Firebolt to keep it under Harry as he reeled him in. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice breaking, as he tied the ropes to his own broom, then flew the two of them to London as quickly as he could manage.

When they got to Grimmauld Place, Remus landed his broom, keeping Harry's hovering, then gently guided Harry's broom inside the house before untying the stunned boy and laying him gently on the floor at the foot of the stairs. Molly, Ginny, Ron, Fred and George Weasley ran to the door when they heard it open.

"Did you get him?" "Is he all right?" "What happened?" the Weasleys asked all at once.

"He's safe. There are Dark Marks popping up all over Little Whinging," Remus replied darkly as he stood their brooms in the corner. "I had to stun him." Tears were in Remus's eyes. "He saw the Dark Mark over Casey's house and tried to go there."

Gasps of disbelief and sympathy spilled from the Weasleys as they surrounded Harry's inert form.

Remus kneeled next to his godson and gently smoothed the hair off his forehead. "I know you're angry with me, and I don't blame you. What I did, I did for your own safety. There was nothing you could do, Harry. Please believe me. If there had been any way to help, I would've fought right beside you. I hope you know that." He paused, took a shuddering breath, and then said, "*Enervate."*

With a gasp, Harry sat up and stared wildly around him. "Where. . .? What. . .?" His eyes settled on Remus. "I. . .I just had a. ..a very bad. . . dream."

Remus gazed wearily into Harry's frightened eyes. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I dreamed . . .I dreamed you came and got me from the Dursleys, and we flew away and there were Dark Marks. . .and . . .and . . ."

"It wasn't a dream, Harry. It really happened." Remus put his hands on the boy's shoulders, hoping to offer support, compassion, whatever he needed.

"No. It was a dream. It had to be," Harry said flatly.

"I'm telling you the truth. It wasn't a dream."

"Then. . .then. . . ." Harry was quiet for a moment. Dawning awareness crossed his face, and he raised stricken eyes to his godfather. "Not Casey's house. Not Casey."

"I'm so sorry, Harry, but yes, Casey's house. We have people there checking on the situation right now," Remus replied, hoping there would be some good news soon.

At that moment, Tonks came in the door, looked at Remus and shook her head, an uncharacteristically serious look on her face.

Remus swallowed hard a couple of times before asking, "All?"

"Even the dog," Tonks said bitterly. "Even the bloody dog." She stomped away toward the living room and sat miserably with her head in her hands.

Harry's face was ashen. "The dog?" he asked in a small voice.

Remus swallowed hard, wishing he could say anything but what he was about to say. "Harry, Tonks just checked Casey's family. They're. . .they're all gone, even their dog. That's what she just reported." Remus was as pale as Harry. The Weasleys were a mass of silent shock.

"Gone?" the boy asked in a small, shaky voice.

Remus's eyes filled with tears as he said, "They've all been killed, Harry. I'm so sorry."

Harry looked around at his friends, studying one well-known face then the next, hoping to see a glimmer of hope somewhere. Every single person there was staring in anguish at Harry, Molly and Ginny, like Tonks, in tears. He went very still for a few moments, digesting what he'd been told, then a horrible scream tore out of his throat. "*NOOOOOOO!*" With his scream, a massive burst of magic came out of him that shattered every piece of glass in the entire house, every mirror, every dish, and all the crockery in the kitchen. Shards of glass flew everywhere in a whirlwind caused by Harry's agony. Molly Weasley threw Ginny to the floor and covered her with her body, protecting her youngest child as best she could. Remus ripped Harry's glasses off and chucked them as far away as possible, then threw himself over his godson to protect him. The boys and Tonks cowered under furniture or wherever they could shelter until Harry's screaming stopped and the glass fell tinkling to the floor.

"Is everyone OK?" Tonks asked moments later as she crawled out from under a table in the living room. "*SHUT UP YOU STUPID WITCH!"* she cried, pulling the shredded curtains back over Mrs. Black's screaming portrait.

Ron, Fred and George were cautiously emerging from various hiding places, gingerly shaking glass chips off their clothes, hair and skin. They were covered in scratches and cuts, some of them bleeding freely. The boys moved hesitantly to where their mother lay still over Ginny. "Mum? Mum? Are you ok? Mum?" They saw she had cuts on her back, arms and legs, but when Fred turned Molly over, they discovered the most serious injury, which was on the side of her neck.

"MUM!" Fred screamed as he and George tried to staunch the flow of blood. Ron moved frantically to Ginny. "Ginny? Ginny?" he said, his voice breaking as he turned his blood-drenched sister over.

"Ron!" Ginny cried as she threw her arms around her brother's neck. "Are you. . .? Fred and George?"

"We're fine. Mum's hurt," Ron said, tears in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just a few scratches," Ginny replied as she examined herself. "Where did all this blood come from?" With a start, she looked at her mother and burst into tears. "Mum? Mummy? *No!*"

Tonks was bent over Molly, her Auror's First Aid Kit spread out beside her, putting a bandage on Molly's neck wound. "I'll have her right as rain in a few minutes, no worries," she asked the boys and Ginny. "Somebody look at Remus and Harry, OK?"

Ron moved to Remus and found the man covered in serious cuts, bleeding profusely. "Remus! Remus, can you hear me?" He got no response at first, then he saw the man stir. "Remus?"

"Aaah," Remus moaned as he moved a little. "There's something in my back, isn't there?"

"Yes, a nasty big bit of glass. Shall I pull it out?" asked Ron.

"Yes, do it quickly. Maybe it won't hurt as much then," Remus agreed.

Ron grabbed a cloak off the hooks by the door and wrapped his hand in it before taking hold of the glass. He got the long, knife-like shard out and saw it was thickly covered in blood. "We need to get you to St. Mungo's," Ron began, but Remus interrupted him.

"There are a few good things about being a werewolf," Remus said with a grim smile but panting with pain. "Those wounds will be healing in a few moments." He groaned as he got off of Harry. He was horrified to see his godson was unconscious. "Harry! Harry, can you hear me?" Nothing he did could rouse the boy. In tears, Remus picked him up in his arms and hugged him tightly, glass crunching under his knees as he moved. "Ah, Harry, I'm so sorry! Please wake up!"

"What's wrong with him, Remus?" Ginny asked, torn between her concern for her mother and for Harry.

"I don't know exactly. Shock at the very least. Maybe something worse. Maybe I hurt him when I threw him down." The man sobbed, an agonized expression on his face. "I was trying to protect him. . .it was so sudden, I was so scared, I wasn't careful about how much strength I used. What if I hurt him?" He took a deep breath and tried to control himself. "We need to get Dumbledore here, and Madam Pomfrey. I don't want to get St. Mungo's involved in this. I don't trust them to protect him properly." He looked over to where Tonks was caring for Molly. "Is she going to be all right?"

"She's lost a bit of blood, but it doesn't look like anything serious has been severed. I think St. Mungo's can fix her up pretty quickly," Tonks replied. "Fred, would you contact your dad and get him to come here and bring some kind of transport for her? George, get your mother's bag and cloak. No woman wants to go anywhere without her bag and cloak. Ron, you contact Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey and tell them what's happened. Madam Pomfrey will need to get here as soon as possible to take care of Harry. Oh, and Fred, I need you to stay here and guard the place – we need an adult Wizard here, and Remus is going to be busy with Harry, so you're what we've got. George can help me get your mum to St. Mungo's. All right?" she finished brightly.

"What about me?" Ginny asked as she sat holding her mother's bloody hand.

"You told me you wanted to be a healer, didn't you?" said Tonks kindly.

"Yes," Ginny replied in a small voice.

"Then I need you to go and help Remus with Harry. Remus doesn't know a lot about medicine and it will be a while before Madam Pomfrey can get here. I know he will appreciate your help. Harry will need to be checked for injuries. He and Remus will both need their wounds cleaned and bandaged. Taking care of them is your job. OK?"

Ginny looked down at her mother, who'd sacrificed herself for her daughter. She should go with her mum, shouldn't she?

Tonks recognized the girl's indecision. "Ginny, if your mum was in your place, what would she do?"

"She'd take care of her family," Ginny said with no hesitation.

Tonks squatted in front of the grieving girl and looked her in the eye. "We have plenty of Weasleys to go around, don't we? So while your brothers are helping me with your mum, you can take care of the rest of your family – which is Harry, right? Your mum would want you to take care of him, wouldn't she? She wouldn't blame him for what happened, would she?"

"No, of course not!"

"So given the choice of you or Ron to take care of Harry when he's injured. . .?"

"Mum would choose me. I'm the one who helps her take care of the others when they're sick. Ron's hopelessly squeamish," Ginny replied in a subdued voice.

"Am not," protested Ron, but quietly. He seemed to be lost between staring at Harry's still form and his mother's blood-soaked body.

Ginny almost smiled at her brother's response. "OK, I'll stay with Harry and Remus."

"Good girl. I'll send word as soon as I know something about your mum, all right?" Tonks assured her.

"Thanks," Ginny replied.

Remus stopped rocking Harry and cleaned the glass off himself and Harry as best he could, then shook out a cloak and covered Harry to try to keep him warm in case shock was part of what was wrong with him. He stood up resolutely with the motionless boy in his arms and carried him tenderly upstairs to his room. As Ginny followed them up the stairs, Fred returned. "Got hold of Dad, he's on the way here now."

"Good. Let's go," Tonks said to George.

"Fred can go, too. I can guard the place," Ron offered.

"You have a job to do, go and get it done, and then you can help Fred – or better yet, both of you do the contacting – there's more than one fireplace in this house, after all – and then it will be done more quickly. Off with you, we need to get your mum to hospital," Tonks said, shooing the boys away. She conjured up a stretcher then levitated Molly onto it and sent her toward the door. The door opened quickly, with Arthur Weasley racing through it.

"Molly! Molly, darling, Molly!" he cried as he bent over his unconscious wife. He looked up at Tonks. "Is she. . .?"

"She'll be fine. We need to go," Tonks replied.

"And the children, are they all right?" Arthur persisted, looking around for his children, and seeing the still form of Harry in Remus's arms, near the top of the stairs, with Ginny close behind them. "What happened to Harry?"

"I'll tell you about it on the way. Your children are fine. Harry. . .we'll talk about it on the way," Tonks said and she, Arthur and George all left with Molly floating on the stretcher in front of them.

Ginny called down the stairs. "Ron!"

"Yeah?"

"When you've finished the job Tonks gave you, could you and Fred clear the glass up so it's safe to walk around the house? And we'll need a jug of cool water and something to drink out of up here, too."

"OK," Ron agreed.

Fred looked at Ron as they entered the devastated kitchen. "I don't know what she thinks we'll put the water in," Fred mused. "Every single thing is shattered in here."

"Weren't there silver or pewter goblets and jugs somewhere?" asked Ron.

"If Mundungus didn't make off with them after Sirius died," Fred replied as they began searching the kitchen. "He wanted to sell them. They were solid silver."

"Remus can't use silver, we'll have to find something else for him," Ron reminded Fred.

Upstairs, Ginny took the covers off Harry's bed and shook them out, then used a cleansing charm to remove all the shards of glass from the windows, mirrors and chandeliers that had shattered all over the beds, other furniture and the floor. She turned down the covers on Harry's bed as Remus removed Harry's shirt, shorts, shoes and socks near the doorway, shaking bits of glass out onto the floor so they wouldn't end up in his bed. He ran his fingers through Harry's untidy hair to shake out any glass that was there, then pulled Harry's shorts on again, wrapped the cloak around the unconscious boy and carried him over to the bed.

"His wounds need to be cleaned and treated," said Remus. "If you can stay with him, I'll put him into bed and find something to wash him with. There must be a metal basin or bucket around here somewhere."

"You get him settled, and I'll go get the things to clean his wounds," Ginny offered. "I know where a metal pan and the other things are. I'll need to look at your wounds too. You've got them everywhere – you won't be able to clean the ones on your back very well." She was very matter-of-fact about dealing with both Remus's and Harry's wounds. Remus smiled in admiration. He didn't know Ginny could be this level-headed in a crisis.

When she returned, Harry was in bed and Remus left to clean himself up as well as he could. Ginny wasn't prepared for the sight of Harry covered in blood. Tears sprang to her eyes as she set to work. At least he'd been on the floor, so his back had no wounds, and Remus had protected him from the majority of the glass. Harry had cuts on his forehead and cheeks, his arms and hands and legs, with a few on his chest as well. She carefully removed shards of glass from the wounds and washed them gently, applying healing ointment to each one as she went. Thankfully, none of the cuts were deep. Most were just long and straight, as if he'd been raked with claws many times. She worked steadily, not allowing herself to think that it was Harry she was working on, Harry who she'd loved all her life, Harry who she was still too shy to talk to about anything but Quidditch or the D.A. most of the time, Harry who could make her blush by just glancing at her. Her attempt at keeping her emotional distance was failing spectacularly. Tears spilled down her face and she sobbed, pausing long enough to rub her

streaming eyes before getting back to work on his numerous injuries. He was so still. He should be waking up if he'd just hit his head, shouldn't he? Why wasn't he waking up? "Mum, I need you!" she whispered. "I wish you were here. I don't know what else to do." She covered Harry and straightened up just as Remus entered the room.

Remus saw her distress and gave her a moment to collect herself, busying himself with picking up Harry's t-shirt, socks and trainers. "Ginny, you need to wash that blood off so we can see how you are," Remus said kindly. "Have you finished attending to Harry?"

"I've treated all the wounds I could find. Maybe you should look to see if I've missed anything. Let me look at your wounds. I think you got the worst of it."

"I suppose I was at the centre of that particular storm," he said with a rueful smile. "There are some places on my back, and the back of my legs, that I couldn't see well enough to deal with properly."

Ginny picked glass out of his wounds and asked, "Should I put ointment or bandages on them? They seem to be healing already."

"One of the few benefits of being a werewolf," Remus commented dryly. "Just getting the glass out should be good enough, unless the big one on my back is still bleeding a lot. That might need a bandage just to keep me from dripping blood everywhere."

Ginny bandaged the largest wounds and left to clean her own injuries and check on her brothers. Remus sat beside Harry's bed. "Harry, wake up," he said quietly. "Please wake up." He took the boy's hand in his and sat quietly, not knowing what else to do to help him.

Chapter 8 – Aftermath

Ginny found Ron and Fred using brooms to sweep up the glass. "Whatever happened to doing things with magic?" she asked, mystified.

"We tried that, and found out it was dangerous if we didn't use the right spell," Fred replied with a grimace, some obviously new cuts on his hands.

"Boys!" Ginny said in exasperation. "*Evanesco!*" she said with a wave of her wand. The glass disappeared from the area where she'd aimed her wand. "Any questions?" she said with a small but cheeky smile at her brothers.

"Yeah," Ron said grumpily. "Why didn't we think of that?" He and Fred separated and did small *Evanesco* charms throughout the hall and entryway. Behind the troll foot umbrella stand, Ron found Harry's badly damaged glasses. "Blimey! What happened to these?"

I wonder how they got over there?" Ginny said.

"Remus threw them – I saw him do it as I was getting into the cupboard under the stairs," Fred replied. "I remember thinking it was a good thing he did that, or Harry might be blind – imagine all that glass right in front of your eyes, with something like that happening!" He shuddered. "And I don't know how Harry ever survived living in a cupboard under the stairs for eleven years. This one's pretty cramped and kind of scary – lots of spiders, Ron!" Fred grinned at his brother's nervous reaction. "And this cupboard's a lot bigger than the one at Privet Drive."

Ron looked at the broken glasses. "These frames are so twisted, I doubt they can be fixed. And there's only a little bit of glass left in them. Remus must have crushed them when he pulled them off."

"I suppose he'll have to go to Diagon Alley for new ones," Fred replied. "I guess things will just be blurry for him for a while."

"How's Harry doing?" Ron asked Ginny, his concern apparent.

"He's still unconscious, not moving at all. I don't know what to do about it. I do wish Mum was here," she said with a catch in her voice.

Ron put his arm around his sister. "She'll be fine, Ginny,"

His concern broke through Ginny's defences and she wailed. "She did it to save me! She could've saved herself. . ."

"Ginny!" Ron said firmly, turning her to face him and taking her shoulders in his big angular hands. "Stop that. She did what she wanted to do. She wanted a daughter so much that she kept trying even though she had six sons, did you know that? She kept thinking, 'one more try' and then finally you arrived. She couldn't love you more if she tried. I'm not saying she doesn't love the rest of us, but you're her *daughter*. She would die for you and be glad if by sacrificing herself, she'd saved you. You know that's true. She'd die to save any of us, but especially for you."

Ron had never been so eloquent. That very fact shocked Ginny out of some of her grief. She stared at him amazed he was almost a man. He was taller than most of the men she knew, and his voice was very deep now. And suddenly he was acting like a man, meeting a need with wisdom and maturity. The whole thing was a bit of a surprise, but a nice one. She hugged him tightly, saying, "Thanks." She knew without looking that his face might be resolute and mature at the moment, but his ears were bright red.

Remus sat by Harry's bed, as he'd been doing for hours. Ginny would come and go, bringing food and drinks, checking on her patients, but she didn't know what else she could do for them. She wanted to stay with Harry too, but she felt she might be intruding. Madam Pomfrey had commended Ginny's work on everyone, and given them all a potion that made their wounds heal more quickly. She thought Harry would wake up when he was ready, and there was no way to hurry him. They'd just have to wait. She returned to Hogwarts, leaving Ginny with instructions on how to continue Harry's care, and to let her know when he woke up.

Snape swept into Harry's room like a giant bat, a steaming goblet in his hand. "The moon is full tonight," Snape told Lupin. "Have you been taking your potion this week?"

"Yes, I have. Thank you, Severus," Remus replied turning away from Harry for only a moment. "I've been wondering if I'd be safe staying here with Harry." He glanced at Snape, whose eyes glittered malevolently. "No, I suppose, even with the potion, I should be locked up away from people," he finished sadly. He stood up and accepted the goblet from Snape, drinking it as he walked toward the door. "Someone will need to sit with him, though."

Snape sneered. Surely Lupin couldn't be asking him to sit with. . .Potter?

Ginny, who had been clearing the tea things from the room, said quietly, "I'll do it, Remus."

Remus looked gratefully at the girl. She was worn out, but he knew even if someone else stayed with Harry, she'd still be hovering around, trying to do whatever she could to help. She was very like her mother that way. "That's very kind of you, Ginny. Thank you. I'll be back in the morning. Can you manage that much time?"

"Yes, I can do it. I'll get Hermione or Ron to help if I need it."

"All right then. Thank you again." Remus followed Snape out of the room and down the stairs, so he could be locked up in the basement for his transformation.

It was very late. Moonlight spilled through the window, washing Ginny's red hair in a gossamer light as she sat holding Harry's hand. "Come on, Harry, wake up," she whispered. "Wake up. It's not healthy for you to be out this long. Wake up, please!" He was so still, he looked like a sculpture, not a living being, especially the way the moonlight was casting his face into planes of light and shadow. She sighed, released his hand and stood up to stretch. "Harry, Harry, Harry, whatever am I going to do with you?" she mused. "I wish I could think of some way to wake you up." She got herself a drink and walked around a bit, stretching her tired muscles, then sat by the bed again. "I'm so tired," she muttered. "I'll just rest here a minute, OK? I promise not to bother you," she said sleepily to the still-unconscious boy as she crawled up onto the bed and lay next to him. "So tired," she murmured and fell asleep.

Some time later, Harry stirred. Awareness came to him slowly. He knew he was lying down. Right, that made sense. His head hurt, so he must be alive. *OK, I can open my eyes now. I know I can. Come on, eyes, open. . .* he thought as he struggled up from the depths of blackness where he'd been for who knew how long. He opened his eyes and saw that he was indeed in a bed, in a darkened room with only one candle glowing across the room. The candle and the moonlight made a golden haze around the head next to him. *A head next to me? Huh?* He rubbed his eyes, and his motion woke Ginny.

"Harry! You're awake! How do you feel?" Ginny said, excited to see those green eyes open again.

"Erm. . ." he began, then swallowed, cleared his throat, swallowed again. "Thirsty."

Ginny got up and poured him a cup of water. "Here, drink this."

"What is it?" he said suspiciously. Whenever he was sick, somebody was always pouring nasty potions down his throat. It wasn't his favourite way to wake up.

"Water. I have a potion to give you, too, but Madam Pomfrey said you should have water first."

"Am I in the hospital wing? It doesn't look right," he said, screwing up his face in an effort to squint around the room as he drank from the cup she held for him.

"No, you're in your room at Grimmauld Place."

"It looks. . .different," he said, looking around, then reaching toward the bedside table. "Where are my glasses?"

"I. . um. . .I thought your room was a bit grim, so I decorated it while you were . . . um. . .asleep," she replied. She wasn't sure how much information she should give Harry about anything. They certainly didn't need him to get overly upset and blow up other things.

"My glasses?" he prompted.

"Oh. They're broken. I'm sorry, Harry."

"How'd they get broken? Can't Hermione repair them? She's done it before."

Ginny picked up the twisted wreck of Harry's glasses. "This is all that's left of them. None of us know how to repair this kind of damage."

"Bloody hell. They look like a herd of hippogriffs trampled them," he groaned. "Now what am I going to do?"

"You can get new ones," Ginny offered. "How long has it been since your eyes were examined? These frames were getting small for your face anyway, you've grown so much."

"But I like them," he protested. "And I need them. I can't see what you've done to the room, for one thing. I see bright spots of colour, but what are they?"

"Oh, I put up a Chudley Cannons poster over there," Ginny replied, happy to have a less dangerous topic to talk about, "and that's my Weird Sisters poster. . ."

Harry's eyes were round with surprise. "You gave me your Weird Sisters poster? But you love that poster!"

"I can see it here," she replied reasonably. "I thought it would make your room more cheerful. This house is so dark inside, and it doesn't look like anyone young has lived here for ages."

"That's because nobody young *has* lived here for ages," Harry replied with a soft chuckle. "Thanks, Ginny, I think it's brilliant. What's that over there?" he continued, nodding toward another colourful spot on the wall.

"That's a new poster," she said hesitantly, not sure how he was going to react to it. "It's a really nice one. Gryffindor Quidditch."

"You're kidding! Someone put out a Gryffindor Quidditch poster? Wow! What's it look like?"

"It. . .erm. . .it looks like you. Ron says it's similar to the picture on the Famous Wizards card that you're on."

He was taken aback. "You mean there's a huge picture of. . .me . . .on the wall?"

"Erm. . .yes," Ginny replied nervously.

Harry stared at the poster on the wall, which was just a red and gold blur to him. "What does Ron think of the room now? And where is he, anyway?" he asked uncomfortably. He didn't want to go through another round of Ron's jealousy over him being "the famous Harry Potter."

"He likes it. But this is just your room for now – he's in with the twins."

"Why?"

"Because you've been sick. I'm sure he'll move back in when you're better."

"I've been sick? What's wrong with me?" Harry was glad Ginny was finally getting around to telling him what was going on.

"I don't know that I should be the one to tell you. Remus. . ."

"Where is Remus?"

"In the basement – it's the full moon tonight."

"Has he had his potion? Is he all right?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes, he's fine, just worried about you."

"Ginny, what's going on? Tell me," he insisted, his eyes boring into hers.

She sighed. What was the best way to do this? She'd been pondering this very thing for hours, and had never come up with a good answer. "OK. Um. . . . What's the last thing you remember?"

Harry leaned back against his pillow, his brow furrowed in concentration. "I did my last essays for school, then went to bed. Something woke me up. . . Remus, it was Remus! He was at my house! Why was he there?" he pondered, speaking more to himself than to her. "He said. . .hmmm. Oh, he said to get my broom and Invisibility Cloak. There were Death Eaters in the area and I was in danger." He cast a startled look at Ginny. "Were we attacked by Death Eaters? Remus is all right, isn't he?"

"Yes, Harry, he's fine, just undergoing his transformation tonight, that's all."

"OK. We were flying. . . ." His face fell. "No. Oh no." His body contorted in grief, Harry cried in great gulping sobs. "NO!"

Ginny put her arms around him, trying to calm him. "Harry, I'm so sorry."

He pulled away from her, pummelling her with his fists in his frenzy of grief. "NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!" he shrieked.

"Harry, don't make me stun you!" Ginny cried, trying to protect herself from his blows. She backed away from him, her wand aimed at him, but he had subsided into his grief. He sat curled up, his face against his knees, rocking his body, pulling at his hair when he wasn't hitting his legs. Ginny watched him for a few moments, then sat facing him and gently pulled his arms away from his legs. She folded him into her arms, put his head on her shoulder and rocked him as he cried. After a long, long time, he calmed down and relaxed in her arms.

"I'm sorry," he said as he pulled away from her to look her in the eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"Don't worry about it," she replied. "I know you didn't mean it."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, his face crumpling into tears again. "I'm sorry."

"Shhhh," she whispered, pulling his head to her shoulder again. She held him until he quietened. This time when he sat up, he looked calm and resolute.

"Do you know when. . .their. . . funerals are?" he asked haltingly.

"No, but Hermione will be checking the muggle paper for the notice in the morning – she did that today, too."

"Hermione's here? I thought she was still on holiday with her parents."

"She just got home. When she heard what happened, she came as soon as she could to help."

"Oh," he replied. After sitting quietly for several minutes, he scrubbed at the tears still streaming down his face and said, "How long since it happened?"

"It was last evening – just over 24 hours ago."

"Then I haven't missed it. I need. . .I need a suit. And I need to send flowers. P-pink r-roses," he sniffled, then gulped back a sob, "for C-c-casey. Daisies for Patricia. . . she's always. . .she liked to make daisy chains for her hair. I don't know what to get for Doug and Margaret," he moaned in despair.

"Hermione will probably know what's best," Ginny assured him. "She's here now. I'll ask her to help us with this when she wakes up, OK? That should be enough time, don't you think? There aren't any shops open now."

"All right," he agreed. "I'll need to get my bank card from the Dursleys to pay for things. I want to get Remus a suit too. I want him there with me."

"Harry, we'll all go if you'll let us," Ginny offered gently.

"You will?"

"Of course. We all liked her. She was a very sweet girl," Ginny said sincerely.

"I thought you . . . didn't like her," Harry said hesitantly.

"Well, at first, I didn't, but she grew on me," Ginny admitted with a shrug.

Harry gulped and caught his breath shakily, sitting up and studying Ginny. He touched her damp shoulder. "I'm sorry – I got you all wet."

"No problem," she said, performing a drying charm.

"You and Hermione are so good at that kind of charm. I always forget which ones to use," Harry said with a small attempt at a smile.

Ginny flushed under his praise. "You're good at lots of other things," she reminded him.

"But that kind of skill makes life more comfortable. I wish I was better at those."

"I could teach you if you'd like," she offered.

"I'll think about it," he replied earnestly. "Dumbledore already wants me to take extra classes next term, so I'll have to see how my timetable works out."

"What kind of classes?"

"Wandless magic," he replied absently. He sat up straighter and looked around. "Where are my glasses?"

Ginny was worried. Had he already forgotten? "They're broken. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember," he replied impatiently. "Where are they?"

"They fell on the floor a little while ago. Hang on," she said as she bent down to retrieve them. "Here."

Harry held the glasses in his hands and began rubbing them with his thumbs, thinking of the time he'd repaired Casey's swimsuit top. That thought broke his concentration and he dissolved in tears again.

"Harry, what is it?" Ginny asked, very concerned.

"It's. . .never mind."

"You know, I've read that sharing things that upset you helps you deal with them. So what's upsetting you about your glasses?"

He chuckled softly, a very sad sound. "You really are going to be a healer, aren't you?"

"I think so."

"You'll be brilliant," he assured her. Taking a deep breath and blowing it out hard, he said, "I was thinking of . . .Casey. . .when something broke and I fixed it for her. I thought maybe I could do the same with my glasses."

"What did you fix?"

Harry blushed and looked down at his hands. "Her swimsuit top. The catch on it broke and there wasn't enough material to tie it together. I worked out how to fix the catch."

"How did you fix it?"

"Wandless magic. That's why Dumbledore wants me to have extra classes in it, so I can control it." He looked at Ginny seriously, then thought a moment. "Ginny, what happened to you? You have scratches on your face and hands."

"We all do – you do too."

"Why?" Harry looked down at his hands, noticing for the first time the cuts on his hands and arms.

"Erm. . .some glass broke and we all got hurt," she answered carefully, hoping he'd be satisfied with that much information.

"Where? How did it break?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Harry. I don't understand what happened."

"What happened? Just tell me, Ginny."

Ginny studied his eyes. He seemed to be calm and in control of himself, but she knew his control was fragile right now. "Do you remember when Remus brought you here?"

"I think my brain locked up when I saw the Dark Mark over. . ." he said hesitantly.

"Remus had to stun you to get you here safely. When he enervated you, Tonks got here and told us the news about Casey's family. You took it very hard, which is completely understandable. We were all standing close around you because you'd been stunned when you came in and we were worried about you."

"Who was there?"

"Ron, Fred, George, Mum and me, besides Remus. Tonks was in the living room."

"So what happened?" Harry asked, staring at her intently, willing her to tell him what he needed to know.

"Uh. . .when you. . .um. . ."

"WHAT? Spit it out, Ginny!"

Ginny flinched back from him, afraid he was going to get violent again.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you!" he said, reaching out and taking her hands in his, stroking them gently with his thumbs. "I know something bad happened. I know I caused it. I honestly need to know what it was. Please?"

She gulped nervously and nodded. "When Remus told you, and you understood, and Tonks confirmed it, you. . .screamed. And all the glass in the house shattered and whirled around in the air like a tornado. It was amazing, but very scary. Mum threw me to the floor and covered me with her body to protect me. Remus pulled your glasses off your face to save your eyes, and threw himself over you to protect you. Ron, Fred, George and Tonks found places to hide so they weren't badly hurt. M-mum and Remus got the worst of it." As she finished, her voice faltered and tears filled her eyes.

Harry gripped her hands more tightly. "Are they all right?"

"Remus is. He said healing quickly is one good thing about being a werewolf. Mum's in St. Mungo's. It was a good job Tonks was here. She gave her first aid right away and stopped the bleeding, but Mum lost a lot of blood. I was covered in it." Ginny was beginning to break down, the horror of that night vivid in her memory. "Ron thought I was. . .d-dead at first, I had so much blood on me." She cringed, tears streaming down her face. "I had to wash my hair so many times to get the blood out of it. And my hands – they were covered, and then they were covered in your blood, and Remus's and my brothers' – I washed between each person, and I washed and washed, and couldn't get all of it off. I don't think my hands will ever feel clean again," she said, pulling her hands away from his and rubbing them together anxiously.

Harry's eyes filled with tears again. "I'm so sorry about your mum, and . . ."

"Stop it, Harry, you couldn't help it and nobody blames you. Don't worry about it. Just get well, then we'll all feel better. Mum will be fine soon, I'm sure," she said, hoping she was right.

Harry nodded his thanks, then took one of her hands in both of his, turning it palm up and looking at it seriously. He rubbed the palm and each finger gently, then turned her hand over and did the same to the back, spending extra time around her knuckles and nails, just rubbing and massaging her hand softly without saying a word. Then he repeated the procedure on her other hand, continuing until he finally felt her relax. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks," she said in amazement. "What did you do?"

"I don't know. It just felt right," he said with a shrug.

A huge yawn escaped Ginny. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she said, blushing.

"Have you had any rest at all since this started?"

"I was just resting a little when you woke up," she said, her eyes downcast. How embarrassing that he woke up with her asleep on the pillow beside him! Was she snoring, or dribbling, or something equally stupid? She hadn't meant to fall asleep, she was just so tired.

"Where's Ron's bed?" Harry asked as he looked around.

"In the twins' room."

"Oh, right. You did tell me that," he said, shaking his head. "Sorry."

"No problem. Why'd you ask?"

"You should go to bed now, Ginny, you look dead on your feet."

"I can't leave you. You've been unconscious a long time. And by the way, Mr. Potter, you haven't taken your potion!" She picked up his dose of potion and handed it to him. He downed it in one very disgusted gulp.

"Eauw, gross! Why does medicine always have to taste bad?"

"So people won't take it when they don't need to, I suspect," she answered reasonably. "Now lie down and I'll tuck you in."

He smiled a little and lay back down, enjoying the attention. Then he slid over and said, "It's a big bed, Gin. You need some rest. Just lie here like you were doing when I woke up."

"I wasn't snoring, was I?"

"Yeah, that's what woke me up," Harry teased half-heartedly. When he saw the pained look on her face, he relented. "You weren't snoring, Ginny. I'm just playing with you."

"Fine way to treat your healer," she grumbled, but not seriously. She accepted his offer and stretched out next to him, leaving a careful space between them and staying on top of the covers.

"Are you comfortable?" he murmured in a tired voice. "Warm enough?"

"Mmm," she replied sleepily. She was already falling asleep and didn't notice Harry tugging some of the covers from under her and tucking them in around her. He shoved his pillow over so she could share it, and then settled down to sleep himself. He lay awake a while, thinking of Casey and her family, trying not to think of them, remembering the good times, mourning the times he'd been looking forward to that never would happen now. He felt numb inside, as if he was a hollow shell. It was going to be hard to get through the next few days. He looked over at Ginny, noticing the way the moonlight haloed her hair in reddish gold light. He was glad he had good friends who were going to help him through this. He'd pushed everyone away when Sirius died, but this time he knew they weren't going to allow him to do that. And for that, he was grateful.

Harry was dreaming happy dreams, lying somewhere warm and comfortable, enjoying the weight of the head nestled on his shoulder. He tightened his arm around her shoulders, making sure she wasn't still part of his dream. Nope, those were real shoulders. A smile tickled his mouth as her hair tickled his nose. Still mostly asleep, he put his hand under her chin and lifted her mouth to his. His initial soft kiss quickly turned into something more serious and he wrapped both arms around her, enjoying the taste of her, savouring the scent of her hair. *Wait a minute, she usually smells like roses. What is this fragrance? It's nice, just different*.

"Mmmmm, hello," he murmured sleepily. "You do know how to wake someone from a nap nicely. You using a new shampoo? Your hair smells different."

The girl laced her fingers in his hair and locked her lips to his again, kissing him hungrily, then suddenly drew back. "Oh! Harry, I'm . . . ." Beet red, Ginny Weasley realized her dream was as real as it could get. Yes, she'd been sleeping on Harry Potter's shoulder – eek, his *bare* shoulder! and yes, he'd awakened her by kissing her. What a delicious sensation that was! But she wasn't who he thought she was. *I'm a horrible, horrible girl!* she berated herself.

Still mostly asleep, Harry squinted, peering at her blearily. "Cas-. . .Ginny?" His eyes flew open wide in shock. "Was that you? Oh, no! I'm so sorry, I don't know what. . ."

"I do. You thought I was her. It's all right, Harry. I'm sorry I acted like that," Ginny said, sliding off the bed and sitting demurely in the chair beside it, her face flaming red.

"Acted like what?" Harry was flummoxed.

"Kissing you back like that, even after you stopped. You must have known, but I was still asleep and thought I was dreaming, and. . . ." Her words trailed off and she wrung her hands miserably. She was surprised to hear Harry's chuckle. "What's funny?"

"We both are. It was an accident. I was the one who invited you to sleep here. I didn't mean to take advantage of you," he apologized, and then sniffed as tears welled up in his eyes again. He sat up and rubbed hard at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Am I ever going to stop crying? Damn." They were silent a few minutes as he tried to control himself. When he caught his breath again, he glanced up at Ginny. "I'm kicking myself for not noticing the difference, but really, you are the same size as her, your hair is nearly as long . . .you felt. . . so much like her in my arms." He paused, pulling his knees up to his face and banging his head against them a few times. "I'm such an idiot. I was having the nicest dream. Casey . . ." he choked back a sob. "She brings. . .she used to bring me lunch every day at work, and I

usually fell asleep under the tree behind the workshop before she got there. She had all kinds of silly ways of waking me up, but sometimes she'd just lie down with me and snuggle into my arms like that, and . . .this felt like one of those times."

His voice was so quiet, Ginny could barely hear him. He pressed his face into his knees, his arms holding his legs so tightly, his knuckles were white. She was afraid if she touched him, he'd explode, or dissolve into tears again. But she couldn't help herself. She sat on the bed and put her arm around his back, resting her head against his shoulder, her long hair spilling down his bare back.

"That feels nice," he murmured after a while, pulling his face away from his knees just a little.

"What?"

"Your hair on my back. Tickles. It's nice." He turned to look at her. "I'm sorry, Ginny, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or anything."

"And I didn't mean to take advantage of you, either," she said seriously.

Harry smiled at her briefly, then frowned. "Ron is going to kill me."

"For what?" said Ginny, surprised.

"For hurting your feelings," he said glumly.

"Don't be silly. You didn't do anything wrong. And besides, I wouldn't let him hurt you," she said in a firm voice.

Harry raised an eyebrow, amused in spite of his sadness. "Can I watch? That should be interesting, watching little you put giant Ron in his place."

"I've done it before. I can do it again," she said stoutly.

"And I believe you. You are your mother's daughter, after all."

Ginny smiled at him, then looked at the window. "It's still dark. You should go back to sleep."

"You too."

"You really want to try that again?" she said in disbelief.

"It wasn't so bad, was it?" he said with a sad smile. "It felt good, honestly."

"To me, too." She looked at him seriously. "I'm not *your* sister, Harry. You should remember that."

"I know." He lay back down and opened his arm for her to join him. Ginny climbed back on the bed and snuggled contentedly into his arms. Harry felt tears sliding down his cheeks, missing the girl who should have been there, but grateful for the concern of the one who was.

Early morning sunlight woke Harry a few hours later. He squinted in the light, then tried to slide out from under Ginny's head on his shoulder and her arm thrown across his chest. She tightened her grip on him and snuggled into his shoulder again.

"Ah, Ginny?" he said quietly, not wanting to startle her. "Ginny? Wake up, please?"

"Mrumrumph," she mumbled.

"Ginny? Please? I need to get up."

"Hmm?" She opened her eyes and squinted, then her eyes flew open wide when she realized she was nose to nose with Harry Potter. "Oh! Um. . ."

"It's OK, relax. I just need to get up. Loo, you know?" Harry said, trying not to laugh at her expression and the blush that rivalled her hair in redness.

"Oh! OK. Hang on," she said, standing up and straightening her clothes, smoothing her hair as well as she could. Putting on her best professional manner, she said, "Here we go, young man. Easy does it," and helped him sit up with his legs off the bed. "Feeling all right?"

"Yeah, so far," he replied. She helped him stand up and start across the floor. "Whoa, hang on," he exclaimed, reaching out to grip the wardrobe. "Bit dizzy."

"Take it slow and steady. You'll be fine," she assured him as she ducked under his arm and wrapped hers around his back. "Hang on to me."

They shuffled slowly out of the room and into the bathroom at the top of the stairs. Once she got him inside, Ginny said, "OK, you're on your own now. I'll be waiting out here when you're ready to go back. If you need help in there, yell, and I'll call Ron, Fred or Remus to help you, OK?"

"OK. I should be fine," Harry replied. He moved very slowly as he took care of his toilet needs, washed his face and brushed his teeth. He was surprised how hard it was to wash your face without a mirror. The frame was all that was left of the one that had been in this bathroom. When he was finished, he went to the door and opened it, finding Ginny leaning quietly against the wall waiting for him. "All done."

"Good. Come on, I'll get you settled and then bring you some breakfast," she said as she pulled his arm over her shoulder and wrapped hers around his waist to help him to his room. After a couple of steps, Harry clutched his head and started to fall. "Harry!" Ginny cried as he started to fall down the stairs. She did her best to catch him, but he was just too big for her. "HELP!" she cried as she tumbled down a couple of stairs after him.

Remus Apparated just below where they were on the stairs and caught Harry as he fell. He lifted the boy in his arms. "What happened?"

"Dizzy," Harry explained cryptically.

"Ginny? Are you all right?" Remus asked as Ginny pulled herself back up the stairs.

"I'm fine, I just slid a couple of steps trying to catch him. Scraped my legs a bit, nothing too bad."

"I'm glad you're OK." He looked down at Harry. "Still dizzy?"

Harry squinted at his godfather. "Dunno. Oh, morning, Remus. How are you feeling? I'm sorry about. . ."

"Don't worry about that," Remus interrupted. "I'm fine. Everybody else is doing very well, too. Even Molly is doing better – we just got word, Ginny."

Ginny's face showed her relief.

"Looks like you're going to have a lump on your head there, Harry," Remus mused as he carried his godson upstairs. "How many steps did you hit?"

"I lost count after three," Harry answered. "I'm glad you're here. I need to talk to you."

"All right," Remus agreed as he set Harry down on his bed. "But first you need to eat something."

"I'll eat and talk to you at the same time, all right? We don't have a lot of time."

"I'll go and get breakfast for both of you, and some ice for the lump on your head, Harry," Ginny offered, and left.

"What do you mean, we don't have a lot of time?" Remus asked.

"The . . . their funerals should be today or tomorrow, the way muggles usually do things. It's usually within three days of . . ." he couldn't continue for a moment. "I have to go, and I'd appreciate it if you'd go with me." Harry told Remus about his wanting both of them to have muggle suits, and that he wanted to send flowers as well. "Hermione can order them for me, I'm sure she knows how," Harry concluded. "And I'll need to get new glasses," he added, picking up his mangled frames and stroking them quietly. He felt as if he'd lost an old friend. He'd worn these same glasses most of his life. Yes, the frames were too small for his face now, but he thought he looked odd without them. As he stroked the frames, the dents and twists started to straighten out.

"Harry?" Remus said quietly. "How are you doing that?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Keep doing whatever you're doing. Albus should see this. I'll be right back."

"I can send for him," Harry offered, and sent off an Adfero message. Within moments, Dumbledore came in.

"Ah, Harry! It's so good to see you awake. I looked in on you while you were unconscious. You had all of us quite worried," the old wizard said with a warm smile. "Now what is it you said Remus wanted me to see?"

"Watch his hands, Albus," Remus said, nodding at Harry, who was still quietly stroking his mangled glasses. "Remember how twisted his frames were? I showed them to you. And the lenses were gone but for a few small bits."

Dumbledore leaned in closely to watch what Harry was doing. "What spell are you using, Harry?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'm using one, actually. I'm just trying to remember exactly how they looked. It's hard, I never looked *at* them that much, I looked *through* them. . . ." His voice trailed off as he concentrated on his task.

Ginny had followed Dumbledore into the room, bringing a tray with breakfast for Harry and Remus. "You can see how they look on your poster, Harry," she suggested.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said, and rose unsteadily to walk to the wall and study the poster. Remus walked beside him, concerned he might get dizzy again and fall. "Oh, I see. I didn't have the curve quite right there," he muttered as his hands continued to work. The others watched him silently as Harry studied his poster and his fingers stroked the glasses over and over. Suddenly he stopped. "I can't think what else to do. I guess they're as good as I'll get them." He held them up to his face and looked through them. "They aren't quite right, but I can see better now." He put them on, squinting as his eyes tried to adjust to the imperfect lenses.

Dumbledore smiled warmly at Harry. "That was a nice bit of conjuring, creating those lenses, Harry. Conjured things don't last forever, so you will need to go to Diagon Alley and get new glasses. I'd like to speak to you about that and some other matters." He glanced at Remus and Ginny, who took the hint and left.

"What other matters?" Harry asked as he settled back in bed, pulling his pillow up so he could sit up, then leaning against it.

"I thought I would wait until you were older to speak to you about this, Harry, but I believe fate has stepped in to hasten things."

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore's words made Harry nervous.

Dumbledore took his half-moon spectacles off and handed them to Harry. "Try these on."

"I doubt we have the same prescription," Harry began, taking the glasses in his hands.

"Take your glasses off and put mine on. Look over them at me, then look through them at me," Dumbledore instructed.

"OK." Harry put the glasses on and looked over them and saw a blurry image of his smiling Headmaster, then tilted his head so he could look through them and saw the same thing. "What am I supposed to see?"

"Now look over them again, Harry."

Harry looked over the glasses and was amazed to see Dumbledore was gone. "Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?" came Dumbledore's disembodied voice.

"Where. . .where are you?"

"Look through the glasses again, my boy."

"Oh, there you are! Where'd you go?"

"I've been right here all along. These glasses do many things besides helping me see, such as seeing through Invisibility Cloaks, Invisibility Charms – which is what I was using just now – and do a wide variety of other things. There's an opti-wizard in Diagon Alley who can make similar glasses for you. He can add spells to make them unbreakable, impervious to rain, dirt and fog which will help you with your Quidditch, I imagine help you see around corners, help you locate specific people, things like that, as well as being self-correcting so they change as your vision changes. These glasses are one of the several ways I've used to keep track of you all these years, Harry. I didn't want you to have such glasses when you were too young, because you wouldn't be mature enough to use them wisely. But I believe the time has come to give you such defences."

Harry's eyes had grown larger as Dumbledore spoke. "Wow," he breathed. "That would be great! Do all wizard glasses have these powers?"

"Oh, no, by no means. Such powers are only given to a very few, and the opti-wizard gives himself a memory charm after delivering the glasses so he can't remember who has glasses with extra powers, or which powers their glasses have. That way, he protects the secrets of his customers. It wouldn't do for just anyone to know, for instance, that I can see through Invisibility Cloaks, now, would it?" He smiled at Harry, his eyes twinkling. "Such knowledge might inhibit certain activities, not all of which are bad." The old Wizard chuckled.

Harry blushed, then smiled back at him. "Yes, I can see that. But don't most wizards know he can do that kind of work? How do they know what to ask for when they go to him?"

"Such knowledge is passed on in a mentoring fashion. Someone who knows these things recognizes someone else who is deserving of such a tool, and tells them about it, as I am doing with you. There are wards set in place to prevent Dark Wizards from entering the shop, so our secret stays safely among those who are of good intent. Those who just need glasses to see and don't have a mentor to tell them about the other possibilities just get glasses that help them see better." Dumbledore sat back and tilted his head as he looked at Harry. "It's been quite some time since I've been to Diagon Alley. I would like to go with you when you go shopping today, so I can ensure you get your glasses done, shall we say, 'properly.'"

"That would be great, Professor," Harry replied. "Thanks."

"You're quite welcome. The other thing I wanted to speak with you about was the loss of your friend and her family." Dumbledore's face saddened as he watched the light go out of Harry's eyes. "I am so very sorry about what happened, Harry. We did have Order members in place near her home and the shop where you worked, suspecting Voldemort might attack either place because they'd been identified in the newspaper. We tried to protect them, Harry, we honestly did. Your warning came in good time, and we had the best people in place."

Harry's face was a study in tension as he tried to keep the tears filling his eyes from spilling. "Then what happened?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily, looking older than Harry had seen him in a long time. "Voldemort himself was there, and he had a large band of Death Eaters with him. They attacked on two fronts, and split our forces, then overwhelmed them. We lost several people that night."

Harry's eyes were huge in his ashen face. "Who?"

"Sturgis Podmore. Elphias Doge. Dedalus Diggle. Several others who you have not met. We nearly lost Nymphadora Tonks, but she managed to escape and call for reinforcements. By the time we had more people there, it was too late."

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault, all those deaths, all my fault, all my fault." Harry was rocking in agony, his face on his knees, his hands pulling at his hair.

Dumbledore sat on the bed beside him and gently rubbed his back. "No, my dear boy, it is not your fault. You are not responsible for the evil in the hearts of Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters. You are one of their favourite targets, yes, that's true, but so am I. It's as much my fault as anyone else's that those people died that night. We cannot blame ourselves for their loss, Harry. These people were fighting for good, fighting against the Dark forces, and by their own free will. They, like Sirius, died doing what they were meant to do, fighting for a just cause, doing what they could to protect innocent lives."

"But the Death Eaters were after the Ashers because of me!" Harry cried. "They wouldn't have gone after them if Casey. . .Casey. . . ." He sobbed, unable to speak further.

"They went after a lot of Muggle families that night, Harry, not just the Ashers. The other families attacked had no connection to you at all."

"It's still my fault. If I didn't live in Little Whinging. . ."

"We don't know that, but even if it were true, you cannot blame yourself. That's a burden you must not bear, Harry." He pulled the sobbing boy into an embrace and held him as he grieved. When he quieted, Dumbledore said, "I will think of something to help you, Harry. I just need to consider it for a while to decide what's best. In the meantime, if you feel up to it, you should get dressed so we can go shopping."

Harry rubbed his eyes and nodded. "OK. Thank you, Professor."

"If there's anything at all I can do to help you, Harry, just ask." Dumbledore replied, patting the boy's shoulder as he stood to leave.

"Oh, Professor," Harry said quickly.

"Yes?"

"How's Mrs. Weasley?" Harry's face was anxious.

"She's doing much better now. She should be home in a few days," Dumbledore said with a reassuring smile.

Harry hesitated a moment. "I don't know how to apologize to her and her family for what I did," he said miserably.

"They all know you didn't mean to do it, and not one of them is angry with you or blames you in any way," Dumbledore said warmly. "You have very good friends in the Weasleys, Harry."

Harry nodded. "I know. But after all they've done for me. . ." He didn't know what else to say.

"They care about you, Harry. Molly and Arthur were asking me how you were doing when I saw them last night. They're quite concerned about you. You take good care of yourself that will be the best way to repay them for all their kindnesses." Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder again. "Now you'd better get dressed, if you want to go shopping today."

"Yes, Professor. Thanks."

Chapter 9 - Goodbyes

Hermione and Ron stood outside the door of Number Four, Privet Drive. "Are you sure you know what to do?" Hermione asked.

"Got it. I think it will work."

"OK, then, here we go," she said as she rang the doorbell.

"Yes?" Vernon asked as he opened the door.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley. I'm Hermione Granger, and this is Ron Weasley. We're friends of Harry's," Hermione began pleasantly. "We've come for his things. He'll be staying somewhere else for the rest of the summer holidays."

"You're his kind, aren't you?" Vernon snarled. "You'll not set one foot inside this house."

Hermione and Ron both had their wands in their hands, held close to their bodies so people on the street couldn't see them. "We're coming in. Don't make us stun you," Ron warned.

"We can do this nicely or we can do it the hard way, it's your choice," Hermione said as she pushed Vernon back into the house and went through the door herself. Ron was close behind her. "Ron, you know where Harry keeps his things. I'll keep an eye – and a wand – on Mr. Dursley here."

"Bossy little witch, aren't you?" Ron said fondly as he started up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"It's one of my many charms," Hermione replied with a serene smile. She turned her attention back to Vernon, who was puffing and fuming and turning many shades of purple. "Please don't cause any trouble. All we want is to get Harry's things. You don't want them here anyway."

"I will not have you. . .you. . ."

"Language, Mr. Dursley," she said calmly.

"GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!" Vernon cried, pointing a shaking finger toward the door. "I know you're not allowed to use magic outside school. You can't do anything."

"Oh really? Guess what? Harry's been allowed to do magic outside school all summer. Ron and I have permission from our headmaster to do whatever is necessary here today. So you're wrong. We can do what we need to here. Get used to it."

Ron came charging down the stairs, his big feet and the trunk each making loud clomping noises on the stairs. "All done," he said with a grin.

"Are you sure you looked everywhere? You didn't leave anything behind?"

"No, I checked all the places he told me to. It's all here," Ron assured her, waving Hedwig's cage around as proof.

"All right, then. Good day, Mr. Dursley," Hermione said in her most posh voice, and turned on her heel to leave the house, Ron following closely behind her with the trunk in tow and Hedwig's cage in his other hand.

"Hermione, you were brilliant! You had ME scared!" Ron laughed as they walked toward Mrs. Figg's, where they would use the floo system to get back to Grimmauld Place.

"Thanks. I was actually hoping he'd do something stupid so I could jinx him. Damn the man for behaving!"

"Hogwarts letters are here!" Remus called cheerfully soon after Ron and Hermione returned to Grimmauld Place.

"Wow, what a list of books," Ron commented as he glanced over Hermione's shoulder at her list.

Hermione snorted with laughter. "Have you looked at yours? It isn't much shorter!"

"What is it?" Hermione asked as a noise from Ginny caught her attention.

Ginny had squeaked when she found a Prefect's badge in the envelope with her letter. She held it up wordlessly for the others to see.

"Congratulations," Harry said, a sad smile crossing his face briefly. He was just going through the motions, getting done what had to be done. He had no idea how he was going to live through the next few hours.

"Well done!" Hermione told Ginny sincerely.

"Mum's going to be over the moon about that one," Ron said with a laugh. He handed Harry his letter. "Here's yours, Harry – it's a bit fat," he said with a grin. "Couldn't be your Quidditch Captain's badge, now, could it?"

Harry just glanced at Ron, then tore open the envelope. Sure enough, there was the Quidditch Captain's badge.

"I'm getting good at Divination, aren't I?" Ron laughed, putting on a dramatic Professor Trelawney pose, then collapsing in laughter. "Congratulations, Harry! You deserve it!"

"Yeah, Harry, that's great!" Ginny chimed in.

Harry looked up at them, still quiet. After a while he said, "Odd, isn't it, me being captain when I was banned from Quidditch for life last term."

"Didn't they lift the ban?" said Ron, completely astonished.

"No. So this is just a wasted effort, them sending me this badge." He sighed.

Remus walked back into the room just then and heard the last part of the conversation. "What do you mean, a wasted effort, Harry? You're the best Quidditch player Hogwarts has seen in years!"

"I'm banned for life, according to Professor Umbridge," Harry said glumly. "They've never lifted the ban."

"Yes, they did. I don't know why you didn't get a notice," Remus said. "Albus and I were talking about it a few weeks ago and he said all Umbridge's decrees, including your ban, have been overturned."

Harry raised his eyes to his godfather. "Really?" He sat up and looked at the badge more seriously. "Well, then. This is nice."

"Nice?" Ron exploded. "You're QUIDDITCH CAPTAIN! You have a right to get a little excited about it!"

"I don't feel much like being excited about anything right now, Ron," Harry replied quietly, then took his letter and badge and went up to his room.

"Nice work, Ron, really," Ginny grumbled.

"Oh, shut up. I thought if anything would cheer him up, it would be getting his captain's badge."

Ginny glanced toward the stairs, watching Harry disappear on the turn after the landing. "It will take a lot more than a badge to cheer him up."

"Harry," Hermione said as they got ready to go shopping a short time later, "I was wondering. Would you like me to do a Cheering Charm on you?"

Harry looked at Hermione, then back at his trainers as he tightened the laces. "No, thanks. I tried it. What you see here is the result of several Cheering Charms," he said morosely.

"Maybe it would work better if someone else did it for you," she offered.

"Go ahead," he said as he straightened up. "Give it your best shot."

Hermione performed the charm and didn't see any difference in Harry at all. "I don't understand why it didn't work," she said, looking at her wand irritably.

"Nothing's wrong with your wand. It's me. I think I'm beyond cheering," Harry replied. He sighed, then gave her a small, sad smile. "Thanks for trying."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Remus, Mad-Eye Moody and Tonks first went to the shop where Doug and Remus had taken Harry to buy his new wardrobe. Tonks and Moody had come along as protection, but Tonks was also enjoying the shops. Moody was as grumpy and wary as usual, keeping his green derby pulled low over his magical eye while he was among Muggles. Hermione was their "Muggle fashion advisor." Ron and Ginny were with them because this trip also included one to Diagon Alley, and they, Hermione and Harry all needed

their school things. Harry and Remus were quickly fitted for Muggle suits, which Harry paid for with his bank card. Remus took their shopping and went back to Grimmauld Place. He needed to take his potion before going to the funeral late that afternoon.

Soon the group entered Diagon Alley through the Leaky Cauldron. First stop after Gringotts was Madam Malkin's to be measured for new robes. Ginny spent some time choosing the fabric for her new dress robes, which were what she'd chosen as her present from her parents for being made a Prefect. Then the group went to Flourish and Blotts for their books. Dumbledore met them as they left the bookstore to take Harry to the opti-wizard's shop.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hermione called as the headmaster and Harry started to walk away, Tonks and Mad-Eye trailing behind them.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore replied, turning to smile at her kindly.

"Would you mind if I come too? I'd love to see how an opti-wizard works."

"Me too!" came from Ron and Ginny.

Dumbledore considered a moment, then looked at Harry. He turned away from the others, bent close to the young wizard and murmured, "You're going to tell them everything as soon as you get your new glasses, aren't you?"

"Probably," he admitted quietly. "Unless you tell me not to."

"And what about the secrecy needed?"

"Professor, one day they may need such glasses," Harry replied earnestly, "and you and I may not be around to tell them. I'm going to kill Voldemort. I don't know if I'll survive. I want to leave them with whatever information they need to be as safe as possible."

Dumbledore studied Harry's face, which had suddenly aged at least twenty years as he voiced the dread task awaiting him. The boy had already prepared himself to die in order to rid the world of Voldemort. Dumbledore was saddened that such a decision had been forced on Harry so soon in his life. "I'm going to trust your instincts, Harry. Do you mean to share this with all of them or just Ron and Hermione?"

Harry glanced over at his friends, looked back at Dumbledore and replied, "All of them."

Dumbledore turned back to Harry's friends, who were surprised that a seemingly simple request had resulted in such a serious consultation. "You may go with us, but you must promise to keep what you see a secret, or there will be very serious consequences. Do I make myself clear? No one but the four of you can know about these things," he murmured to the young people.

"We promise," they agreed, their eyes wide. What had they got into?

"Harry, are you certain?" he asked the boy.

"Yes."

"All right then, we're off. And I'll treat you all to an ice cream afterwards, shall I? I could do with a butterscotch sundae with Fizzing Whizbee sprinkles," he said with a smile that crinkled up his whole face.

As they got to the opti-wizard shop, Tonks stayed outside the front door while Mad-Eye went all the way through the shop, checking to make it was safe. They'd done this in every building they'd visited. Mad-Eye would guard the back entrance until they were ready to go.

While Moody scouted through the shop, the Headmaster explained to the Harry's friends about the secrecy required, and why it was so important to keep whatever they learned in the shop to themselves. "The opti-wizard will put a Memory Charm on himself to keep from divulging any secrets. If you don't think you can keep this information secret, we can do the same to you. We must protect Harry. He wants you to know about it for your own protection, in case any of you ever needs glasses like the ones he's going to get. But Harry's secret must be kept at all costs. Do you understand?" He got three solemn nods in response.

They entered the shop and were greeted by the owner, Mr. Verre, an ancient, owlish looking man with huge glasses. He was tall but stooped over with age, a large hump on his back. He reached out to shake Dumbledore's hands, long fingers meeting long fingers.

"Ah, Professor Dumbledore! It has been a very long time! How may I help you?"

"Mr. Verre, I'd like you to meet some of my students. This is. . ."

"Harry Potter! I've wondered if you'd allow me to replace those glasses sometime. You've outgrown them, yes? Where did you get them? Are they Muggle manufacture? Such a pleasure to meet you, sir! I'm so honoured!" The man had taken Harry's hand in both of his and was shaking it vigorously through this entire enthusiastic speech.

"Yes, this is Harry Potter," Dumbledore confirmed, "and this is Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley and her brother Ron."

"And do the others need glasses as well?" Mr. Verre said with a cheerful wrinkle in his face that must have been a smile. He had so many wrinkles, it was hard to tell.

"No, just Mr. Potter. The others wanted to watch you work."

"Very well. Step over here, Mr. Potter, and I will take some measurements," the old man invited, gesturing to a stool by a table full of instruments. Harry had never seen anything like them before.

"Um, Professor?" he asked Dumbledore hesitantly. "What are all those things? Will this hurt?"

"No, no, my boy, this won't hurt a bit!" Mr. Verre answered, picking up one instrument after another, apparently trying to decide where to start.

Dumbledore patted Harry reassuringly on the shoulder. "It's not painful or invasive in any way. Just relax, you'll be fine," he said with a smile.

"Let's see your glasses," Mr. Verre said, holding out one long, claw-like hand. "Ah. Yes. Muggle-made. Apparently damaged, but nicely restored." He looked up at Dumbledore. "Your work?"

"No, actually it was Harry who mended them," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Ah, wonderful!" the opti-wizard replied. He finished examining Harry's glasses, then lifted an instrument that resembled a magnifying glass, except that it had small appendages with a wide variety of tips all around the circle of metal holding the lens. "Which is your wand hand, Mr. Potter?"

"My right," said Harry, still a bit nervous. He honestly couldn't remember much about his last eye exam, but he was positive there were no pointy things close to his eye, and it looked like. . .yes, the opti-wizard was raising the instrument to his eye. Harry tried not to flinch.

"Fine, fine. Look through here with your right eye, then, please." When he held the instrument up to Harry's face, the small appendages whirled around in what appeared to be some kind of organized pattern as the man looked at Harry's eye.

Harry flinched as they touched his face, but each touch was light and lasted barely a moment, so he finally began to relax about the process.

Mr. Verre stopped and made some notes on a piece of parchment, then held the lens up again. "Left, please." He repeated the procedure and made more notes. He held various other instruments up to Harry's eyes, asking him what he could see through various lenses, what shapes or colours appeared in different boxes, and so forth, humming happily the entire time. At one point, he asked Harry if he noticed any particular smell when he looked through the instrument.

Harry thought it all very odd, and quite unlike what little he remembered of previous eye exams.

When the opti-wizard had used every instrument, he bustled to the back and came out with a temporary frame and a box of lenses. "Let's try some of these, shall we?" He put a pair of lenses in the frame and put it on Harry's face. "How's that?"

"Erm. . .it's making me dizzy," Harry replied uneasily.

"Dear, dear, let me see. Ah, try this then," he said, putting a different set of lenses in the frames. This procedure went on through several sets of lenses until they found the right combination of prism, strength and curvature to suit Harry's eyes. "Now then, frames. What style do you want? I have quite a variety."

"Yeah, Harry, try on some different ones, let's see how you look," Hermione agreed.

He tried on small rectangular frames, rimless frames, oval frames, square frames, every kind of frame imaginable and didn't like any of them. Ginny liked some, Hermione liked others, Ron laughed at a lot of them. Finally, Harry walked to the rack of frames and picked up round ones like the ones he'd worn all his life and put them on. "Well?"

"Well what?" Hermione said. "They look just like your old frames."

"Do you like them?" he persisted.

"On anyone else, I wouldn't, Harry. But on you – they're you. I do like them. Which of the others did you like best?" Hermione asked. They all could tell his heart wasn't in this task, that he just wanted to get it over with. But they also knew that, if he had to live with these glasses for a long time, he should be happy with them.

"Honestly? I've always liked my glasses. I think I look silly in these other frames. I like these," he said seriously.

"Then that's what you should get. They look great on you, Harry. The others were getting too small for your face," said Ginny.

"OK, then. These frames," he said with a small smile, handing them to Mr. Verre.

"Lovely choice, young man. Your friends are right, they do suit your face quite well." Mr. Verre headed to the back of his shop to start making lenses for Harry's glasses, but Dumbledore stopped him.

"Harry needs a 'special order' pair of glasses," he said with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh! A special order! Well, that's different. What powers do you want on them?"

"Give them everything you have," Dumbledore instructed.

"Yes, I can do that. It will take a little longer. Shall we say an hour then?"

"Yes, an hour will be fine," Dumbledore replied.

"Erm. . .how much are these going to cost me?" Harry asked nervously.

"With every possible option, one hundred and eighty galleons."

"ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY! That's. . .that's. . ." Harry was dumbfounded.

"Mr. Verre," Hermione interrupted, "maybe we could come to an arrangement?"

"What kind of arrangement?"

"You can advertise that you are the 'official supplier of Harry Potter's glasses' in exchange for a serious discount on his glasses."

Harry and the rest looked at Hermione in shock. "Hermione! These are supposed to be a secret!"

"I didn't say he had to say anything about the secret part. But everyone knows you wear glasses. Wouldn't it be good for his business to be known as the place where 'The Boy Who

Lived' gets his glasses? I think in exchange for advertising, he should let you have the glasses for twenty galleons."

"Twenty galleons! My dear girl, do you know how much work and expense goes into a pair of these glasses?" Verre said squeakily.

"No, sir, I don't. But I do know the value of advertising, and I noticed you are not the only opti-wizard on Diagon Alley. Wouldn't you like to have more business?" She looked at Dumbledore to make certain she wasn't making an error of judgment. "There's nothing wrong with this idea, is there, Professor? It can't get Harry in any trouble, and it will benefit Mr. Verre as well, right?"

Dumbledore was chuckling. "I think you're on to something here, Miss Granger. Go right on with your negotiation."

"I think you're asking too little, Hermione," Ron said with a grin, getting into the spirit of the thing. "I think he should pay Harry AND give him his glasses for free!"

"Yes, I like that better too. All right, Mr. Verre, how about you pay Harry, let's see, if you have ads in the Knight Bus and the best bookstores on Diagon Alley and in Hogsmeade, and Madam Malkin's, in the Leaky Cauldron and Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, and the *Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly*. . .hmmm. You should give him his glasses for free, and pay him five hundred galleons for the use of his picture and name."

"Hermione!" Harry said in a strangled voice, absolutely astounded. "I. . ."

"Hush, Harry, I'm negotiating," she said imperiously. Verre was obviously pondering what she was saying.

Ron leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, "Hermione's going to get you paid for your picture being used – that's better than you're doing with the Quidditch poster, isn't it?"

Harry thought about that a moment and said, "Yeah. I do need to talk to Colin about that," in a grumpy voice.

"I'll give you two hundred and fifty galleons and not a knut more," Verre said.

"Six hundred," Hermione stated emphatically. "And with every counter-offer, I go higher!"

"Six hundred? Are you insane?"

"Seven."

Verre blustered for a moment, then cried, "Seven! That's my final offer!"

"And the glasses?"

"And the glasses."

"Seven hundred galleons and the glasses in exchange for Harry's name and likeness in your advertising for say. . .a year?"

"Done."

"And done!" Hermione said triumphantly. "We'll need to write up a contract stating exactly where you can use Harry's photo – he does have his image to think about. His photo can't be anywhere that isn't a nice place to display it. And Harry gets to choose which photo you'll be using. You can't use just any picture you find."

"I don't advertise in such places," Verre said with pride, "and I'd be pleased to use the image Mr. Potter wishes presented. It will be an honour to have him advertising my work."

"Then once we agree to a written contract, we're in business!" Hermione said with an exultant smile.

Harry looked at Ron, bewildered. "What just happened here?"

"Dunno, but I think what it boils down to is you getting free glasses and money to boot. Not a bad day's work, eh?" He grinned at Hermione, quite proud of her negotiation.

As they walked toward the ice cream parlour, Harry said, "Hermione, what was all that about back there?"

"It's about time you got some good out of being famous, Harry. There's no reason for you to pay for things like glasses. I'll bet we could do the same thing with Madam Malkin for your robes!"

"Oh, no, you don't! I have enough people cross with me for being famous already! Thanks for what you did, but let's leave it at that, all right?" he said earnestly.

Hermione deflated. "Oh. All right. I'm sorry."

"No, Hermione, I do appreciate what you did," he said hurriedly. "You were brilliant! I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I'm glad I saved that money – and I'm making more! That's great! But. . ."

"I understand. Sorry, I got carried away a bit."

"No problem. And as my agent, you get a percentage, right?" Harry said with a smile.

"No, Harry, you don't have to. . ."

"Yes I do. You earned it!" He smiled at the glow on Hermione's cheeks.

At the ice cream parlour, Dumbledore bought sundaes for the group, then walked off while enjoying his. He had some other errands to do and would eat his ice cream on the way. Tonks and Moody sat at a table nearby, keeping an eye on the kids. As the four friends enjoyed their ice cream, Harry suddenly stiffened.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Colin Creevey," he grumbled. He got up and strode over to the small table where the enthusiastic boy and his brother and father were sitting down to a snack. "Colin, I need a word with you," Harry said.

"Hi, Harry!" both boys chirped.

"This is our dad," Dennis said. "Dad, this is Harry Potter!"

"Very nice to meet you, Mr. Creevey," Harry said politely. "Hello, Dennis."

"A pleasure, Harry. The boys have told me so much about you," Mr. Creevey said amiably.

"What can I do for you, Harry?" Colin said eagerly.

"I suppose we should speak in private," Harry said, uncomfortable with the idea of having the confrontation he was planning in front of the boys' father.

"Did you like the Quidditch poster?" Dennis said excitedly. "I got one of your Famous Wizard cards the other day! It was brilliant!"

"Erm. . .that's what I wanted to speak to you about, Colin," Harry began.

"Isn't it great? My photos are published now!" Colin enthused.

"It would be great except you never asked ME if I minded you doing it," Harry said sternly. He was fighting to control his temper. He really liked Colin when the boy wasn't shoving a camera or a photo he wanted signed in his face, but Colin had gone too far this time. "And you gave the Famous Wizard card people a lot of information about me, too, didn't you?"

"Yeah, they did a good job of getting it right, too!" Colin said excitedly. He still hadn't noticed Harry was angry.

Harry sighed. Colin could be so thick sometimes. He pulled a chair up and sat down facing the boy. "Colin. I am a private citizen. I am not a rock star or a politician. And I'm a minor. It's not right to publish pictures of me without my permission."

Mr. Creevey said, "Colin? You did that without Harry's permission?"

"Uh. . .yes?" Colin looked from Harry to his dad and back to Harry again, finally twigging on that he was in trouble.

"Colin, that's not only rude, it's illegal," his dad said sternly. "Harry, I do photography as a hobby and I've had a few pictures published and in photography shows. The boys have watched me work for years. I can't have made it clear to them about getting photo releases before publishing photos of private citizens. I'm very sorry this happened."

"Thank you. That doesn't make up for it though. I have a seriously hard time at school from people who hate me for being the 'famous Harry Potter' and now this card and poster are going to make things much worse," Harry grumbled.

"How can we make it up to you?" Mr. Creevey asked.

Harry thought a minute. He'd planned the confrontation, but not exactly what it would take to satisfy him. He suddenly had an idea. "Colin, I'll bet you're making good money on those photos, aren't you?"

Colin brightened. "Oh, yeah, it's fantastic! I'm making pots of money! They're selling like hotcakes!"

"OK, here's how you'll learn your lesson," Harry said with an uncompromising look on his face. "You, your dad and I are going to Gringotts. We're going to have them draw up a legal contract stating that a percentage of whatever you're making will be put in an account to pay me for the use of my image." He turned to Mr. Creevey. "What percentage do you usually pay people?"

"It varies, but usually around ten to twenty percent."

"All right. You will pay me twenty percent of your proceeds. And the account the money goes into will be set aside for those who have lost family members to Voldemort and the Death Eaters. It may not be much, but it will be a way to help those who need it."

"Wow, that's great!" Colin said with excitement, pulling parchment and a quill out of his bag and digging around for his ink. "How do you spell 'altruistic?"'

"What for?" Harry asked, unnerved that Colin thought his 'punishment' was a cool thing.

"I'm going to add it to the back of your Famous Wizard card! 'Altruistic humanitarian, generous to a fault' – how does that sound? And how do you spell it?"

"Oh, no, you're not!" Harry said, a dangerous glint in his eye.

Colin finally realized he'd pushed his hero too far. He put his parchment and quill down and said, "Uh, OK, Harry, whatever you want."

"You can keep producing the poster and the card, as they are, but I also want you to produce Gryffindor Quidditch posters with each player, and one with the whole team. That will help take the focus off of me," Harry said. "You can do them for all the House teams if you want. And you will give each team member twenty percent of the proceeds of their posters – you will have a written agreement with each one, and permission from the parents or guardians of those who are underage, *before* you send their picture to the publisher. AND you'll let them look at the pictures to make sure they approve of them. And you will NOT publish pictures of them without their and their parents' approval – in writing! Agreed?"

"Great, that's a fabulous idea, Harry!" Colin replied. "Thanks!"

"It's only fair," he conceded. He took a deep breath and said, "Colin, you are an excellent photographer. I'm very happy about your success. But I don't like it that your success involves me. Please stop selling my photos and making posters of me and so forth unless you *ask me first!* OK?"

Mr. Creevey reached across the table and rapped his knuckles gently on his older son's head. "Is he getting through to you, lad?"

Colin looked from Harry to his dad and back again. He gulped. "Yes. I'm sorry, Harry. It seemed like such a good idea. . . ."

"It was, except for the fact I didn't want to be involved. Finish your ice cream so we can go to Gringotts and get this sorted out. My godfather isn't here right now, but I'll get him to come and sign it as soon as he can," Harry replied. "Thank you for understanding, Mr. Creevey. I hope I haven't spoiled your day."

"No, Harry, it's important the boys learn how to do business the right way. And I'm honoured to meet you, honestly. I've heard so many wonderful things about you. I can see why the boys respect you so much."

Harry blushed and studied his trainers while the Creeveys finished their snack. When they were done, Harry and his friends and the Creeveys went to Gringotts to set up the legal paperwork and the bank account Harry had described.

It was late afternoon. Harry wore his new suit and dress shoes and his new glasses, Remus had on his new suit and shoes as well, and Hermione had made sure the Weasleys were properly attired for a Muggle funeral. ("Dark blue will be fine, not sky blue. No, Fred, you can't wear lime green. Dark green is better.") A few glamour charms later, the Weasleys all looked perfectly acceptable for a solemn muggle occasion. On their way to the funeral, Harry insisted they stop at the Dursleys' house. When they got there, he walked into the back garden and took out the pocket knife Casey had given him for his birthday, neatly cutting off a beautiful pink rosebud with a short stem.

"I ordered flowers for you, Harry," Hermione said, confused at his actions.

"I always give. . .gave. . .Casey a pink rose whenever we had a date," Harry said stiffly, determined not to cry again. Hermione made a small squeaking sound and backed away from him. He was methodically de-thorning the rose stem as he spoke, cutting toward his thumb as he'd learned to do from Doug, despite Casey asking him to do it the other way. He almost smiled at the memory, then pushed the thought to the back of his mind. With a shudder, he remembered the other pocket knife he'd had, the magical one Sirius had given him, which had been destroyed in the Ministry of Magic when Harry was trying to rescue Sirius. Two pocket knives, two deaths. *No. Don't go there,* he thought, nearly mangling the rose in his sudden realization.

"WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU LOT DOING IN MY GARDEN!" Vernon snarled as he stormed out of the house.

Harry rounded on his uncle, so tall now he towered over the man. "I grew these flowers, every single one of them," he said in a dangerously quiet voice, a steely glint in his eyes. "I planted,

fertilized, pruned, sprayed, and weeded every single thing out here. I will take flowers from here when I need them."

Vernon didn't know what to make of his nephew dressed so elegantly in a fine suit, with a large group of people with him. Most of these people had red hair, so they had to be part of that wizard family who had crashed into his living room. Wary of more trouble from wizards, Vernon backed down, sputtering incoherent noises as he moved back toward the house. Harry glared at him until the man was back inside the house, then turned to go, leading his friends and godfather to the church where the Ashers' service was to be held.

In the vestibule of the church, a man greeted them. Hermione said, "We're here for the Asher service, please," and the man shook their hands and held the door open for them to enter the nave.

A number of people were already seated, but the service had not yet started. In the front of the altar stood four coffins, three large ones and one tiny one. Harry caught his breath and stumbled in the doorway when he saw them. Remus put his arm around him and murmured, "We don't have to do this."

"I have to do this," Harry replied, straightening his shoulders and taking a deep breath before taking another step forward. *Left foot, right foot, left foot, right, left, right, keep moving, Potter,* the boy told himself. Before he got to the coffins, a middle-aged woman approached and held out her hand to him.

"You must be Harry Potter," she said, a tremulous smile on her face. "I hoped I'd get to meet you."

"Erm. . .hello," Harry replied, not knowing who she was or what he should do. Remus stayed at his side, his hand on Harry's shoulder, and the rest of the group stayed close behind them.

"I'm Emily Thomas, Doug's sister," the woman said. "I've heard so very much about you. I thought you'd come – I hoped you would. I need to talk to you."

Harry's heart sank. *She knows*, he thought. *She knows it's my fault they're dead.*

"Doug thought the world of you," Mrs. Thomas said as she drew Harry aside and sat on a pew nearby, silently inviting Harry to sit with her. "He talked to me frequently about the mosaics you were making, and how excited he was that you'd discovered such a talent while working for him."

A tear escaped Harry's control and slid down his face unheeded. "He. . .he was so good to me," he murmured. "Such a good man, so kind. . .the whole family was that way."

Mrs. Thomas smiled as tears filled her eyes. "Yes, that's true. You knew them well, then?"

"Yes, I think so," Harry replied.

"I have to sell the shop and the tools in it. I'm their heir and have no use for any of those things. I hate the idea of selling it, but there's nothing else to do. I need to talk to you about your mosaics."

Harry thought he knew where she was going with this line of conversation. "The tables that are paid for are completed and ready to go – they were to be delivered yesterday, actually. They have tags on them with the owners' names and addresses. The others I was doing on spec, so there aren't any customers waiting for them. Some of them I was doing on my own time as presents for my friends."

"Yes, I thought that might be the case. You do beautiful work, Harry. I understand why Doug was so excited about it." The woman paused. "Is this your father?" she said, looking at Remus.

"Oh, no. My parents are dead. This is my godfather, Remus Lupin. I'm sorry, I forgot my manners. These are my friends. This is Hermione Granger. That's Fred, George, Ron and Ginny Weasley, and their dad, Arthur," he finished, indicating each Weasley in turn.

"I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances, but I do so appreciate your coming," she said quietly to Harry's friends. She turned back to Harry. "This is the key to the shop. The solicitor inventoried everything today, so the estate is all in order. I'd like you to take whatever you need to keep working on your mosaics – tools, supplies, whatever – as well as the ones that are not sold. Doug would want you to have those things – they're yours to keep. You should finish them, maybe make some more. I understand there's a table saw as well as a good many hand tools involved in what you're doing."

"Yes," Harry agreed. This woman was making a very generous offer. Those tools alone were worth a lot of money. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. You leave the key under the flowerpot on the porch when you're done, all right?"

"Yes. Thank you very much."

"And another thing," Mrs. Thomas said, pulling a shopping bag from under the seat. "I found this when I was looking for a dress for Casey to wear. She had decorated a box with photos of you and little stickers and. . ." she broke off, tears suddenly streaming down her face. She took a moment to control herself, not noticing Harry was battling tears himself. "She obviously thought a great deal of you, Harry. I know her parents felt the same way. Apparently, she kept things you gave her in there. Lots of dried up flowers, ticket stubs from the cinema, a card with a picture of you on it. It's an odd kind of picture, really, but you look so happy." She reached out and touched his hand, leaning in to look at him closely. "You have an absolutely wonderful smile, do you know that? Seeing your smile in that picture made my heart lift a bit. Such a lovely smile. . . ." She sat back, looked at the bag in her hands again and sighed heavily, lost in her own thoughts for a few moments. Harry had no idea what to say. "I couldn't make head or tail of what that card said on the back. I suppose it's a joke of some kind?" she asked, looking up at him curiously.

"Erm, yes. A joke card one of my friends made," he said uncomfortably, hoping he wouldn't have to explain the wizard photo.

"Well, then. I have the box here, with all its contents. I thought you should have it," she said, offering the bag to him.

With trembling hands, Harry took the bag, then very hesitantly reached inside for the box. He barely glanced at it before he had to put it away again, holding his breath to hold back a sob. He held the bag tightly in both hands. "Thank you," he choked out.

"One other thing, dear boy, and then I'll leave you to. . .well. . .um. . .I was wondering. Would you like to say something during the service?"

The Weasleys and Hermione made a collective gasp. They couldn't see how Harry was managing to handle what he was dealing with now. Speaking at this funeral would be more than he could bear, wouldn't it? Hermione put a gentle hand on his shoulder, leaned in and whispered in his ear, "You don't have to do this, Harry. Just say 'no, thanks,' and leave it at that."

Harry heard her, but he also heard Casey's voice in his head, talking with him about having a memorial service for Sirius, and how he needed closure to get through his grief. He took a deep breath and blew it out, lifted his eyes to Mrs. Thomas and said, "OK. I don't know what to say, though."

"Just say whatever's in your heart, lad. That will be fine. And if you decide you don't want to, that's not a problem. I just thought you might . . ."

"Yes. I'll do it."

Mrs. Thomas patted his hands, which still clutched Casey's box. "Thank you." She nodded at the rest of the group, then stood up to greet other people who were arriving for the service.

Harry looked lost. He sat staring into space, his knuckles white as he held the box tightly. He realized he was crushing it and released it suddenly, nearly dropping it.

Remus caught it. "Shall I hold this for you?" he offered.

Harry looked up at Remus, looking so startled it was as if he didn't remember his godfather was with him. He glanced around at the others, then at the coffins in front of the room and the line of people passing by them. Harry stood up and started to walk slowly toward the line, not noticing when Remus removed the shopping bag from his hand and passed it back to Ron to hold. As they neared the coffins, Hermione noticed which flowers were Harry's and pointed them out to him. Then she showed him some her parents and she had sent as well.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry whispered, his head bowed. "They're beautiful. I appreciate it. And please, thank your parents for me, too."

"I will."

The first coffin was Doug's. Harry held onto the side of the coffin and gazed down into his friend's face. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Asher," he murmured. "Thank you for everything." Remus kept his arm around Harry, squeezing his shoulder when the boy trembled. At the second coffin, Margaret's, Harry said, "Thank you for being such a good friend – and for all the good food." He looked at Remus and said, "She was like Mrs. Weasley, always trying to fatten me up." At Casey's coffin, Harry was shaking hard. No tears escaped his control this time, but he couldn't speak for a while. He delicately put the rose in her hair, tucked behind her ear as she

had done with every rose he'd given her. His hand brushed her cheek – then he recoiled in shock. "She's . . .hard!"

Remus leaned over and murmured in Harry's ear, "That's something Muggles do to prepare people for funerals. She's not there, Harry. This is just her . . . shell. Her spirit is free now."

Harry looked at his godfather, his face and posture showing the strain as he tried to control his emotions. "Yes. Her shell. That's why I had to come. To understand that she's gone and won't be back." He nodded, his face bleak. He desperately wanted to kiss her one last time, but the thought of kissing those lips, those sweet, tender, soft lips that were now hard and cold, was more than he could bear. He bowed his head, his hands clenched tightly on the side of her coffin, remembering the first time he'd kissed her, the time he'd protected her from other people peeping at her bared breasts when her swim suit top broke, her head on his shoulder at the cinema, her joyful squeals as she held tightly to him on her first broom ride, snogging through the credits of the films, her easy acceptance of his being a wizard, their laughter, their lunches. . .their love. So many lovely memories of a warm, vibrant, beautiful young woman. He shuddered with a stifled sob but refused to cry. He'd be strong for her if it killed him.

At Patricia's little coffin, Harry sobbed aloud. "This is so unfair," he moaned. "She was still a baby." Remus pulled him into his arms and held him until he was calmer. They went and sat in a pew with the Weasleys and Hermione, all of whom were weeping, mourning the passing of a kind family who had taken Harry into their hearts.

When Harry was called upon to speak during the service, Remus reminded him he didn't have to do it. "Yes, I do," he replied and moved to the podium. He lifted his eyes and looked at the crowded room. There was a huge turnout for the service. He recognized co-workers and customers among the crowd as he cleared his throat and tried to organize his thoughts. He squared his shoulders and began.

"My name is Harry Potter. I. . .I worked for Mr. Asher, and Casey . . .Casey was . . .my girlfriend. When Mrs. Thomas asked me to say something here, I didn't know what I could possibly say. It. . . hurts too much. But then. . . . ." He took a deep breath, and then soldiered on. "When I met the Ashers, their dog had run away, and he ran right up to me. I'm. . . ." How much should he tell? He heard Casey's voice in the back of his mind. *Be honest, ! Spit it out! It will be good for you!* He could almost hear her chuckling as she encouraged him to face his demons and move on. He blew out a deep breath and got back on task. "I'm an orphan and had to wear hand-me-down clothes until Mr Asher started paying me and I could buy my own things. He even took me shopping because I didn't know how." Harry had to stop a moment before going on. "When I met the Ashers, I looked like a tramp. But Mrs. Asher and Casey looked past my appearance and saw a worthwhile person. Mrs. Asher had me contact her husband about a job, and he, too, looked past my appearance, my lack of references, my lack of experience, and hired me. Then while I was working for him, he discovered I had a talent for mosaics and he let me work on those rather than just doing labour around the shop as I'd been hired to do. They encouraged me, fed me, helped me in every way they could – and they even let me go out with their daughter. She was. . .she brought light into my life. My godfather had recently died and I didn't know how to mourn him. She helped me through that and helped me learn how to laugh again. We became friends, good friends, and then we started dating. Oh. . .I just realized." He stopped as a single tear ran down his face. "Today's her sixteenth birthday. What an awful way to have a birthday." He rubbed at his eyes, keeping his promise to Casey not to cry here, then continued. "I don't know how well you all knew

this family, but they were the kindest, sweetest, most amazing people. . .and they will be missed. I will never forget any of them. It was an honour to know them." With that, he sat down.

Harry didn't remember much of the rest of the service. All he remembered was feeling relieved when Remus said they didn't have to go to the graveside. He couldn't have borne seeing those boxes put down in the ground, dirt thrown over them. That would have been too much.

The next thing Harry knew, they were at the tile shop and the Weasleys, Hermione and Remus were carefully pulling his mosaics off the shelves, quietly exclaiming over the beauty of the designs. They set all his work on the floor, as well as his big box of tile, marble and granite scraps, the boards he used for backing the mosaics, his grout supplies, and the tools he picked out, then put Shrinking Charms on everything so it would all fit in their pockets. In a short time, they were on their way back to Grimmauld Place, with Harry as silent as a statue among them. The Weasleys were uncharacteristically quiet, respecting his feelings.

When they got to the house, Harry sat on a chair in the living room with his suit coat unbuttoned and his tie loosened, elbows on his knees, staring into space, ignoring the movement around him. The Weasleys, Hermione and Remus were emptying their pockets of miniaturized tools, marble, granite and tile pieces, and the mosaics themselves.

"Where shall we put this stuff, Dad?" George asked quietly.

"Well, I suppose we could put the tools and supplies in the basement. Harry may want some of these mosaics to stay out. They'll certainly brighten up this old house," he said with a smile. "Harry?" Arthur said, turning to the silent boy, "where would you like us to put these things? Do you want to keep some of them in here? Or where?" He held out a tiny mosaic, the size of a galleon due to the Shrinking Spell.

"These designs are so beautiful. I can't quite make out what's on this one. . . ." Arthur mused as he studied the tiny object. "Well, how silly of me," he muttered, then enlarged that mosaic to full size. When it expanded, Arthur could see that it was a circular piece about a foot across, with a pink marble rose in the centre of an ivory marble heart set in a sparkly grey granite background, with the same granite used to make small letters around the rose: "H.P. C.A."

Realizing what it was, Arthur moved to put it gently on the table by the doorway, but just as he reached out to lay it down, Fred tripped on the tattered end of the rug and stumbled into him. The mosaic flew through the air, seemingly in slow motion, catching the light as it turned. Arthur and Fred tried to catch it and wound up banging their heads together. The mosaic hit the floor with a loud "CRACK" right at Harry's feet. A few pieces fell out of it.

Harry came out of his daze and looked down at the mosaic, which was fractured across the centre. He reached down slowly to pick it up, gathering up the pieces that had fallen out when it hit the floor.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry!" Arthur began miserably. "I didn't mean. . ."

"I'm sorry! It was so clumsy of me!" Fred offered, devastated at what had happened. "Shall I fix it for you? I think I can do it."

Harry glanced up at them, then back at the damaged ornament in his hands. "It's OK. It's just broken tiles anyway. And she's. . .she isn't. . .she won't. . . ." Tears filled his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. He clutched the mosaic to his chest and walked slowly out of the room, leaving his friends staring after him in shocked silence.

"I'd better go and see. . ." Remus said after a few stunned moments, moving to follow Harry across the hall and up the stairs. He stopped in the doorway. *THUD. THUD. THUD.*

"What the devil is that?" Arthur said, turning his head to try to locate the source of the sound, which was coming from upstairs.

"It's probably Harry banging his head on the wall," Ron said solemnly. "He does that sometimes."

Remus took the steps three at a time, threw open the door and found Ron was right. Harry was sitting on the floor in the corner of the darkened room, the mosaic clutched to his chest, banging his head hard on the wall every few seconds. He wasn't crying. He was just banging his head over and over. *THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD.*

"Harry, stop it! Why do you do that to yourself? Stop!" Remus cried, grabbing the boy's shoulders and trying to hold him.

Harry fought back, refusing to be comforted or touched. When Remus left him alone, he went back to banging his head on the wall, but if Remus touched him, he was in for a fight.

"Harry. Harry, listen to me. Harry!" The heartsick boy seemed oblivious to his godfather's voice.

"Here, maybe he'll listen to me," Hermione offered. She sat by Harry and tried to talk to him, tried to stop him from banging his head on the wall, but he just went on as he had been, with no change of expression or of the rhythm of his head-banging, as if nobody was there at all but him.

"He's going to get a concussion if he doesn't stop, or even worse," Remus said. "Get back, Hermione. I don't want you hurt." Remus picked up the distraught boy and held onto him, despite the fact Harry was as big as Remus, and was fighting his godfather desperately. Remus moved to the bed and wrapped his arms tightly around his godson. "I've got you, Harry. You're going to be OK. We'll get through this. Hang on." He sat and rocked the boy, who finally stopped struggling and started crying despairingly, holding on to his godfather as if his very life depended on it. "Shhh, Harry, there, there," Remus murmured as he rocked the boy, doing his best to comfort him. He tucked Harry's head under his chin, gently rubbed the boy's back, and did whatever he could think of to calm him.

"Are you going to be all right here?" Arthur asked quietly.

"Yes, I think so," Remus replied in a soft voice.

"Let us know if you need anything," Arthur said, then turned to leave, herding his wide-eyed children and Hermione out of the room.

After holding him so long Remus's legs were getting numb from the boy's weight in his lap, Harry finally calmed down, a sniffle escaping now and then. "Harry?" Remus murmured.

"Hmm."

"Would you like to change out of your suit?"

"'K." Remus helped him change into a t-shirt and shorts, then they sat on the side of the bed together.

"Are you hungry?"

Harry barely shook his head.

"Thirsty?" There was no response at all to this question. "Do you want to talk?"

No response.

"Do you want to sleep?"

Harry nodded and lay down, curling up in foetal position. Remus pulled the blankets over him. "I'll sit with you for a while, all right?"

He barely nodded. He still held the mosaic in his hand.

Remus sat rubbing the boy's back, trying to get him to relax. He didn't know what else to say or do.

"Remus?" Harry's voice was hoarse and whispery, almost not there.

"Yes?"

"Why is Voldemort after me? Why is he killing everyone I care about? What did I do to deserve this? I've tried to be a good person. Casey. . .Casey. . .Casey and her family. . .they were the best. Why . . .?" His voice broke.

The questions hung in the air between them. Remus sighed. "I wish I could tell you, Harry. I honestly don't know any of the answers except that you did nothing to deserve any of this. None of this is your fault, you know."

"Yes it is! My fault, all my fault!" Harry cried and started moaning. "Mum, Dad, Cedric, Sirius, Casey and her family, all those Muggles. . .the Order members who died that night. . .all my fault. All my fault." This litany of guilt went on for hours. Nothing Remus did could break through to the grief-stricken boy. Eventually, Harry was so exhausted he fell asleep, but he had terrible nightmares, during which his body flailed around and he tore at the covers and his clothing. He got very little actual rest.

Dumbledore showed up early in the morning with a Pensieve under his arm. Ginny had taken the night shift because it was still the full moon and Remus had to be locked in the basement

for his transformation. She met Dumbledore at the door to Harry's room. "Happy birthday, Miss Weasley. It is today, correct?"

"Yes, Professor. Thanks," she said with a small smile.

"Have I missed your party?" he asked kindly.

"None of us feel much like having a party," she said quietly.

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry," he replied. He thought a moment and reached into his sleeve, pulling out a gigantic, fragrant red peony. "A bit out of season for these, I'm afraid, but I am rather fond of them, so I conjure them when the occasion warrants. Happy birthday, Miss Weasley."

Ginny smiled, taking the flower and breathing in its rich perfume. "Thank you, Professor. I'll put it in water and set it by Harry's bed so he can smell it too."

"That's a very nice idea. How is he doing?"

"No real change. Extremely depressed the few times he's been awake, and he won't eat. I have to nearly force his potions down his throat. He just doesn't want them."

"I'm not terribly fond of potions either. I think I may have a solution that will help him get back on his feet," the old Wizard said with a small smile.

"That would be wonderful!" Ginny replied. "What can I do to help?"

"Go find Remus and ask him to join us, would you? He should be fine by now."

Ginny left on her errand and Dumbledore sat on the edge of Harry's bed. The motion of the bed as he sat down roused the boy from sleep.

"Hello, Professor," he muttered.

"Hello, Harry. I think I have something that will help you get through this hard time. I wish I'd thought of it before."

"What is it?" Harry rubbed his eyes blearily, trying to focus.

"I brought you a Pensieve. It's yours to keep. I think you, as I do, have too many thoughts in your head. As I told you before, taking thoughts out of my head and putting them in the Pensieve helps me to see patterns and examine my memories and ideas from different angles. Sometimes I just put thoughts in there that I prefer to deal with after some time has passed, which is what I think will be helpful to you."

Harry struggled to sit up, his covers so tangled he could barely move despite Ginny's repeated attempts to straighten them. When he was finally upright, he picked up his glasses and put them on. He took the mosaic out from under his pillow, gazed sadly at it for a moment, then resignedly put it in the drawer of his bedside table, closing the drawer slowly and staring at the mosaic until it was completely out of sight. He shuddered a little, then turned to his headmaster, gazing at him resolutely. "OK. I'm ready. How do I do it?"

"Get your wand," Dumbledore began, watching him pick it up from the table. "Now concentrate hard on a thought or memory – something not stressful to you will be good for a start." He watched as the boy focused his eyes on something far away. Dumbledore could see him working to find one quiet thought or memory to start with out of the tumult in his mind. "Got it?" Harry nodded. "Good. Concentrate on that one thought, then touch your temple with your wand. Pull it slowly away and the thought will come out. Then touch your wand to the inside of the Pensieve, and the thought will be deposited there."

"Will I remember the thought?" Harry asked suddenly, looking nervous.

"Whatever you put in the Pensieve, you won't remember that memory or thought itself – just that it exists. The actual memory will be fuzzy, like a dream you once had. Pick an easy memory for your first try, something simple, something pleasant."

"Um. . .pleasant. OK. Meeting Ron on the train the first time."

"Excellent. Concentrate on that."

Harry concentrated on that memory, touched the wand to his head and then watched a silvery thread come out of his black hair and land with a plop in the Pensieve. His eyes widened.

"Well done, Harry!" Dumbledore said with a warm smile. "Now do that again, with another pleasant thought."

"Um. . .getting my Nimbus 2000 at breakfast."

"That's a good choice. Go ahead."

He complied, and another silvery thread came out of his dark hair, attached to his wand, then landed with a soft "plop" next to the first one in the Pensieve.

"Now you've got it!" Dumbledore enthused. "Do you remember those thoughts exist?"

"The ones in the Pensieve? Something about Ron and a train, and my first broom?"

"Exactly. You can't remember the details, the memory is fuzzy, but you know it exists."

"Right."

"All right then, I think you're ready to try something harder. Try concentrating on a less pleasant memory."

Harry's face became stony as he confronted the pain within him. "Got it."

"A single memory, Harry, remember, and it can be just a little unpleasant or stressful. Don't try to do a really difficult or uncomfortable memory yet."

Harry nodded, then touched his wand to his head. A thicker silver thread came out and landed in the Pensieve.

"Be careful. Taking out too large a memory at once can be harmful."

Harry glanced up at him and nodded again, then went still a moment before touching his head with his wand again. Another rather thick silvery thread came out.

"What are you removing, Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"Casey."

"Ah. I thought so. Be very careful to remove only one small memory at a time. The last two were a bit big."

Harry nodded again, and screwed up his face in stoic concentration. Tears filled his eyes for a moment, then he blinked them away, rubbing furiously at his eyes with the heels of his hands. He went back to concentrating, then touched the wand to his head again. A massive, writhing ball of silvery threads came out of his head with a loud "pop" and fell into the Pensieve, and Harry fell back on the bed unconscious.

Chapter 10 - The Refiner's Fire

Harry was unconscious for days, but it wasn't a normal kind of unconsciousness. He kept ripping at his covers, tearing at his skin with his fingernails, as if he was trying to tear his heart out. When he wasn't trying to rip himself apart, his arms and legs were flailing wildly, getting him hopelessly tangled in his covers. He was dangerous to anyone taking care of him. Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey and Snape tried several restoratives, potions and charms at various times, but any magical treatment they tried only seemed to make him more ill. Now he was burning up with fever and was lying in bed with his hands in restraints to keep him from hurting himself further or from hurting those caring for him. It was Ginny's turn to look after him.

"Professor," she asked Dumbledore when she came in the room and found him standing over Harry, his hand on Harry's sweaty forehead. "What's really wrong with him? Is all this just from taking out too large a memory for the Pensieve?"

"I'm afraid it's a combination of many things, Miss Weasley. It's the large cluster of memories he removed all at once, combined with grief and terrible, soul-crushing guilt. Harry. . ." The old wizard looked sadder than she'd ever seen him. "Harry is. . . . I'm afraid he may have given up," Dumbledore said sorrowfully. "He's had so very many horrible things happen to him in his life – I think this family's death was just too much for him."

"Is he. . .going to. . .die?" Ginny asked in a small, horrified voice.

"If he doesn't start fighting back, he very well may. He seriously damaged his mind with that cluster of memories he removed, but the mind is a wondrous thing and can heal itself given enough time. His fever is not a normal fever. He's not sick in the usual sense. His mind and his body's resources have been overwhelmed. The only strength he has left at the moment is his magic, and he's a very powerful wizard. His magic is burning him up – that's why he's fevered. This is a very rare illness."

"How do you treat it?" she said hesitantly.

"I must be honest with you. So few wizards have survived this illness, there has never been a particular treatment that we can say truly cures the illness."

"So few?" She gulped. She just had to know. "What's the percentage?"

"In all our records, there are only two known survivors." The old headmaster sighed heavily before going on. "If. . .if Harry makes it, he will be the third."

Ginny sat down hard on the chair by Harry's bed. "Two?" she said in a small voice.

"Yes," Dumbledore said, his face grim. "This illness is called The Refiner's Fire. If a wizard survives it, his magic is much more powerful than it was before he became ill. But most don't survive. Harry has to develop a will to live – he seems to have given up, but at the same time he's angry and frustrated. His rage is not helping, because it's directed at himself. He just won't get better as long as he feels that way."

"What can we do, Professor? I'll do anything I can to help him," she said earnestly.

"I know you will, Miss Weasley," he said kindly, patting her on the shoulder. "You're doing wonderful work here. Just keep caring for him as you have been. I'm not giving up on Harry. He's very strong. He can pull through this. He just needs to fight the illness, not wrestle with his inner demons." Gazing sadly at Harry, he patted Ginny once more on the shoulder and left.

A short time later, Hermione came in. "Any change?"

"No, not really," Ginny said in a weary voice. "Dumbledore did say what it is, though."

"What is it?"

"The Refiner's Fire. It's an extremely rare wizard's disease, and only. . .only two wizards have ever survived it." As she said this, Ginny began to sob.

"No. Oh no," Hermione groaned. She sat next to Ginny and put her arm around the grieving girl. "There has to be some treatment," she began as she wiped tears from her own eyes.

"Dumbledore said there isn't," Ginny whispered, appalled that the headmaster didn't have a solution to the problem. He'd always seemed all-powerful to her.

Hermione shook her head, willing herself to be strong and find a solution to this problem. "There just has to be a treatment, some way to fight this, something we can do. I'll go and do some research. I'll research Muggle things too. Maybe there's something wizards have just missed."

Ginny looked at her friend in disbelief. "You think Dumbledore is mistaken? And you think Muggles have a cure for a magical illness? Harry's magic is burning him up – that's why it's called 'The Refiner's Fire.' If he survives, his magic will be much more powerful."

"Did Professor Dumbledore say who the two wizards were who survived?"

"No. I didn't ask."

Hermione sat thinking a few moments. "Well, I can't just sit here doing nothing. Can I give you a break?"

"No, I'm fine."

"OK. You're good at healer stuff, I'm good at research. I'm off to the libraries, both in Diagon Alley and the Muggle one," Hermione said, giving Ginny a brief hug before she left the room.

Hours later, Hermione sat at dinner with everyone but Remus, who was sitting with Harry at the time. "I found out that in the Muggle world, Harry's symptoms are like catatonia. Children who are the victims of terrorists react the way he is. Usually they're just quiet, but I suppose him fighting with his magic is part of why he's so violent."

"That's probably true," Arthur replied. "What do they do about it, Muggles?"

"They've found if they give a child a teddy bear, they calm down if they're upset, and they heal faster. I think Harry needs a teddy bear."

"A teddy bear?" Ron was stunned. "He's sixteen years old!"

"He's not sixteen right now, not in his mind. He's a victim of lifelong abuse at the hands of the Dursleys, and he's been terrorized by Voldemort – get over it, Ron!" she snapped as he flinched at the name, "his whole life, and he blames himself for all these deaths. I can see why he thinks he's at fault for them, too."

"Those deaths weren't his fault!" Ginny retorted defensively.

"No, but they were connected to him, because those people were in his life. That's why he thinks he's at fault," Hermione reasoned.

"So what do you think we should do?" Ginny asked urgently, realizing Hermione was offering at least some form of action.

"I think he needs to be loved – a lot. Petted, talked to, hugged. I think that may bring him out of this." Hermione sat thinking a while. "Dumbledore has told Harry in the past that one of his greatest strengths is his ability to love. Maybe that's what will bring him back to us. At least, it can't hurt him." She looked around the table, studying the faces of each of Harry's friends in turn. Ron, Ginny, Arthur, Fred, and George all looked stunned at what she said. "Do you have any better ideas?"

"Erm. . .no," Ron muttered. "How do we. . .I mean. . ."

"I'll do it," Ginny said in a determined voice. "It will be good to have something positive to do."

"I'll help you, too," Hermione said. "We can take turns. You boys," she said, looking at the Weasley brothers, "can talk to him about Quidditch, tell him jokes, be his friend. That's probably the best we can do for him."

"Hermione?" said Ginny in a small voice. "Did you find out who the two wizards were who survived this?"

"Yes, I did," Hermione said, a grim look on her face. "You won't believe it."

"Why?"

"They're probably the two most powerful wizards in recorded history. Merlin and Dumbledore. For Harry to join them as a survivor, he's going to have to be very strong. And once he's well – his powers will be unbelievable."

As Remus prepared to go to the basement for the night, he said, "Good work on the research, Hermione. I hope you're right. Let me know how it goes, will you?"

"Of course," Hermione agreed. "Ginny, you've been taking care of him so many hours, you look exhausted. I'll take the first shift with him tonight, all right?"

"I don't mind," Ginny began.

"He's my best friend," Hermione said, tears in her eyes. "Please let me help. This is something I can do."

"All right. Come get me when you need a break – or I'll just come and check on you when I wake up, whichever comes first."

"OK." After Ginny left, Hermione sat and smoothed Harry's hair back from his forehead, held his hand, rubbed his arm, told him silly stories as she thought of them, trying to find cheerful things to talk about. He still fought his restraints from time to time, apparently in the throes of horrible nightmares. He alternated between sweats and chills, fighting through both with equal ferocity. Hermione was soon exhausted from trying to calm him. A few hours later, Ginny showed up.

"It's still the middle of the night. What are you doing here?"

"I just had to see how he was doing, and if your plan was working," Ginny said hopefully. "I couldn't sleep much anyway. How is he?"

"The same. He seems to have lots of nightmares and nothing I say or do is helping." Hermione's concern showed in her face. "I'm so frustrated. I honestly thought. . . ."

"What have you tried?"

"I've talked to him, I even sang to him – as horrid as that sounds. I tried holding his hand, rubbing his forehead. . .I just don't know what else to do."

"You go on to bed, I'll take care of him," Ginny offered. "If I'm going to lose another night's sleep, I may as well be doing something useful."

"What are you going to try?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know yet. I'll let you know if anything seems to work."

"OK. Good luck!" Hermione said as she left the room.

"Thanks. I expect I'll need it," Ginny replied quietly as she looked at Harry's exhausted face. He was grey with fatigue and illness, going rapidly from sweats to chills, still fighting the restraints, but more feebly than before. He was getting weaker and weaker. Ginny got a pan of warm water and a flannel and washed the sweat off of Harry's face, chest and arms. Then she watched him struggle a while longer, talking to him about Quidditch and whatever other light-hearted things she could think of.

"I just can't take this anymore," Ginny said as she watched Harry fighting the restraints on his hands. His wrists were red and raw from his struggles with his bonds. "I'm going to trust that the Harry I know is still inside there somewhere," she said in a firm voice. "Harry, listen to me. It's Ginny. I'm going to untie your hands. Don't hurt me, and don't hurt yourself, either. Listen to me, Harry. If you can calm down, you can stay untied." She took a deep breath and unbuckled one restraint, then the other. He writhed on the bed, flailing his arms and legs wildly a moment, then less wildly. When he slowed down a bit, she said, "I'm going to hold on to you, Harry. I won't let you go. You're safe. Don't hurt me, OK?" and she dived between

his still-moving arms and lay down beside him, wrapping her arms around his heaving chest, laying her head on his shoulder. "I've got you, Harry. You're safe now. You're going to be fine. Please don't hurt me."

Harry writhed on the bed, struggling with whatever demons were in his mind, but as Ginny doggedly held on, he began to quiet, and finally, after a very long half hour or so, he relaxed, dropping his arms around her in a loose embrace, which tightened when he seemed to understand she was actually there, not part of a dream. He sighed, nestled his cheek against her hair and at long last, rested.

Early in the morning, Remus came into the room to find Harry holding Ginny, both of them apparently asleep. Harry was still pale and drawn, but finally calm. Remus walked quietly to the bed, gently feeling his godson's forehead for fever, tenderly smoothing the sweaty hair off his face. Ginny was covered in scratches and bruises, and had a shiner any little boy would be proud of. But she'd apparently won the battle. Harry's hands were unrestrained and he was holding Ginny tightly, as if he was afraid to let go. Remus rubbed his hand over his careworn face, exhausted from his own ordeal, and heartbroken he wasn't able to help Harry through his. He sat in the chair by the bed and watched the teenagers sleep, then drifted off himself with his hand on the boy's shoulder.

A few hours later, Ron and Hermione opened the door to Harry's room to find the three occupants sound asleep. "Bloody hell, look at Ginny! He's beaten her!" Ron cried. The bruises on her face and arms made him sick to his stomach.

"Shhh," Hermione warned. "He didn't know what he was doing. She apparently worked out the right thing to do. He's calm, he's untied and he's got a little bit of colour in his face. Her bruises will heal."

"Hermione, she could be hurt! I need to see how she is!" Ron insisted. He was at the bedside in three long strides. "Ginny? Ginny, can you hear me?" he said softly as he touched his sister's shoulder.

"Mmm?" she murmured as she opened her one good eye. "Ron? Whassup?" she mumbled. She started to lift her head, then realized where she was and relaxed against Harry's shoulder again, afraid to disturb him.

"You've got a bleedin' great shiner, that's what's up!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. They're just bruises. I'm sure Madam Pomfrey can heal them quickly. Don't worry about me right now." She glanced up at Hermione. "How's he look?"

"Better, actually. He's got a little colour in his face, doesn't look so awfully grey," Hermione replied. "Good work, Ginny. Why is he untied?"

"I thought he might actually rest this way, at least if I held him," she whispered in reply. "Don't wake him. I think he's just sleeping now, not unconscious. It's different than before, I can't explain it. He responds if I move a little, and he didn't before." She moved her head away from his shoulder and they all noticed him tightening his arms to keep her in place.

"I hope you're right." Hermione said. "Do you need anything? Do you want me to take a turn with him?"

"No, I'm fine for now, thanks," Ginny replied quietly.

"How about some ice for your eye – or a steak?" Ron asked, concerned.

Ginny smiled at her brother. "No, thanks. I'll manage without them for a while. It doesn't hurt that much."

"Wow, Ginny, you really are a brave Gryffindor," Ron said with a proud grin, touching her shoulder gently.

Hermione turned to Ron and said, "Let's leave them alone." She dragged the reluctant Ron out of the room before he could disturb the occupants' much-needed rest.

Half an hour later, Hermione and Ron returned, laden with trays full of food and drink for breakfast for Remus, Ginny and Harry whenever they awoke. They sat the trays down and looked at the three sleeping people. Ginny woke up with a start and looked around to see who was in the room. Harry murmured something unintelligible and pulled her back down. His movement woke Remus.

"Oh, breakfast! How lovely," Remus said with a smile as he stretched and yawned. "Thank you both." He leaned over Harry and brushed the boy's forehead with his hand. "Any change?" he asked Ginny.

"I think he's asleep instead of unconscious, but I can't be sure," she whispered. "The oddest thing is, when he's having a nightmare, I can feel something tingly coming off him in waves. Sometimes it happens when he's just a bit agitated, but if he's having a bad dream, it's really strong."

"Something tingly?" Remus asked, puzzled.

"Like when your hand's asleep? Kind of tingly like that, but coming out of Harry, not from my arm being asleep or anything."

"Is he doing it now?"

"No. Watch for when he starts moving around a lot again. That's when I feel it."

Ron said, "Ginny, do you need to get up? One of us can take a turn sitting with Harry."

"Not yet. I don't want to disturb him. Give me another hour or two, okay? I'll need a break then, I'm sure."

"OK, we'll check on you in a couple of hours then," Hermione agreed as she and Ron headed for the door.

Remus offered Ginny some breakfast, which she declined, then ate some himself. "Are you all right there, Ginny?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to try to find out when Albus will be back – he had to leave last night on Order business, but said he'd be back this morning. I want to talk to him about that tingling thing," Remus said as he rose to leave. "If you need anything, let someone know, all right?"

"We'll be fine. Thanks." She settled back onto Harry's shoulder, glad he was having longer peaceful periods. Before long, she dozed off.

Harry felt something warm by his side and his eyes seemed to be filled with a rosy glow. He blinked a few times, then realized he was looking at long red hair spilling like silk over his arm and the bed beyond the sleeping girl on his shoulder. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, then opened them again. That rosy glow was still there. She was real. His dreams had been so vivid, he wasn't certain this wasn't a dream as well. If this was a dream, it was a million times nicer than the ones he'd been having. He tried to speak, couldn't get any words out, swallowed, tried again. "Ginny?" he croaked.

She sat up with a start. "Harry, you're awake!"

"Hello," he said with a small smile. "What. . . happened?"

"Long story. Can I get you a drink or something?" Ginny started to get off the bed, but he held her back. He gently reached toward her black eye.

"F-face?"

"What?"

He tried again. "Face. What?"

"Oh, my shiner? Don't worry about it. I think Ron's jealous of it being such a good one," she said flippantly, then flinched as her smile made her bruises ache.

Harry frowned, his eyes terribly sad. "Did I. . .?"

"You know how clumsy I am – I just walked into a door or something," Ginny replied, trying to avoid giving him something else to feel guilty about.

He looked at her thoughtfully a moment, then turned on his side a bit and patted the pillow beside him. "Come. . .here."

Ginny lay down on the pillow facing him as he seemed to want her to do. He reached up to her face and started stroking the bruise around her eye with his thumb, gentle touches that barely caressed her skin, but somehow eased the pain. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Dunno. Seems like. . ." he began, then had to stop speaking. He just didn't have the strength. But he kept rubbing that black eye. Finally, he looked satisfied and dropped his hand. "Better?"

"Yes! It doesn't hurt, and I can see out of it! What did you do?"

"Dunno. 'S'gone."

"It's gone?"

Harry nodded, then yawned and closed his eyes, rolling onto his back and pulling her close to him again. "Sorry," he said softly. "Didn't mean. . .hurt. . . you."

"I know," she murmured, then realized he was already asleep. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly, then snuggled into his shoulder again as he tightened his arms around her. She relaxed and started to fall asleep, then felt his muscles go unnaturally slack. "Oh, no. Not again," she said, a tear running down her cheek. She reached out for her wand and shot red sparks out the door, hoping somebody would notice and come see what was going on. She was afraid to leave him, but afraid to not call for help since he seemed to have lost consciousness again.

Remus, Ron and Hermione hurried into the room.

"What happened?" Remus said. "I saw your red sparks."

"He woke up for a little while," said Ginny. "He didn't say much, and wasn't awake long." A tear slid down her cheek. "He seems to have lost consciousness again. I felt his muscles change a little while ago. I suppose I should've called somebody sooner," she berated herself.

"You don't have anything to feel guilty about. You've done a great job of taking care of him, of all of us, really," Remus assured her. "He'll come around again."

"Ginny, what happened to your black eye?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Harry did it."

"Did what?" said Ron, studying his sister's face and finding no traces of the bruise anywhere near her eye.

"He rubbed it with his thumb for a while. It felt so good, and the pain went away."

"So did the bruise," Hermione noted. "That's amazing."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too," Ginny agreed, "but he lost consciousness right after that. Using that much magic must have hurt him." She looked up at Remus, tears in her eyes. "I didn't realize he was doing magic, or I would've stopped him. It just felt so good. . . ." She sobbed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let him do it."

"There's no way you could have known what he was doing, Ginny. Don't blame yourself," said Remus comfortingly.

"Have you ever heard of a wizard who could heal with just a touch?" she asked.

"No, I haven't," he replied, a puzzled look on his face.

"You look exhausted, Ginny. Are you ready for a break now?" Hermione offered Ginny.

"Actually, I could do with a trip to the loo. I don't know if I can get up without disturbing him."

"Does someone need to be lying down with him?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing else I tried worked. I'm being the teddy bear you said he needed," Ginny replied.

"OK, then. Ron and Remus can hold his arms while you slip out and I take your place so you can have a break," Hermione said.

Ginny nodded, and Ron moved next to the bed where he could reach one of Harry's arms, while Remus reached for the other. Remus said, "On three, then? One, two, three!" and he and Ron each held one of Harry's arms as gently but firmly as they could, while Ginny and Hermione switched places. Harry fought a little, and Ron and Remus had to struggle to keep the girls from being hurt.

"Oh! I feel the tingles Ginny was talking about!" said Hermione in surprise.

"Yeah, me too," said Ron as he tried to settle Harry's arm quietly on Hermione's shoulder.

"Interesting. I don't understand it," Remus mused as he, too, settled Harry's arm gently around Hermione.

Harry twisted in the bed a little longer, but began to settle down when Hermione wrapped her arm around his chest and nestled her head on his shoulder. He laid his chin on top of her head, and his nose started twitching as her hair tickled it. He brushed at his nose and smoothed her hair down, then relaxed.

"Those tingles stopped when he calmed down," Hermione said wonderingly. "That's just odd. I've never read about anything like this."

"Are you going to be all right for a while?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, he seems to be fine now. Go ahead and have a break," Hermione murmured.

"I'm staying here to look after you," said Ron stoutly. "I don't want you winding up with a black eye like Ginny's."

Hermione chuckled and responded, "You're so sweet," which made Ron's ears turn pink.

"Tingles when he's active?" Dumbledore was saying. "His magic is causing that."

"Why?" asked Remus. "I've never heard of anything like that."

"The Refiner's Fire is a unique ailment. His magic seems to be streaming out of his pores, and one might be concerned he'd have no magic left. But the magic within him is being refined, like gold in a refiner's fire. Whatever is 'dross' is being burned out – that's the tingles, and part of what's sapping his strength. But from the sound of things, he's calming down, so the worst may be over. The critical stage of the ailment goes very quickly, and I believe he passed that stage last night."

"And the healing he did?"

"That's something I've never heard of. It's a remarkable achievement, but I think Miss Weasley is right – he was too weak to use that much power, and that's what caused his setback."

"So you think he's going to get better?"

"I have every hope of it, if he can get past this setback from using his magic to help Miss Weasley. When he's well, we will have to train him very carefully in how to control his powers. Both Merlin and I had the ailment when we were grown, mature wizards and had excellent control of our skills. Harry is going through a growth spurt, huge variations in his hormone levels, and tremendous stress. Controlling the power he will have if he survives this will be an awesome responsibility and a difficult task, made much more difficult by his youth and the fact he is not yet a fully trained wizard."

"But first he has to get well," Remus said sadly. "And he just got worse."

After healing Ginny's black eye, Harry's condition worsened rapidly. He was having horrible sweats and chills, and nightmare upon nightmare. There seemed to be no end to the torment his mind and body were dealing with. The thrashing incidents were getting fewer and weaker, but not because he was improving. He was visibly weakening, his face getting more and more grey, lines of strain making him look old before his time. He was panting as if it was difficult for him to breathe. Hermione was sticking with him through this ordeal, with Ron close at hand talking to her and Harry about anything he could think of. Remus sat nearby, his head in his hands, his face filled with grief. Ginny sat by the bed holding Harry's hand, tears streaming down her face. Only a couple of hours ago, it had seemed as if Harry was getting better. Now, however, he looked worse than ever and his strength and the life force in him were visibly fading.

"Remus!" Ginny cried. "He's dying!" She, Ron and Remus clustered around Harry's bed, and Hermione was still lying on his shoulder, clutching him tightly. They watched him diminish right before their eyes, his breathing getting shallower, with periods when he didn't breathe at all. Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore were due at any moment, but had not yet arrived.

Harry was falling to the bottom of a deep, dark lake. The water was murky, warm, with vegetation tickling his face, neck and chest. He thought he was drowning, but he was so tired, so very tired, and didn't much care anymore. It was time. He'd run his race. He was done. He couldn't do anything else. He sank into the oblivion of the darkness below him. He'd almost found the light once – there was a red glow near his eyes, he could feel it. He thought he'd reached it, he remembered that red glow around him, but it slipped away. He tried to get back to it, and he almost. . .almost managed to get through the murk to that light, but then it disappeared. What seemed like a long time later, he heard a voice calling from far, far away. "Harry? Harry? Can you hear me?" He slowly turned around in the darkness, trying to find the source of the sound. It was the faintest whisper he could barely hear it. It was a sweet, light sound. "Harry? Please come back, Harry, please!." *No, leave me alone. I'm tired. I don't want to fight anymore.* Another voice, deep, rich, kind. "Harry? Come back to us, Harry. You can do it," the voice encouraged. He turned his head and found something in the way. Soft but hard, it tickled his nose. A voice came from this ticklish thing. "Harry? Come on, you can do it. Come on, Harry." An energetic voice chimed in, "C'mon, mate, we've got Quidditch

practice this afternoon. You're Captain, we need you to run the plays." *Quidditch?* His face twitched as he tried to find some light, some direction. "He's heard us, look at that!" "Come on, Harry! Quidditch! Hurry up! No homework today! Let's go and fly!" Harry swam up from the darkness, trying to reach that sound. "Let's fly, Harry! You can be Chaser and Seeker, and I'll be Keeper. No Bludgers today, just fun! C'mon, Harry!" Harry turned his face toward that voice and cracked his eyes open. A glare of bright red accosted his weary eyes. He closed his eyes again and turned away. "Come on, Harry, get up! We need to run some plays! I'm going to take the Firebolt out myself if you don't get a move on!" Harry turned back toward the eager voice of his best friend. He opened one eye, trying to focus on the red haze in front of him. "Ron?"

"HARRY!" Ron cried in excitement. "I knew Quidditch would get through to you!"

"Huh?" said Harry, trying to open the other eye and focus the two of them together. "Ron. . . hold still. . . there are. . . three. . . of you. You're. . . making me. . . dizzy."

Ron laughed aloud. Harry felt a vibration on his chest, a warm chuckling near his breastbone, and fuzzy hair tickling his nose and lips. He looked down and found himself nose to nose with Hermione. "'Mione? Ron's. . . going. . . to kill me." His head fell back and his eyes closed again, but his face was more alive than it had been for hours.

Both Ron and Hermione laughed. "No, he's not," she said with a merry smile, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'm so glad you're awake, Harry. You had us terribly worried."

Harry opened one bleary eye and cracked a tiny smile. "Again?"

Hermione laughed. "Again!"

"Did I . . fall off. . . my broom? Is the. . . Firebolt. . . OK?" Harry spoke very slowly, as if the act of talking was painful.

"Your Firebolt is fine. You've been sick. You didn't fall off your broom," Hermione assured him. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired." Harry rocked his head back and forth a couple of times, hoping his vision would be better the next time he opened his eyes. "Hurts."

"What hurts?" Ginny said in alarm.

"Ginny?" He turned toward her voice.

"Yeah. Hi, Harry," she said with a warm smile.

"I dreamed . . .you were here. . . not Hermione. You were. . ."

"Yes, I was there with you for a long time. Hermione and Ron just took a turn looking after you so I could have a break."

"Ginny?"

"Yes?"

Harry reached out to her and pulled her hand to his face. He put her hand on his cheek and leaned against it. "Oh. I . . . remember." He held on to her hand, and drifted off into a doze for a moment. Hermione didn't notice he'd fallen asleep. She moved out of his arms to sit up beside him, which awakened Harry again. He fought to stay awake, but he was so tired.

"Ron, I think I hear Dumbledore downstairs. Would you please tell him what's going on," Remus said. "Madam Pomfrey may be here now as well."

"'K. Great to see you awake, Harry!" Ron said with a grin as he raced out of the room, shouting all the way down the stairs, "Professor! He's awake! Come and see!"

Remus shook his head and chuckled. "I could've shouted, I suppose."

"Remus," Harry breathed. When Remus looked at Harry, Harry saw tears in his godfather's eyes. Harry slowly lifted his hand toward Remus.

Remus took Harry's hand in his and gave it a squeeze, then reached down suddenly and pulled Harry into a warm embrace. "Try not to scare me like that again, OK?" he sighed, his voice breaking with emotion. "I love you, Harry. I can't bear the thought of losing you."

Harry pulled back and looked into his godfather's eyes, the smile in his eyes no match for the joy in his heart. "You do?" Remus nodded. "Me . . . too," he whispered, doing his best to hug the man tightly.

A moan escaped Harry, and Remus, filled with remorse, laid him back in the bed. "I'm so sorry, you said you were hurting and I just. . .just grabbed you. I'm sorry, Harry."

"'S'okay. Worth it," Harry breathed, a ghost of his crooked grin appearing briefly.

Hermione leaned forward, businesslike as usual. "Where does it hurt, can you point to it?" She carefully put Harry's glasses on his face so he could see them better.

Harry shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh. Shouldn't have."

"Shouldn't have what?"

"Done that. Hurts." He squeezed his eyes shut and ground his teeth, moaning as he did so.

Dumbledore came striding into the room, talking to Ron as he entered the room. "How did you get him to wake up?"

Ron shrugged, a happy grin on his face. "Dunno. Quidditch, maybe."

"We just kept talking to him, and then Ron mentioned Quidditch and he seemed to respond. Wouldn't you know it?" Hermione said with a laugh. "He says he hurts all over."

"What hurts, Harry?" Dumbledore asked as he looked fondly at the boy.

"Everything. Everywhere. Hurts."

"Hurts a lot or a little?" Remus said, smoothing the hair off Harry's forehead tenderly.

"A lot." He moaned softly.

"Can you tell me what the pain feels like?" Dumbledore said kindly as he placed a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Like. . .sharp knives. . .cutting. . . shredding. . . ." Harry stopped speaking, caught his breath and went on. "Skin hurts. . . . Bones hurt. . . . Muscles hurt. . . . Hair hurts. . . . Whatever. . .else there is. . .it hurts," Harry said with a moan, rocking his head back and forth slowly, obviously miserable.

Dumbledore smiled. "Your hair hurts? Poor dear boy," he said with a chuckle. "Your sense of humour is still intact, so you must be on the road to recovery."

Harry looked at him seriously with one eye, the other squinched tightly shut. "Hurts," he insisted.

"Madam Pomfrey is on the way. I'm sure she will have something that will make you feel better," Dumbledore assured him.

"In the meantime, chocolate is always good for whatever ails you," Remus said lightly as he broke off small pieces from a huge chunk of Honeyduke's Best Chocolate. He put a sliver of chocolate in Harry's mouth, small enough it would soon melt with no effort from Harry at all beyond swallowing. "How's that?"

Harry seemed to be considering the question gravely. "More."

Remus complied with a smile. "As much as you want, Harry." One tiny sliver of chocolate after another disappeared into Harry's mouth, and as they dissolved there, his colour improved, little by little.

Madam Pomfrey bustled in. "Chocolate! Well done, Remus," she said with a smile. "Now, Mr. Potter, let me have a look at you." She examined his eyes, ears, mouth. "You have a chocolate tongue. Remus, how much did you give him?"

"Not. . . enough," Harry mumbled, then tried to smile. Everyone in the room chuckled, glad to hear him being funny.

Madam Pomfrey commended everyone on the care Harry had received so far, and gave him a restorative potion to help him get his strength back, as well as a potion to ease his pain.

"What's. . .wrong with. . .me?" Harry croaked.

"Thirsty?" Madam Pomfrey asked, ignoring his question.

Harry nodded. She gave him some water, then some pumpkin juice, and then turned to Dumbledore. "Perhaps it's best if you explain it to him," she offered.

"Perhaps so," Dumbledore agreed. He sat gently on the side of Harry's bed, trying not to jostle him too much. "You have been through a very serious illness, Harry. It's called The Refiner's Fire. You hurt all over because your magic was so . . . so active, so powerful, it was wearing out your body. You've had a long hard fight to get through this illness, but you're on the road to recovery now."

"Did I. . .lose my magic?" Harry asked, a frown creasing his face.

"No, no, I didn't mean to imply that. Your magic has been refined, purified, made much more powerful. Most wizards who have this ailment are mature, grown wizards when it hits them. Most don't survive – the young ones have never survived it, until now. You're a very strong young man, Harry."

Harry's hand fell to his side, feeling his wasted body, his ribs prominent. "I . . .used to be. . .strong."

"You're still strong, you've just lost weight. We'll get you built up again quickly, never fear," Dumbledore said reassuringly.

Harry, exhausted, was drifting off to sleep again.

"Should we try to keep him awake?" Ginny asked.

"Let him rest. I think he will be fine now. He just needs to get his strength back. Do not allow him to try any magic, whatever you do. His magic will be completely out of control for a while," Dumbledore warned. "I mean it – he cannot light his wand, summon his glasses, anything, not the smallest bit of magic."

"OK, Professor," Ginny said solemnly, taking Harry's glasses off his face and laying them by his wand on the bedside table. Hermione and Ron nodded their agreement.

Harry's screaming woke Ginny up from her doze in the chair by his bed. He was struggling again, fighting his covers. "Oh no," she moaned as she watched him thrash about. "I'm here, Harry, hang on," she cried as she dived between his failing arms and held him tightly. "Hold on, you're going to be fine!"

His eyes flew open and he looked wildly around, then saw her face near his. "Not you too! No!"

"Harry, calm down. You're safe," Ginny assured him. He continued to struggle, panic on his face. "What are you feeling?"

"Falling! Falling. . ." he cried. He glanced at her again, finally focusing on her. "Ginny?"

"Yes, it's Ginny. We're in your room. You're in bed. You aren't falling. It must have been a bad dream. Can you tell me about it?"

Harry's eyes darted around the room, settling here and there to squint at something before moving on. "My room?" he said in confusion.

"At Grimmauld Place, Harry. Your room."

He took a deep breath and held it a moment, then blew it out. His body started to relax. "Oh. My room. Quidditch posters." He sighed, a relieved sound.

Ginny was confused. "Did the Quidditch posters give you a bad dream? I can take them down if you want."

"No. I remember. . .you put them here," he said, with a slight smile. "Bad dream, though."

"Want to talk about it?"

"I've had it. . . over and over. I'm flying, but the Firebolt disappears or something and I'm falling from the top of the sky, out of control, no way to stop."

"Maybe that's what you've been dreaming when you've been fighting your covers and waving your arms around – that would make sense. It's like you're trying to find something to hold on to."

Harry looked at her intently. "That's it exactly." His look softened. "Then I feel someone grab me and hold on tight, and I think maybe I won't get killed from this fall after all. But this time I woke up while I was still falling, and thought you were falling with me. Scared me. I couldn't save you." Ginny nodded. What he said was making what she'd experienced with him make sense. "It was you, wasn't it? When I was falling, you caught me, every time."

"Actually, Hermione was holding you when Ron got you to wake up by telling you that you were late for Quidditch practice," Ginny replied.

"Is that what he did? I don't remember." He thought a moment. "Not falling through the sky then. In the bottom of a black lake." He shivered.

"You're all right now, though, you're safe," she assured him.

He looked at her a moment, still tense, then relaxed and nodded. "Safe."

"How are you feeling?" Ginny asked, sitting up on the edge of the bed again. "You seem stronger."

"Everything still hurts. Not. . . sharp knives like before, but still lots and lots of knives."

"Knives?" Ginny was confused.

"Stabbing, slashing, chopping knives. It feels like . . . my body is full of them, especially in the bones." He held his hand up to rub his eyes, then stopped, staring at his hand in front of his face, the fingers spread wide. "Wha. . .is that. . .MY hand?"

"Yes, silly, of course it is," Ginny said, smiling at Harry being funny again.

"Have you looked at it?" he asked her, his eyes alarmed.

Ginny was getting concerned. This line of questioning was very odd. "What's wrong with it?"

"Give me your hand," he said, then held their hands palm to palm, fingers outstretched against each other. "The last I remember, my hands weren't that much bigger than yours. Now your fingers don't come to my second knuckle!"

"Well, we've never actually done this kind of comparison before, have we, Harry?"

"I know my hands are a lot bigger than they were – and my feet are cramped at the end of the bed. How long have I been sick?"

"Twelve days."

"It's not normal for people to grow this fast," he said with a worried frown.

"If you're in a growth spurt, that would explain why you're in so much pain, especially in your bones."

Ron rushed into the room. "I heard Harry yell. Is he OK?"

"Yes. He had a nightmare."

"Hey, mate, feeling better?" Ron said, plunking himself down on the side of the bed.

"Ron!" Ginny cried, "he's in pain, be careful!"

"Oh, sorry," Ron apologized, hanging his head glumly.

"S'okay," Harry said with a brief grin. "Good to see you."

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I could use a trip to the loo."

"I'm just the bloke who can make that happen! Let's go," said Ron cheerfully, offering Harry a hand up.

Harry took Ron's hand and sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed and slowly, carefully stood up. When he straightened up, he laughed out loud. "No way!"

"What?" said Ginny.

"I'm not as tall as Ron, am I?" he asked Ginny. Turning back to Ron, he said, "Am I?"

Ron's face showed his surprise. "Whoa! That was one wicked growth spurt! You were shorter than me by a good bit and now you're at least as tall as I am!" He pulled his friend's arm over his shoulders to help him to the bathroom.

Harry gasped as pain shot through his body.

"All right, there, mate?" Ron asked in concern.

"I guess this pain will be worth it," Harry groaned, "if I end up taller than Malfoy." He sniggered in spite of his discomfort, while Ron laughed aloud.

"Just imagine his face when he sees you," Ron said with a snort of laughter. "He's going to freak out! No way he'll ever out-reach THESE long arms!" The boys laughed and talked about Quidditch all the way to the bathroom. "You gonna be okay, or do I need to come in with you?" he asked at the door.

"I think I can manage," Harry said, holding on to the door frame as he entered the bathroom. He turned around and closed the door, then screamed as he glimpsed the mirror. Ron and Ginny hit the doorway at nearly the same time.

"Harry! What's wrong?"

"There's someone in here!" Harry called in a panic, hobbling out the door as fast as possible.

Wand out and grim-faced, Ron slipped into the bathroom, keeping his back to the wall, covering the small room with his wand. After a brief look around, he called to Harry. "There's nobody in here. Were you dreaming or something?"

"No, I was sure I saw a man in there – tall, thin, with a beard and . . ." Harry straightened up and ran his hand over his face, "and glasses. Was that me?" Red with embarrassment, he leaned into the bathroom and peered at the reflection in the mirror. "It IS me! When did I grow a beard?"

"You've been shaving for quite a while, haven't you?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, but it was just . . . fuzz. It was nothing like that!" Harry replied, bemused by his own reflection. "Wow." Harry stood looking at a tall man with a gaunt face, his cheekbones and collarbones seeming ready to burst out of his skin, a thick black beard covering the lower third of his face. All three friends were laughing by the time Remus joined them to see what the commotion was.

"I guess I'd better get rid of it," Harry said. "Yuk, it makes me look old."

"Yeah, I bet you could buy some Ogden's Old Firewhiskey and not have them check your age!" Ron said with a laugh. Glancing at Remus he added, "Not that you'd want to. . ."

Remus just chuckled. He remembered being young.

"Harry, when you shave, don't cut it all off," Ginny said, moving closer to him. She reached up and slid her fingers over his face, drawing imaginary lines. "Just trim it here and here, and these places," she said, moving her finger to define the areas on cheeks and lower lip she wanted shaved, "and trim the part under your chin so it's not fluffy. You'll look like a pirate!"

"And is there a reason I should look like a pirate?" Harry said with a laugh.

Ginny stood on tiptoe and tugged on his sleeve, asking him to bend down so she could whisper in his ear. "It will look dead sexy, that's why." She blushed and giggled as she backed away from him. Harry blushed and laughed in turn, but looked thoughtful.

"What'd I miss?" Ron asked. "What'd you tell him?"

"None of your business!" Ginny replied, still blushing.

Harry leaned against the wall, thinking about what Ginny had said for a little while, then glanced at her. "This better?"

They were all astonished. "Perfect!" Ginny cried in delight. "That's it exactly!" Then her face fell in horror. "Oh no! Dumbledore said you aren't to do any magic until you're stronger!"

"Really?" Harry was surprised to hear this news. "I don't feel ill from doing this."

"How did you do it?" Remus asked.

"I dunno. I've always been able to control how long my hair is. I thought it might work on a beard too," Harry said with a shrug.

"You can control your hair?" Remus said in wonder.

"Just the length of it. Not how it looks," he chuckled. "Haven't any of you ever noticed I haven't been for any haircuts when I'm at school? It used to drive Aunt Petunia mad. She'd take me to a barber, or she'd cut it off herself, because they hated how my hair looked, but by the next morning, it looked just like it had before they cut it. She finally gave up on it."

"That's a remarkable skill. If you can control your hair like that, Harry, you should talk to Tonks. You may be able to learn how to be a Metamorphmagus," Remus commented.

"Cool!" Harry had been excited about Tonks's skill ever since he'd met her. "But if I'm getting extra training from Tonks as well as Dumbledore, I won't have time to eat, much less for Quidditch."

"It will all work out in good time, Harry. Don't worry about it. The beard looks nice, by the way. Very dashing. Sirius would be proud. He used to have one like that."

"Did my dad have a beard too? In the pictures I have of him and Sirius, they're both clean-shaven."

"No, James was always clean-shaven. Sirius was the one who changed his look frequently, going from clean-shaven to a beard to a moustache, to a different kind of beard, all the time." Remus smiled at the memory.

Harry's heart lifted at these new bits about his dad and Sirius and he smiled gratefully at Remus.

Remus continued, "But Ginny's right. Dumbledore said no magic for you until you're stronger, so, no more magic until he says it's safe."

"OK." Harry glanced at Ginny. "So this is perfect? Does it meet your expectations?" He grinned wickedly at her, teasing her.

She blushed, but grinned cheekily back at him. "Even better than I expected." With another blush, she went back into the bedroom to tidy up, calling over her shoulder as she went, "Don't forget you went to the bathroom for a reason!" She laughed and went back to work.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said with a grin, and grabbed the doorframe and hobbled back into the bathroom. "Dunno if I can get used to looking like this, though," he called back as he glimpsed himself in the mirror.

"So don't look!" Ginny called back, laughing again.

"You'll put on weight soon enough, Harry," Ron assured him through the door. "That will put you right, make you look normal again."

"So now I don't look 'normal'?" Harry replied, turning to look at his friend.

"Not normal for Harry," said Ron helpfully.

"I look like Harry at the age of forty. It's weird."

A small, light voice came quietly from the bedroom, as if Ginny were commenting to herself. "It's dead sexy, that's what it is." A giggle followed the comment. Ron and Harry looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Chapter 11 – More Homework for Harry

"Yes," Dumbledore replied later that day, "The Refiner's Fire makes the wizard grow – if he survives at all. When I had it, I was fifty years old and I grew three inches taller!" He chuckled. "I hadn't outgrown my robes in many years! I heard Merlin grew four inches taller."

"Harry's got both of you beaten – he's grown over six inches! He's got Ron beaten, too," Fred said with satisfaction, looking at the marks on the doorjamb they'd made when Harry was up. "Ron's six foot two, Harry's six foot three! Who would've thought that little squirt would be taller than Ron?" he finished with a good-natured laugh.

Harry smiled. "I never would have believed it. Ron may still grow some more, so I may not win this particular race, but that's okay," he said fairly. "I guess I'll have to have Seeker tryouts."

Ron was dumbfounded. "Why? You're the best Seeker Hogwarts has ever had!"

"I'm too big now," Harry said reasonably. "Seekers are usually small and light."

"But look at you! Malfoy will freak out! You could outreach him when you were smaller than him – no way he'll ever outreach you now!" Ron chortled with glee.

"You can worry about that when you get back to Hogwarts," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "In the meantime, Harry has some homework to do."

"I did all my homework for the holidays," Harry protested.

"You have some extra homework to do, remember? It's time I started training you," Dumbledore reminded him.

"Oh. OK." He straightened up in his bed. "What do you want me to do?"

"First, I want you to eat all this chocolate," Dumbledore instructed, handing Harry a huge hunk of Honeyduke's Best. "You need to build up your strength, and this work would be tiring to someone who was healthy. Getting some chocolate inside you to start with is a good idea." With a look, Dumbledore asked the others to leave the room. Soon he and Harry were alone.

Harry set to work on the chocolate, glad that wizard medicines weren't always nasty potions.

"While you're eating, Harry, I will explain some things. First, the wandless magic. You have shown a talent for wandless magic since you were a young child. The accidental magic you did when you were growing up was much more complex than that of most other wizard children. Levitating yourself up onto the school roof, for instance – a very interesting use of a Levitation Charm, which you did not know how to do at the time."

"It takes me quite a time to learn charms in class. Why is that, if I was able to do it naturally?" Harry asked between bites of chocolate.

"Because you did them instinctively before, and in class, you think of the process step-by-step, rather than the end result you're after. The step-by-step thinking is useful in learning a skill you don't know, but it slows down learning how to refine something you can already do."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry pondered.

"Another skill you've shown since early childhood is Metamorphing. Your ability to change the length of your hair at will is a sign of possible Metamorph skills. We can work on these skills and see if you're truly a Metamorphmagus after you become proficient at wandless magic. The newest aspect of your wizard abilities is the massive increase of your magical strength as a result of The Refiner's Fire. Your spells will be much more powerful than you expect them to be for quite a while. I will alert your teachers of this potential problem so you will not be trying new spells on fellow students and possibly hurt one of them."

"How will I learn my spells then?"

"By trying them on the teachers. Once forewarned, they will be able to block any excess energy in your spells. I'll work with Ron and Hermione as well, so you can practice with them once you've learned the new spells."

Harry nodded his understanding.

"Now, to begin with, I'd like you to work on controlling your power. That's more important at the moment than wandless magic, I think you'll agree?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Right, then. I'd like you to levitate this feather, Harry. A simple Wingardium Leviosa will do."

Harry sighed. *Back to first year charms*, he thought morosely. "*Wingardium Leviosa*" he said with the "swish and flick" wand movement required. The feather shot up to the ceiling, where its quill penetrated nearly all the way through the plaster, only the least bit of the fluffy tip showing. His eyes were huge. "Whoa!"

"You see why we're starting with simple spells?" the professor said, his eyes twinkling.

Harry nodded, dumbstruck.

"All right. Let's try it again," Dumbledore said, producing another feather.

Harry hesitated. "Professor," he began, "how do I reduce the force of the spell?"

"Excellent question. Think about it a moment. How do you think you would do that?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me," he chuckled. Dumbledore looked at him patiently. He wasn't going to make this easy. "Right. Um. . .make the wand movement smaller?"

"That might work. Try it and see."

Harry did the spell again, with minimal wand movement, and the feather zoomed up toward the ceiling again. This time he was able to stop it before it pierced the plaster. It floated gently down again, landing on his bed near his feet. He reached for it and looked at it, puzzled.

"How did you stop it, Harry?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it. What did you do?"

"Erm. . .I said the incantation, did the swish and flick much smaller, then, um. . .lifted the wand before it hit the ceiling? I mean, I pointed it away from the feather."

"That's right. But you removed the wand from the spell completely, so the feather fell. This time, try holding back the magic within you. Feel for the control you need. It's inside you. You can control that power the same way you control your Firebolt, as easily as thought. But it takes practice. That's what we're doing here."

"So I need to feel like I'm holding the magic back while I'm doing the spells?"

"Until you learn to control the power you have now, yes."

"OK. Let's go again," Harry said, a determined look on his face. He slowed his breathing, thinking *Hold back, hold back*, then lifted his wand and whispered, "*Wingardium Leviosa*" and barely moved his wand. The feather moved upward rapidly, then slowed, then moved wherever Harry pointed his wand.

"That's it! Well done, Harry!" Dumbledore encouraged him.

"I think I understand," the boy replied, then "Whoops!" as his concentration faltered and the feather hit the wall with a thud. He laughed. "I didn't know feathers could make noise like that."

"It hit with quite a bit of force," Dumbledore said with a smile. "That's why it was so loud. Try it again."

Harry did the spell again, but this time his feather exploded in flames. "Whoa! How did I do that?"

"What were you thinking of?"

"I don't know. I thought I was concentrating."

"Focus, Harry, focus."

Dumbledore gave Harry a new feather, and Harry tried again. This time the feather did exactly what he wanted it to.

"Now you have a feeling for what you need to do. Give it a try without the wand."

Harry was excited to be having a wandless lesson so soon. "What do I have to do differently?"

"Concentration is the most important thing." Dumbledore sat back and crossed his arms, smiling expectantly. "Go ahead."

Harry grinned and cracked his knuckles, then shook out his hands. "OK!" He looked at the feather, concentrating on what he wanted it to do. He murmured "*Wingardium Leviosa*" as he held his hand out to the feather. In jerky, uncoordinated movements, the feather lifted, then fell back to the bed, then lifted again, suddenly zooming off to one side and fluttering to the floor. "WOW! Did you see that?"

The headmaster was laughing. "That's a very good start. I want you to practice this in every variation you can think of. Use your whole hand at first, then try getting down to one finger barely moving. When you can do this charm with minimal hand movement, we'll move on to another." He patted Harry on the knee as he rose to leave. "Don't tire yourself out too much, Harry. The most important thing right now is for you to get better."

"Yes, Professor."

As he left the room, Dumbledore turned back and said, "And Harry – feel free to try any other first year charms and spells you can think of, but only on inanimate objects, and only when there's an adult in the room, or when you're alone. It's not safe for your friends to be with you right now – they don't know how to block your power. I'll teach Ron, Hermione and Ginny how to be safe near you while you're practicing here."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said with a grin. He set back to work on his feather, which exploded in flames. His shoulders sagged in disappointment.

"Not to worry," Dumbledore said with a chuckle, and conjured an entire bag of feathers next to the bed so the boy could practice as long as he felt up to it. Harry grinned, pulled out a feather and set to work again.

August was drawing to a close. In a few days, the students would be boarding the Hogwarts Express for another year in school. Harry had learned to control his power for first to fourth year charms fairly well. He was also regaining his strength rapidly, eating well and starting to exercise again. His face had lost some of its gaunt look, so he no longer saw himself as a forty-year-old when he looked in the mirror.

"Professor Dumbledore says I've finally got it!" Ron exulted as he bounded into the kitchen, where Harry was just sitting down to lunch with the rest of the Weasleys and Remus. "Now I can be your partner in class, Harry."

Harry grinned. "That's great! I really didn't want to be paired with teachers all the time."

"You can partner with me, too, Harry," Hermione offered. "It was amazing how hard it was to do that particular blocking charm, but I'm ready for you now."

"Thanks. Now as long as the teachers cooperate, we'll be fine," Harry said with relief.

"What do you mean, as long as the teachers cooperate?" Mrs. Weasley asked. She'd come out of the hospital just after Harry's recovery and was happily taking over household duties again.

"Snape," Harry began, then corrected himself at a look from Remus, "*Professor* Snape likes to pair me up with Malfoy or Neville just to . . . well, I honestly can't say why he does it. I'd probably have to use language that's not appropriate for mixed company," he finished with a wry grin.

Just then, Snape swept into the kitchen. Ron, Hermione and Ginny all stifled laughter as Harry turned beet red.

"Apparently," Snape sneered in his most snide fashion, "I missed the joke."

"Not a problem," Harry said, "it was pretty lame anyway." He trod on Ron's toe just as Ron was about to explode in laughter.

"Sit down, Severus," Molly invited. "Would you like some lunch?"

"No, thank you, Molly," Snape replied, giving Ron a look of extreme distaste as the boy crammed a huge bite of stew into his mouth. "I came to bring a warning for Potter, here."

Harry sat up straight, staring unblinkingly at Snape. "What?"

"Lord Voldemort has a plan to attack you at Hogwarts from within." Snape said this as unconcernedly as if he were reading a grocery list.

Harry gulped. "You mean he has Death Eaters at Hogwarts again?"

"I don't know," Snape drawled.

Harry was bewildered. What kind of warning was this? "If you don't know, then how am I supposed to protect myself?"

"I. Don't. Know." Snape drew out every word as if each one was a delicious taste in his mouth. "I am not privy to that information. What I do know is that there is a plot to kill you inside the school. He has come up with a way to get someone inside to kill you. That's all I know."

"Is there a new teacher this year?" Hermione asked.

"No. Lupin is returning as Defence teacher. The rest of the staff remains the same."

"Remus!" Ron shouted with joy. "You'll be our teacher again? That's brilliant!" Hermione and Ginny shared in the celebration, then noticed Harry didn't look at all surprised.

"You knew and didn't tell us?" Hermione asked him.

"I thought it was Remus's news to share," Harry said with a shrug and a grin. "Fantastic, isn't it?"

Remus smiled, ducking his head in embarrassment at the excitement this announcement was causing. "I'm looking forward to it. And Albus thought it important for me to be there for Harry, in particular. He has so much to work on this year, Albus thought it would be easier for if I were one of the people teaching him, since we worked well together before." He gave his godson a fond look. "And it will give us more time together, which will please me more than I can say."

Harry looked at Remus as if he and Remus were the only ones in the room. "I just realized we can have a family Christmas," he said in amazement. "Wow."

"Yes, that will be wonderful!"

"Oh, isn't this *sweet*," Snape said with a nauseated look on his face. "If you're quite finished, Potter. . ."

His comment wiped the smile from Harry's face. "What?"

"The threat is unknown, but it's there and very serious. We are at war now, and Lord Voldemort's primary concern is you. You are the initial target of this war. When you're removed from the picture, he will broaden his attack, although he is allowing the Death Eaters to terrorize people here and there just as a warm-up, you might say. But you, Potter, are in mortal danger, much more so than ever before. You will need to be careful who you associate with. Stick with known friends. Go only to well-known places. Don't go anywhere alone. We're all doing our best to protect you. Please don't make all our efforts be in vain." With that, he swept out of the room and returned to Hogwarts.

A deafening silence reigned in the kitchen for many long moments after Snape's departure. Harry sat wide-eyed, looking shell-shocked, glancing around at his friends, all of whom were staring back at him, aghast. Harry knew Voldemort was after him. He knew war was starting. But to have the threat come inside Hogwarts, to have it aimed so personally at him. . . . He swallowed back the bile that was threatening to rise in his throat, then took a deep calming breath. The quiet sound of him blowing it out broke the tension in the room.

"Well, THAT was fun," Fred commented dryly. He and George had dropped in for their mum's cooking. "Hey, Harry, you haven't been to our joke shop yet. We're open in Diagon Alley, and are looking for a place in Hogsmeade."

"Business is good, then?" Harry said, grinning shakily at the twins. They were always good for a diversion from the darker things in his life.

"Business is great! We've had to hire people to help make the stuff. We're sticking with research and development. Lee Jordan is helping with marketing. Angelina is running the office for us."

"That's wonderful. I'd love to see your shop."

"We'll probably have our Hogsmeade location up and running by the first Hogsmeade weekend. We'll invite you lot to our grand opening!" George said.

"Great!" Harry agreed.

"Harry, perhaps you should stay in the castle. You heard Severus's warning," Molly said, her face creased in worry.

"He said the danger was IN the castle! Hogsmeade should be fine!" Ron protested.

"That's right," Harry agreed. "I may be safer anywhere but the castle this year." He'd intended his comment to be a light one, but the truth of it hit home. The castle had always been the safest place in the world for Harry, but now he wasn't even safe there. His shoulders drooped.

"No worries, Harry. We'll take care of you!" Ron said stoutly, clapping his friend on the shoulders hard enough to make Harry wince. "Oops, sorry, mate. I forgot you're still a little fragile."

"I'M NOT FRAGILE!" Harry growled. "I'm so tired of hearing that I'm delicate, I'm fragile. I've been sick. I'm better! I'm not well, but *I'M NOT FRAGILE!*"

Ron backed off, his hands held up in surrender. "OK, OK, I didn't mean anything by it."

Harry's anger left him as quickly as it had appeared. "Sorry, Ron. I know you didn't mean it. I'm just sick and tired of being sick and tired and THREATENED all the time!" He grumbled to himself for a while, then took a deep breath and blew it out, realizing the entire group was unnaturally silent. "What?"

"Harry," Hermione began timidly, "you're going to have to control your temper better than that."

"I'm sorry, I just. . .what? What happened?" he said, realizing everyone was staring at him with big, scared eyes.

"Um. . .look at the door over there," Hermione said hesitantly, pointing to the wooden cupboard directly across from Harry's seat. "That crack appeared when you yelled."

Harry was dumbfounded. "It did?"

"It's probably lucky you didn't aim your anger directly at anyone, Harry," Remus said quietly.

"I wasn't THAT angry," Harry said nervously. He got up and walked to the cupboard and opened the door, which fell apart in his hand. The dishes, glasses and bowls inside the cupboard were shattered. "Damn. More crockery to replace."

"Those can be fixed, dear. Don't worry about it," Molly said kindly.

"This is my house, isn't it? Sirius left it to me? I remember being told that earlier this summer – I think. A lot of my memories of this summer are hazy, though. Am I right or not?"

"Yes, Harry, this is your house. You are Sirius's sole heir. He made you his heir when James and Lily named him as your godfather," Remus told him.

"Then at least I'm not destroying somebody else's stuff," Harry said with a brief, sad grin, trying to be funny and not succeeding very well. "OK, I'm going to my room. Apparently I

don't have this control thing mastered as well as I thought I did." He sighed and trudged out of the kitchen, his shoulders drooping.

Ron looked at Hermione and said, "We need to work harder on those blocking spells – I wasn't ready for that at all!"

"Me either," she said glumly, then turned to Ginny. "What about you? Did you anticipate what he did at all?"

"I felt something building up, but I didn't realize what it was. It sort of felt like the way the atmosphere feels before a big storm, didn't it?"

"Yeah, sort of," Ron agreed.

Hermione shook her head. "This is going to be harder than we thought."

Fred looked at George. "Did you feel the wave of power that came off him? Imagine if we could harness that!"

"Boys!" Molly chided her twins. "Harry has enough problems. Don't even think about bothering him until he has his life back in order and his powers under good control."

"OK, Mum," they agreed far too readily. "We wouldn't want him blowing up the shop anyway." They glanced at each other, sharing the same thought. *We've got to get Harry to work with us – what cool things we could make with that kind of power!*

Dumbledore sat with Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny in the kitchen. "I need to talk with all of you," he began gravely.

"Yes?" Hermione replied.

"You three," he said, indicating Ron, Hermione and Ginny, "will be bearing a very important burden at Hogwarts this year, as we've discussed before. You will be Harry's first line of defence against whatever the threat is at Hogwarts. You will be his partners in class when you're learning new spells. You will have to help him when his temper flares up. You've seen a small sample of what can happen when he gets even a little bit angry. There will be far more demands on his temper at Hogwarts than there are here. Please do your best to stay with him in the corridors, Great Hall, classrooms or common room. I'd rather he not be alone where someone can provoke him, at least not until he has his power completely under control." He turned to Harry. "You get on well with all your dorm mates, don't you, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry answered. He looked rather glum. He was upset that his friends were being required to baby-sit him.

"Then you should be fine in your room. And Ron and Ginny, you will be on the Quidditch field with Harry, so you're his protectors there."

Ron spoke up. "Ginny will be there too?"

"Of course," Harry replied, surprised at Ron's reaction.

"But she played Seeker. You're Seeker, Harry, and you're back on the team," Ron insisted.

"That's right," Ginny agreed. "I'd love to be on the team, but Seeker is your position, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "I'll be on the team, but I can play Chaser or Beater. I've seen you fly, Ginny. You'd be a great Seeker or Chaser, whichever you like. We'll be having tryouts for Seeker as well as Beaters and Chasers."

Ron spoke up. "Harry, we've already discussed this. You're the best Seeker ever!"

"There may be someone who's better than me. We have to find out," Harry said reasonably.

Ron grumbled, but Ginny was glowing. *Harry wants me on the team!*

Dumbledore spoke again. "Harry, you bear the greatest burden of all. You absolutely must control your temper. You must not reveal that you can do wandless magic. You must not reveal the extent of your power. You must appear to be a normal wizard in every way. I know this will be extremely difficult for you, but you have to do your very best. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said, his face stoic. He didn't know how he could control his temper better than he already did, but he knew he had to manage it somehow.

"I know Mr. Malfoy is a trigger for you. Do whatever you can to avoid him. I have spoken specifically with all the teachers to ensure the two of you are kept apart as much as possible. They do understand the risks involved, but it's up to you, Harry, to keep your temper."

"I understand."

"Now, to details. If anything, and I mean *anything*, odd happens, if one of you feels yourself or Harry is in danger of some kind, you are to get in touch with me, Professor Lupin, Professor McGonagall or Professor Snape as quickly as possible. We will do whatever we can to ensure the safety of all concerned. Harry, if you feel endangered in any way, go to the office of whichever of us is closest, or to your dorm, and stay there. Send me an Adfero – no wait, we haven't worked on those. Don't send any Adfero messages until we have perfected them again. If you sent one without good control, you could kill the recipient. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry replied, his eyes wide with shock. It had never occurred to him that the communication spell could be lethal. "No Adferos."

"Right then. I think you will all enjoy the coming year. We have some interesting things planned for you, and, as sixth year students – well, except for you, Miss Weasley – you don't have those pesky O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. exams to worry about. Please, all of you, feel free to come to me if you have questions, concerns or just need a lemon drop." He smiled genially all around, then said, "I'm off to prepare for your arrival. Safe journey!"

"Ginny?" Harry called from his room as he saw her pass by.

"Yes?"

"I thought you'd want to be here for this," he said with a shy smile.

"What?" She entered the room and saw that he was in the midst of packing.

"It's time to get rid of the beard," he said with a lopsided grin.

Ginny's heart turned over. He thought enough of her to share this with her – or was it just that he knew she liked his beard and was humouring her? Whatever it was, she was glad he'd called out to her. "I hate to see it go. It looks fantastic on you." She hesitated, blushing furiously. "Not that you don't look great without the beard, I didn't mean to imply that! But. . ."

"I understand what you mean," he replied with a smile. "I'm sort of glad you asked me to keep it – and told me how to trim it, so I wouldn't wind up looking like Hagrid."

Ginny laughed. It was so good to hear Harry making jokes again. Rare though they still were, he was feeling much better and being funny more often than he had in ages. "I'm glad you didn't mind keeping it," she said, smiling up at him shyly. "Are you going to shave?"

"No, I'll just do it the old-fashioned way," he teased.

"Metamorphing is the old-fashioned way?" she laughed.

"Well, I've been able to do it longer than I've been any good at shaving – and this way, I don't have to worry about cutting myself." He gave her a cheeky grin and then stood in front of the mirror looking thoughtful for a few moments. Suddenly, the beard started to disappear, then was simply gone, leaving him with smooth cheeks again.

"Wow, nobody would ever know you shaved," Ginny said, studying his face in amazement.

"Oh, I'm too old for that. Hang on," he said, looking thoughtful again. "Is this better?" His cheeks now had a serious five-o'clock shadow.

"No, too dark. It looks as if you need to shave. Makes you look like a Greek, all that black hair and black beard stubble," Ginny teased. "Except for the green eyes, of course."

"Hmm. Hang on." A few moments later, his face looked like any other boy's who had started shaving recently.

"That's it! Well done!"

Harry gave her a deep bow and a cheeky grin. "Thank you, thank you. Please order tickets in advance for our next performance."

Ginny laughed. "You're silly."

"One of my better qualities, I imagine," he replied with a chuckle.

"Will it be hard to keep it like this, or will you have to take time to work out when it's 'just right' every day?"

"Once I know how I want it, it's easy to maintain," Harry replied. "I don't think about my hair at all, except sometimes if I want it a bit longer or shorter, that's all."

"Cool," she replied. "Thanks awfully, Harry, for showing me how you do that. And it was nice to say goodbye to your beard."

"It's not goodbye forever. I can grow it out again when I want to – maybe over Christmas."

"You could let it get long and curly and we can spray it white so you can play Father Christmas!" Ginny teased.

"So now my beard is your toy?" he said, amused at Ginny's unusual audacity when it came to his beard.

"Maybe," she said, blushing. "I'd better go and pack."

"Me too. See you later."

Chapter 12 – Back to Hogwarts

Platform 9 ¾ was crowded as usual. Harry was amazed at how tiny the first year students seemed to be. When his school friends saw Harry, they nearly didn't recognize him because he'd grown so much. He joined Neville in a compartment, stowed Hedwig's, Pig's and Crookshanks' cages on the luggage racks and sat down to wait for Ron, Hermione and Ginny to join them after their meeting in the Prefect's compartment.

"Are you looking forward to going back to school, Harry?" Neville said as he fussed with Trevor in his lap.

Harry smiled at his friend, then looked out the window, thinking. He was very nervous about going back to school. Not only was there the threat to his life, but he was certain there would be a lot of teasing going on about him having a Muggle girlfriend – the fact she was dead wouldn't stop the Slytherins from picking on him. He knew there would be a lot of challenges to his admittedly shaky control of his temper, and he just could not allow himself to lose his temper any more, not with the damage he could do in an uncontrolled moment.

"Yeah," he finally replied, mentally crossing his fingers that he'd have at least a somewhat enjoyable year at school.

"Did you have a nice holiday?" said Neville.

It was the best holiday ever – and the very worst you could imagine, Harry thought. After taking a deep breath, he went with the safe answer. "Erm. . .yeah, I guess. You?"

"It was OK. My Uncle Algie took me out on a boat and we went fishing, then we went swimming, but I got a cramp and nearly drowned."

Harry leaned forward, concerned about his friend. He knew what almost drowning felt like. "Are you all right now?"

"Yeah. It was weird, though. Almost like floating, not as scary as I thought it would be to almost drown." The round-faced boy shook his head. "I don't know why everything always happens to me."

Harry shook his head, thinking how true Neville's statement was about his own life. "Rotten luck, that, but at least you came through it. I'm glad you're OK."

"Yeah, me too." Neville sat quietly a moment, then his face brightened and he reached for his pocket. "Look what I've got!"

"What?"

"My own wand! It chose me, it isn't a hand-me-down! My gran was really upset about my breaking Dad's wand last term, but when she saw what I can do with this one. . ." His face shone with pleasure.

"What do you mean? What can you do?" Harry asked, genuinely curious.

"Whatever I want," Neville said with glee. "Watch!" He flicked his wand and a shower of glittery red and green sparks flew across the compartment, turning into hummingbirds before they disappeared from sight. "Isn't that great?"

"Yeah, Neville, that's wonderful! I'm happy for you," Harry said sincerely. He smiled at the other boy, who looked fondly at his wand a while before putting it safely back in his pocket.

The train started moving and Harry dozed off as the train rocked along. Ginny was the first one back to the compartment. She smiled at Neville and sat down across from Harry, watching him sleep, noting the tired circles under his eyes. He was getting stronger, but still wasn't back to his full strength. When Ron and Hermione joined them, Ginny hushed them as they entered the compartment, and the friends rode quietly, letting Harry rest.

Harry awoke when the food trolley lady arrived at their compartment. He bought treats for everyone and they enjoyed sharing the sweets and looking at the Famous Wizard cards that came in their chocolate frogs.

"Oh, look!" said Ginny. "I got Harry!" She laughed, and held up the card for the others to see. "That's one to keep!"

"If you want, I can ask him to sign that for you," Ron said in a stage whisper and a wink. "Make it loads more valuable. I've got an 'in' with him, y'know."

Harry snorted and threw a box of Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans at Ron's head. They all dissolved into laughter.

"What's this, then?" a sneering voice demanded as the compartment door flew open. Draco Malfoy stood there with his pale, pointed face twisted up in disdain. His thugs, Crabbe and Goyle, stood stupidly alongside him, looking not nearly as intelligent as the giant barrage balloons they resembled.

"Buzz off, Malfoy," Harry snapped.

"Buzz off? Buzz off? Is this an expression you've learned from your filthy Muggle girlfriend, then? Pretty low-class expression, from the sound of it, but what else can you expect from Muggles, after all?" said Malfoy snidely.

"*GET! OUT!*" Hermione snapped, striding toward the door.

"You can't order me around, Granger. I'm a Prefect too."

"There are THREE Prefects in this compartment, in case you hadn't noticed, and we do NOT need you here. *GET OUT*!" Hermione repeated, pulling out her wand as she pushed Malfoy through the door.

Malfoy had learned the hard way not to mess around with Hermione, so he backed away, but not before grumbling, "You're in for a rough year, Potter. You've been warned."

"Get stuffed, Malfoy!" Ron called as he pushed the Slytherins out of the compartment and slammed the door in Malfoy's face. He turned around to see Ginny had moved to Harry's side

and had her hand on his shoulder. Harry's cheeks were flushed with fury and he was breathing heavily. Ron watched tensely for a moment, then relaxed as he saw his friend's clenched jaw muscles loosening a bit as Harry fought down his temper. Hermione hovered protectively between Harry and the door, still staring out of the window, watching for trouble.

Neville looked from Ron to Hermione to Ginny to Harry, and scratched his head. "What's going on? Did I miss something?"

"Erm," Ron began.

"We're not taking anything from Malfoy this year," Hermione growled.

"There's something odd about the way you lot reacted – like you were protecting Harry. And Harry didn't do anything at all. That's not normal," Neville observed.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny exchanged a look. Harry was studying his trainers, not certain what to say.

"Erm. . ." said Ginny. "Neville? Can you keep a secret? It's really important nobody knows this."

"Ginny!" Ron said in horror. "No!"

Ginny gave him a quelling look, then turned back to the other boy. "Neville, Harry was ill over the holidays and he's still recovering. We don't want him to get too tired, so we're being a bit overprotective. You can understand that, right?"

"I suppose so," he replied hesitantly.

"If Malfoy or others found out about it, they'd give him a hard time. You can see he's exhausted. He's already taken a nap on this trip," Ginny explained. "He just needs time to get well again, and needs to be left alone to do so. Being annoyed by Malfoy will be too much of a strain for him."

Harry grumbled. "I'm. Not. Fragile."

"No, Harry, you're not fragile," Ginny said with a smile, "but you don't have your full strength back. When you do, you can say all the bad things you like to Malfoy – I'll even give Gryffindor points if you come up with really good insults."

That comment got a smile from Harry. "You're on."

"What was wrong with you, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Some kind of nasty flu – it lasted a long time, took a lot out of me," Harry replied hastily.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You're OK now, though, right?"

"Yeah, just recovering still. I'll be fine."

"I won't tell anyone. I think it's great you lot are looking after him this way," Neville said with a smile.

Hermione shrugged. "What are friends for?"

"Firs' years, this way!" came a deep, booming voice.

"Hagrid!" Harry called, and ran to greet his friend.

"All righ' there, Harry?" Hagrid said, giving him a one-armed hug and beaming down at him.

"Yeah. You?"

"Couldn't be better! Blimey, but you've grown a mile! You'll be as tall as me soon!" Hagrid said with a laugh.

"No, I don't think I'm going to get quite that tall," the boy chuckled.

"Good to see you, Harry. You'd best be off to the carriages now. We'll chat later, OK?"

"'Course. See ya!" He waved and ran off to find his friends, who were saving him a place in a carriage.

Walking into the castle, Harry found himself again the subject of intense scrutiny by his fellow students. Some showed shock on their faces when they realized who he was, and how he'd grown and changed. Others sneered and gossiped with their friends, obviously having read the articles in the *Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, Teen Witch Weekly, The Quibbler* and other so-called "news outlets." Harry ducked his head and moved with long strides up the staircase and through the halls to the Great Hall, Ron hustling to keep up with him, Hermione and Ginny running to catch up.

"Harry, slow down!" Hermione panted.

Ginny ran hard to get close enough to Harry to see his face. "Come here," she said, pulling him away from the Great Hall and into a quiet corridor.

"What?" he snarled.

"Temper, Harry. You're losing it again," Ginny warned. "Be careful." Ron and Hermione came and joined them.

Harry was nearly panting, he was so angry. "I'm trying, I really am. It's just so. . ."

"I know," Ginny began, reaching out to touch his arm.

"You know? How can you!" he snapped, jerking his arm away from her hand. "Nobody points you out to their friends so everyone can stare at your scar. Nobody prints lies about you in the paper so people think you're a completely different person than you are. Nobody. . ." He had to stop because Ginny had run into his arms and was holding him tightly. "What are you doing?" he growled, putting his hands on her shoulders to push her away.

"I'm staying here until you calm down," she said quietly. "You can do it. I know you won't hurt me."

Harry shook his head, angry at himself now. "Not intentionally, no, but Ginny, you've just put yourself in danger."

"Not if you calm down."

"C'mon, mate, you know all these gits would make stuff up about you if it weren't already in print. They're all jealous that you're so famous," said Ron. "First you were 'the Boy Who Lived,' then you became a Quidditch star, then the Tri-Wizard Tournament, all the stuff with You-Know-Who. . ."

"Voldemort," Harry said. "Say the name."

"You-Know-Who," Ron insisted, "and now the Famous Wizard Cards and the posters? I know you didn't ask for any of this, and you'd rather things weren't the way they are, but this is your life, mate, and you've got to deal with it. I thought we had this all worked out before we left home."

Harry sighed. "We discussed it. We talked it to death. Yes. But getting hit in the face with it. . ."

"Is normal for this time of year, Harry. Just ignore them," Hermione said earnestly.

Ginny was still holding him tightly, her arms around his waist, her head pressed into his chest. She leaned back to look up at him. "You know who your friends are, Harry. You don't need the rest of them."

Harry's breathing slowed as he calmed down. He dropped his hands from Ginny's shoulders and gave her a hug. "OK, you lot. I'm sorry. I'll be good. Can we go to the Feast now?"

The Sorting Ceremony and Welcome Feast were as much fun as always, and everyone was full to bursting with good food. Dumbledore stood up to make his announcements.

"Now that we have completed our excellent feast, I have a few start-of-term notices. The forest on our grounds is, as always, off limits to students. Mr. Filch has added several things to the list of forbidden items – the complete list may be seen in his office. I believe the list has more than five hundred and fifty items on it now – that's rather remarkable when you think about it. A great many of the new forbidden items are manufactured by Weasley Wizard Wheezes," he said with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle. "The Weasley twins are still leaving their mark on Hogwarts, it seems. Mr. Filch also asked me to remind you that no magic is allowed in the corridors between classes. We're pleased to welcome back Professor Lupin as our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher." A smattering of applause greeted this announcement, the strongest by far from the Gryffindor table. The Slytherins hissed. "Now, now," Dumbledore said, casting a quelling eye toward the Slytherin table. "For those who have concerns about his health issues, I assure you that we have that situation under complete control. He is the best Defence teacher we have had in many years, and in these troubled times, we need his expertise more than ever."

Dumbledore took a deep breath, then looked over his half-moon glasses quite seriously at the students. "You must understand this. We are at war. Lord Voldemort . . ." There was a collective gasp. "Do not be afraid of his name. Learn to say it, learn to hear it, learn to accept that he is back, and that he is at war with the forces of good in our world," he said in a firm voice. "We. Are. At. War. These are serious times. Hogwarts is the safest place you can be. We have put extra protections around the castle, and there will be dragons guarding all entrances to the grounds."

At this, Hagrid's face split into a huge grin. Harry, Ron and Hermione stifled their laughter at Hagrid's delighted expression.

"We are increasing the amount of time you spend in Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, since we believe this to be the most important subject for you to concentrate on in these times. Harry Potter, with the assistance of Professor Lupin as needed, will be continuing the D. A. meetings. For those of you who are not aware of what the D.A. is, it stands for 'Dumbledore's Army.' The D.A. is a student-run Defence Against the Dark Arts club, if you will, where you get extra practice in your defence skills and learn some hexes, jinxes and so forth that aren't normally taught in class. If you are interested in joining the D.A., please sign the lists now hanging in your house common rooms. The membership of D.A. will be limited in size in order for each member to get plenty of personal attention from the instructors, Harry Potter and Professor Lupin. The first D.A. meeting will be held. . .when, Harry?" he said, his eyes searching the Gryffindor table for a messy shock of black hair. His face lit up when the boy smiled back at him.

"Two weeks from today," Harry replied, "in the Defence class room."

"Thank you." Dumbledore smiled genially, then glanced around the room again. "My intent is not to frighten you, but to prepare you for the coming conflict. Hogwarts is a safe haven, but evil lurks outside our grounds. We will be monitoring visits to Hogsmeade quite closely, and will make every attempt to keep it safe enough for those who are third year and up to visit. But if we hear of dangers in the village, we will cancel visits there until the danger is past. We are taking these measures for your own protection. Please do not try to pass the dragons without permission, or to sneak out of the grounds at night. The dragons will not allow anyone through the gates without permission, and you will have to have special permits that they will understand in order to pass. Don't even think about trying to forge such passes – ah, I suppose I didn't need to say that, as the Weasley twins are no longer students here." His eyes twinkled again briefly. "I ask you to be vigilant in your communication with the outside world. If a stranger contacts you for whatever reason, and you feel worried about that contact in any way, please talk to one of the teachers about the situation. Even if someone known to you contacts you in some way that makes you uncomfortable, or makes you suspicious, please let us know. We are here to teach and guide you, and to protect you as well." He took a deep breath and then smiled. "That said – I remind you that by working together, we create a formidable force. Let us work together for good. I'm sure you're tired after your journey and our excellent feast, so I will bid you all good night."

"Well, that was cheery," Ron said as they left the Great Hall.

"Too right it was," Harry replied, "but they need to know. They need to understand."

"Yeah, I guess," Ron replied morosely.

Later, as he settled back in his four-poster and pulled his covers to his chin, Harry sighed contentedly. In spite of hateful or overly curious looks from other students, in spite of dire warnings, in spite of Malfoy still being a thorn in his side. . .it was good to be home.

When Harry got to the Common Room the next morning, he was gratified to see the large crowd waiting by the message board. Two lines had formed – one to sign up for the D.A. and the other to sign up for Quidditch team try-outs. He had to replace Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirke as Beaters, both of whom had decided Quidditch wasn't for them after their numerous injuries in the past year's games, and Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet, who had finished Hogwarts last term.

"Oy, Harry!" Seamus Finnegan called. "How are you going to schedule both Quidditch and the D.A.?"

"We'll manage. We've done it before," Harry replied, smiling confidently. "Going to try out, Seamus?"

"I thought I might," the other boy said with a big grin.

"Cool. We need Beaters and Chasers, and we'll be having Seeker tryouts as well," Harry replied.

A huge shout went through the Common Room. "Seeker?" "Why?" "Harry, what are you playing at?" "Harry. . ." "Harry. . ." "Harry. . ."

Harry climbed back up the dormitory steps to see the whole crowd. "OK, OK, calm down! I'm not going anywhere!" he said with a chuckle. "In case you haven't noticed, I've had a huge growth spurt. Seekers are normally small and light. We need to see if someone else would be a better Seeker. Ginny played Seeker very well last year, but she wants to play Chaser now. We'll just have to see who's best. I can play Chaser or Beater."

A wave of protest went through the crowd.

Harry was laughing. "Don't worry, I won't pick somebody slow. They will have to out-fly me to get the position."

"As if!" "Too right!" "Are you going to let them try the Firebolt?" "How's anyone supposed to out-fly you without a Firebolt?"

Harry held up his hands to calm the crowd. "The Firebolt isn't being loaned out, sorry. Whoever tries out, we'll just see what kind of fliers they are. If we see a potential Seeker among them, we'll go from there. If not, I can still do it. But we'll make a decision that's best for the team – we do want to keep that Cup!"

Cheers met this statement, and the crowd eventually turned back to signing the lists.

As Harry, Hermione, Ron moved down the corridor toward their first class, they noticed a large crowd of girls was following them. "What's up with them?" Ron asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Couldn't tell you. No idea," Harry replied, trying not to look around at the growing crowd of giggling girls. They were all ages, and all houses, even some Slytherins, who usually only followed Harry and his friends around to tease and torment them.

"I think I have an idea," Hermione said. "Keep looking ahead. Just ignore them. I'll tell you when we get to class." The boys looked at each other over her head, then down at her. Seeing her giving each of them a quelling glance, they looked obediently ahead, staying quiet until they got to their classroom. By the time they got there, Harry understood what was going on. He could hear what the girls were saying as they whispered and giggled behind him. A blush suffused his face and he clenched his teeth as he started muttering passages from *Which Broomstick?* to distract himself from getting angry. Ron and Hermione watched him nervously out of the corners of their eyes, hurrying him along to the safety of the classroom. The girls stuck with them, their comments getting louder and bolder.

"Look how tall he is now!" "When did he become such a hottie?" "Isn't it cute how his hair curls a bit at the back of his neck?" "Oh! He LOOKED at me!" "Do you think those articles were true?"

In the classroom, Harry wheeled on Hermione. "What did which article say about me now? That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

Hermione gulped. "Harry, remember. You need to . . ."

"I know. Keep my temper. What is it?"

Hermione took a deep breath, then said in a rush, "*Teen Witch Weekly* arrived in this morning's mail. They named you the 'Sexiest Wizard of the Year' a few weeks ago, and have been running a whole series of articles on you, saying what you like in a girl, what you like to do on dates, what your hobbies and interests are, that kind of thing. The articles have been pretty. . .um. . .well. . .let's just say you get described in glowing terms all the time." She blushed, hoping he wouldn't ask for details.

"*What?*" Harry's jaw dropped, his face flushed, his eyes flashing.

"Harry, please. . ." Hermione began timidly.

"Mate, calm down," Ron said urgently, putting a hand on Harry's arm and putting himself between his best friend and his girlfriend. He pushed Hermione behind him protectively. She peered around his arm, watching Harry fume as he fought his rising rage.

Harry backed up and leaned against the wall, banging his head slowly and deliberately against it several times. "Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn," he said with each bang.

"It's kind of funny, really, when you think of it," Ron offered nervously.

"In what way is it funny?" Harry wanted to know, glaring at him.

"Erm. . ." Ron was at a loss.

"Never mind." Harry sighed, then looked down at the floor and took quite a few deep, calming breaths, shaking his hands out loosely, stretching and contracting his leg muscles, anything to distract and relax himself. Finally, he looked up at his friends, then past them at the gaggle of girls still standing outside the classroom looking in at him. When they saw him look at them, they burst into giggles and many of them covered their faces with their hands, their blushes obvious, while others waved.

"Look at it this way, mate," Ron commented, laughter in his voice as he, too, glanced at the giggling crowd. "You won't have to look far for a date this year."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, well, that's true, I suppose. As if I'd want to date any of them."

Hermione was affronted and stepped defiantly out from behind Ron. "There are some very nice girls out there!"

"There may be, Hermione, but I don't want to be stuck with a 'fan' girl," he reminded her. "They're not my type."

"If you take the time to get to know some of them, you might be surprised and find a nice girlfriend among them." she insisted.

"Yeah, but I'd have to weed out the others first," he grumbled as he headed toward a desk, "and I just don't feel like doing that."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other uneasily. Harry was just simmering, not really angry, which amazed them. When was the explosion coming? Or did he really have himself under control? With a look, they agreed to stick close to him to try to help him maintain his calm demeanour.

Harry saw nothing funny about the girls following him. And he wasn't interested in dating anyone. Despite the fact that nearly all of his memories of Casey were in the Pensieve, not in his head, he retained an aching Casey-sized hole in his heart. His anger had dissipated at that moment because it had been replaced by crushing depression. Fighting to hold the depression at bay gave him little energy for anger. He sat down at the desk, kicked his bag under his seat, then dropped his face into his hands, closing out the world, battling his inner demons alone until the teacher called the class to order.

As the days passed, the fans didn't lose interest, but grew in number, and became more aggressive. Harry tried ignoring them, tried walking too quickly for them to keep up, and eventually accepted the fact that they were there and he'd have to face them at some point. He finally broke down and talked to one of them, a pretty fourth year Ravenclaw girl who got shoved into him by the crowd, causing both of them to drop their bags.

"So what's your name?" he asked as they picked up their things.

"Emma McDougall," she answered shyly. "I'm sorry I crashed into you. I couldn't help it. . ."

"I know." Harry cast about for some safe subject of conversation. "What class are you going to?"

"Charms. You?"

"Transfiguration." He couldn't think of anything else to say, and the girl wasn't helping. She was staring at him with huge, sparkling eyes, an excited grin on her face. She reminded him uncomfortably of Colin Creevey in her excitement at being near him. He found it a bit creepy.

"I guess our ways part here. Have a nice day," he said, turning down the corridor for his class, lengthening his stride to catch up with Ron and Hermione. He turned around when he heard a burst of laughter behind him. Emma was surrounded by her friends and they were dissecting her brief conversation with him in excruciating detail. Emma was squealing and jumping up and down. Harry turned back toward his friends, shaking his head and sighing.

"I tried, Hermione," he said quietly when he joined his friends. "Don't ask me to do that again! And what happened to you two staying with me in the halls to protect me?"

"Crikey, Harry, it didn't look like you needed our protection," Ron quipped. "They look like they'd be a bit of fun for you, if you'd let them."

Hermione poked Ron in the ribs. "Harry's right, we're supposed to stick close to him." She looked at Harry. "We're sorry. We'll do better, we promise!"

"I don't want to put you out, you know," Harry conceded, "but in this case, I wouldn't mind a bit of protection!"

A few days later, as Harry, Ron and Hermione walked down the extremely crowded hallway, Harry yelped. "Ouch!"

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Somebody pinched my bum," Harry said, red with indignation. "Ouch!" He turned quickly and snapped "Gerrof!"

The girls behind him backed off a little, but the ones on his sides crowded in even more.

"What do you want from me?" Harry demanded. "Keep your bloody hands to yourself!" Seeing no immediate, sensible response, and trying desperately to hold his temper, Harry turned and stalked away, flanked by Hermione and Ron, then turned again, this time in a rage. "Stop touching me!"

"What happened this time?" Ron asked, taking a cautious step away from Harry, hoping his friend could control his anger.

"Somebody felt up my bum," Harry snapped. His head snapped up when he heard Ron's stifled laughter. Ron blanched, and swallowed hard in the face of Harry's temper. "It's not funny, Ron. It's gone too far. It has to end." Ron nodded mutely.

"Temper, Harry," Hermione reminded him quietly.

Harry rounded on the girls crowded around him. "What do you want? Tell me."

No response. Then finally a small voice said, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"That's none of your bloody business," he snapped, glaring at her pointedly.

"It is if we want to apply for the position!" a voice from the back of the crowd quipped cheerfully. The others laughed.

"I will choose whoever I want to be my girlfriend whenever I want to choose someone. Is that clear? Now back off! I don't like being rude to you, but you've forced me to it." He turned and stalked away, but not before hearing excited murmurs behind him.

"Did you see how his eyes flashed when he was angry?" "Such a brilliant green!" "Those patches of red in his cheeks make him even cuter." "His lips get red when he's angry! Yum!" "What a DISH!"

Harry was growling by the time they got to class, but he still, somehow, managed to hold his temper.

On tryout day for the house Quidditch teams, nearly every Gryffindor was there. Most were in the stands as an enthusiastic audience, and a large group of hopefuls were standing around with brooms in their hands, waiting their turn to fly. Harry, Ron, Ginny and Katie took their time with each applicant, watching them demonstrate their flying skill however they wanted, then trying a few moves with them in various positions to see how they did. When some young students asked to try out as Seeker, the massed Gryffindors in the stands booed them. "We want Harry! We want Harry!" they chanted. Harry grinned and waved at the students in the stands, then turned back to his potential Seekers.

"Don't listen to them. You're all going to have a chance to try out. You're decent fliers, but we need to see how you do at catching the Snitch. I'm going to release it and see how it goes. I'll be the opposing team's Seeker, so look out, I'm going after that Snitch too! I promise not to use any dirty tactics on you – I don't want any of you hurt. But do watch out if I dive – don't plough yourselves, be sure you pull out of the dive in time." He looked around at the eager, nervous faces. "OK, you're first," he said, pointing to a first-year girl. "Let's go." He released the Snitch, then the two of them kicked off. Harry flew conservatively for a few minutes, then started increasing his pace. The girl kept up with him for a while, but just had no talent for tight, quick turns. Harry caught the Snitch and landed. "Good job. Next?" He and the second student repeated the process. Eventually, Harry had worked his way through all the applicants for the Seeker position, but it was plain not one of the people trying out for any position at all could fly as well as he did.

"All right, that's it for today. The names of those who have been accepted for the team, and the positions they'll be playing, will be posted in the Common Room by tomorrow morning," Harry announced. "Thank you all for trying out. You all did a great job, and you've made our decision a tough one," he said charitably. He turned to those in the stands. "Let's give a cheer for all these folks who tried out. And thanks to you for coming to watch. GO, GRYFFINDOR!" The stands reverberated with the cheer, "GO, GRYFFINDOR!" then the students dispersed.

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Katie retired to the locker room, sitting together and comparing notes about the various students who'd tried out.

"The Creevey brothers were a lot better than I thought they'd be," Ginny offered.

"Yeah, and they work well as a team. I was thinking maybe they could be the Beaters," Harry said, looking over his notes on the various applicants.

"Don't you think they're still a bit small for that?" Ron asked, his forehead furrowed. "I mean, Beaters should be big."

"Not necessarily. They're both quick and agile fliers. I think they'll do," Harry assured him. "Now for Chaser, I think Seamus was good."

"Yes, I liked him too. I thought Seamus would make a good Beater," said Ron. "He's big enough."

"But the Beaters need to work as a team even more than the rest of us," Harry insisted. "Or have I just been spoilt by Fred and George's teamwork?"

"No, I think you're right," said Katie. "The Creeveys are small, but they never missed the Bludger, and they passed to each other well."

"If we want them to work together, they could be Chasers, and Seamus and Dean could be Beaters," Ron offered.

Ginny looked affronted but didn't say anything.

"No, Ron, Ginny was the best flier out there," Harry replied, looking at his friend curiously. "Do you not want Ginny on the team?"

Ron sat up, looking startled. "No! That's not it. I was just trying to think of other options."

"Speaking of other options, who should be Seeker?" Harry asked.

"You!" Ginny, Katie and Ron replied.

"OK, then, I'm Seeker. Katie, Ginny and Seamus are Chasers, Colin and Dennis are Beaters, Ron's Keeper. Are we agreed?"

"Yes," said Katie.

"Yeah," said Ron with a reluctant shrug.

"Yup!" Ginny said with a grin.

As they started to go to the showers, Harry stopped to talk privately with Ron. "Ron, are you worried about Ginny being on the team? I really need to know," he insisted.

Ron sat back and thought a while. "I guess I'm just being overprotective. I always have been with Ginny. She is my baby sister."

"Can you stick to your position as Keeper if she gets in trouble?" Harry asked. "If you can't, then she can't be on the team. You have to do your job, not be babysitting Ginny."

Ron thought another moment. "I can do it. She loved being on the team last year, and she's a really good flier. I guess Chaser isn't that much more dangerous a position than Seeker. It wouldn't be fair for me to want her off the team."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go ahead and put her on the list."

Harry caught up with to Katie and Ginny as they were about to enter the girl's locker room. "Do you have any reservations about anyone we've discussed?"

"No, I think the people you chose will be a good combination. Go for it!" Katie said with a grin.

"Me too," Ginny agreed. "Are we done?"

"Yeah. Thanks a lot," Harry replied, picking up his gear and heading for the showers. "See you later. Oh, and let's not tell anyone who's on the team before the list is posted – let them all find out at the same time."

"OK," said Katie and Ginny as they headed for the girls' showers.

"Right," said Ron as he followed Harry into the boys' locker room.

Harry waited until after midnight, when the Common Room was empty, to post the new team list. As he turned to go back to his dormitory, he heard someone coming down the girls' staircase.

"Ginny. What are you doing up?" he asked, smiling at the girl, who looked a bit frowsy from sleep.

"I had a bad dream," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes. "Couldn't get back to sleep." She looked up at him, then realized a new piece of parchment was on the bulletin board behind him. "Is that the team list?"

He nodded.

"Ron was trying to get me off the team, wasn't he?" she said as she looked over the list.

"He thought about it. He's worried about you. He says he's overprotective, because you're his baby sister. But he said you were great last year, and deserved to play," Harry assured her. "He thought Chaser might not be as dangerous as Seeker." They both chuckled, knowing there wasn't really a "safe" position on a Quidditch team.

"You talked him into letting me stay, didn't you?"

He shrugged. "You earned it."

"Thank you, Harry," Ginny grinned, her eyes dancing, then impulsively hugged him. "I can't wait to start practicing again. I just love to fly!"

Harry found he was quite enjoying holding the excited girl in his arms. He wondered if he'd be the one to be overprotective of her. He leaned his cheek against her hair and just held her a moment longer before releasing her. "You said you had a nightmare. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No, that's all right. I've forgotten what it was," she replied, a big grin on her face. "Now I'm too excited to sleep, though. Wow, I'm Chaser! That's brilliant!"

"You've always been a good flier," he told her. "I think you'll be a very good Chaser." He turned to go upstairs. "Are you going to stay up?"

"I honestly can't sleep right now. I guess I'll read or something," she replied.

"I'll keep you company, then," he offered.

"No, you must be tired. You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't have to – I want to. I've spent enough nights down here alone to know it's no fun at all," he replied with a smile. "Do you want to play gobstones for a while? Or Wizard's Chess?"

"Yes!" she replied, going to get the game out. They spent a pleasant hour chatting and giggling as they played Wizard's Chess before they both were tired enough to go to bed.

"This was fun, Harry. Thanks for staying up with me," said Ginny, smiling warmly as she put away the game.

"It was fun for me too. We don't get to see each other at school that much, you and I. I'm glad you came down tonight." He smiled down at her.

"So am I," she said. She looked up at him and felt a strange tension between them, not an unfriendly one, but something different to normal. She suddenly realized she was in her pyjamas, robe and slippers, hair all frowsy, and Harry was seeing her like this and had been for over an hour. Not only that, but he wasn't looking at her like she was his little sister anymore. A blush suffused her face and she turned for the stairs, calling "Good night!" over her shoulder as she hurried to her dormitory.

Harry smiled at Ginny's retreating back. "Good night, Ginny," he replied, then turned to go upstairs, pondering the intriguing mysteries of girls.

The fan problem wasn't going away. More pictures and articles were appearing in the various magazines and papers, none of which were any help to Harry's hopes for quiet walks between classes. Now the girls were asking for his autograph, and often on some very inappropriate items. He blushed furiously when a girl handed him a pair of her knickers and a lipstick and asked him to sign that, "To Meg, with much love, Harry." He stormed off after that, but the girls persisted in pursuing him. Nothing seemed to deter them, or dim their eagerness to follow him around. Ron and Hermione tried to walk with him as much as possible, but the

crowd of girls often cut Harry off from them despite their best efforts. It didn't help that Ron still thought the whole situation was pretty funny and Hermione thought Harry should be nice to them. On one of these occasions, Harry got cornered by a mob of girls. He couldn't get away from them unless he was willing to push them rudely or use magic on them, neither of which seemed a good option. He had worked out by this time that most of them were nice people normally. They were just treating him as if he were a movie star or something. He didn't know how actors and other celebrities managed. The whole situation was completely barmy.

"Harry! Harry, sign this for me!" a girl said, waving her Charms book at him. "Harry, can I have your autograph," another girl asked more meekly, holding out one of his Quidditch posters. "Harry, will you go to Hogsmeade with me?" an aggressive girl said throatily, pushing herself against him.

"Sorry, no," he told the first two girls, trying to curb his impatience. "No, thank you" he said uncomfortably to the third, who was a seventh year and gorgeous. Was he a nutter, turning down these opportunities? No, he didn't think so, but his friends did. It all made him so uncomfortable. All he wanted was to be "just Harry." Why couldn't he manage that? He was grinding his teeth with tension and weaving between the girls, trying to get free of two who were trying to hug him – or worse – when he saw Ginny coming down the hallway. "Ginny!" he called.

"Hi, Harry!" she replied, waving and smiling at him. Her smile faded when she saw his situation. "All right there?"

"Not really!" He pushed through the girls to get to Ginny, apologizing when he trod on someone's foot, or had to push someone to get past. Some girls were deliberately offering their chests or buttocks for him to push against. Harry felt as if he was a cat on hot bricks trying to keep away from them. The girls in front were being crushed against him by the ones at the back whether they wanted to be pushed against him or not.

"You lot, back off!" Ginny yelled. "I'm going to start taking house points if you don't give Harry some space."

"We're not doing anything wrong," a few protested.

Ginny put her hands on her hips and stared them down. "You're harassing him. He needs room to move, to walk to class. He's been late a lot lately, and it's your fault. You Gryffindors, in particular, should be ashamed of yourselves. When Harry's late because of you, it costs our house points!"

The girls only looked slightly put out by the reprimand.

Harry finally reached her side and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Can I ask you a favour?"

"Of course!" she replied.

"Would you mind . . .erm. . ." He blushed furiously, at a loss for words. "You see, it's just. . .I mean. . .I was wondering. . ."

"Would you like me to, um, maybe, erm, pose as your. . .girlfriend. . . for a while to get you some relief from them?" Ginny offered with a twinkle in her eye while she blushed furiously.

"Yes! That would be brilliant!" he said, grinning hugely, relief brightening his face.

"Fine with me," she agreed with a chuckle. "What are friends for, after all?"

"OK, then," Harry said, straightening up and draping his long arm gingerly around her narrow shoulders. "Where are we off to?" He nearly laughed to hear the collective moan from the girls behind them.

"Potions. You?"

"Defence. I can walk you part of the way to class anyway," Harry said, grinning. As they walked, he could feel the space behind them opening up. The cluster of disappointed girls dropped back. "Whew. Thanks, Ginny," he said, then leaned down and kissed her on top of her head. "You're a lifesaver."

Ginny felt warmth rush all over her from that kiss on top of her head. Posing as his girlfriend would be a joy – and a heartache, if it continued to be just posing. What had she done?

"Mister Potter," Snape sneered, "exactly what do you call that?"

Harry sighed. His potion was supposed to be lavender, not pink. "It's the Kiss of Death potion."

"No, it isn't. After all these years, you still can't read?" Snape's lip curled in disgust.

Harry ground his teeth and counted to twenty, working hard to control his temper. Despite the teachers being warned about the dangers of Harry losing control of his temper or using magic on students, Snape continued to bait him. Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, then looked at the board again. His shoulders slumped. "I added the boomslang skin after the lacewings instead of before," he muttered.

"*Evanesco*," Snape said with a flick of his wand, emptying Harry's cauldron.

Harry fumed as Snape walked away. He could do Potions. He was actually good at it – he'd received an "Exceeds Expectations" on his Potions O.W.L. He got out his ingredients and started again, adding things carefully, stirring counter-clockwise, then clockwise as required, working as quickly as he could. He was determined not to get a zero today, even if he had to skip his next class to get this potion done correctly. He soon had a lavender potion that looked exactly like Hermione's.

"Potter!" Snape snarled, hovering ominously over their workstation again. "Did you put some of Granger's potion in your cauldron?"

"No, sir, I made this myself just now," Harry said, his face open and innocent. He wasn't completely shocked by the question. This was, after all, Snape who was asking. But still. . .he'd worked very hard to get it right. If he got a zero on it this time. . . .

"That's not possible in this amount of time," Snape retorted with his usual snarl.

A glance at his professor's eyes showed Harry the man looked nervous. *What's going on now?* he wondered. He dipped some of his potion into a flagon and sealed it, handing it to Snape wordlessly.

Snape took it and set it on his desk, saying "See me after class, Potter," as he set the flagon in the testing tray.

Hermione and Ron looked at Harry sympathetically. "How did you do it that fast?" said Hermione.

"I dunno, I just kept at it until it was done," he said with a shrug as he packed away his things and cleaned his work table.

"Did you watch him?" Ron asked Hermione in a quiet voice. "It was like he was speeded up or something. Not much, but still. . .it wasn't our normal Harry."

Harry looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Ron whispered as he finished clearing away his things, "you were working non-stop, ploughing on, and your hands were moving rather fast. Normally you're careful and deliberate in here. This time, you acted as if you. . .," Ron was obviously searching for the right words, "as if you knew what you were doing, I guess you could say, and it was easy for you."

Harry looked affronted. "Well, I didn't. I was just determined to finish it correctly, no matter how long it took."

"Good job, however you did it," Hermione said with a smile. "I've never seen Snape so shocked." She stifled the laugh that was just beneath the surface of her words. She and Ron lingered inside the door as Harry squared his shoulders and walked up to the professor's desk.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked in as polite a tone as he could manage.

Snape looked past him to Ron and Hermione. "You may go," he told them.

"We'll wait for you outside, Harry," Ron said as they left and closed the door behind them.

Harry nodded at his friends, then turned back to Snape.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape said in an uncharacteristically gentle voice. Harry sat down at the desk that faced the professor's. "I know what you did," Snape began.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, then remembered to add, "sir."

"You used some kind of magic on the potion, didn't you? Did you copy Granger's?"

"No. Is that possible? I thought potions had to be made from scratch." Harry was truly confused now.

"Yes, they do. You, however, are a very . . . unusual, shall we say? . . .wizard. You have powers emerging that no one but Dumbledore can comprehend or expect. Today I watched you speed up a process that should take two hours to complete. There should not have been time for you to re-do that potion in the amount of class time we had left."

Harry had no idea what to say. He swallowed hard. He hadn't felt like he was doing anything unusual. "I, erm, I just worked hard at it, sir."

"You don't know how you sped up the process?" Snape looked sceptical.

"No, sir, I was just concentrating and working hard. . .I don't know what else to tell you." Harry's face showed his confusion.

Snape sighed. "All right, Potter, if you don't know how you did it, I suppose we'll have to leave it at that. But be careful. The headmaster told you not to use your, shall we say, 'excess magic' in class. You might have blown something up."

"I'm sorry, sir. I honestly wasn't aware I was doing something unusual."

Snape studied his least favourite student for a moment before replying. "Your getting a potion correct at all is something unusual," he snarled. "Now that you've shown you're capable of the work – and I would love to know how you managed to get the O.W.L. results you did – your work will be held to a higher standard than it has been in the past. What you did today showed skill, concentration, and ability. Do make an effort to show these things in future classes, while making every effort not to blow up the rest of the class."

Almost an actual compliment, and from Snape! Who would believe that? "Yes, sir," Harry said, starting to get up, then hesitating. "Is that all?"

"Yes, you're dismissed."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry picked up his things and left before Snape could change his mind. When he got outside, Ron and Hermione were waiting for him with anxious faces.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, her face creased with worry.

He told them all about his conversation with Snape.

"You're right, Harry," Hermione exclaimed after hearing the story. "He gave you a compliment!"

"That's probably unheard of – for a Gryffindor, and you especially, to get a *compliment* from him? Amazing!" Ron said with a grin.

"Well, not a real compliment, just almost-a-compliment," Harry said modestly, but he was grinning.

"You'll have to go tell Remus," Ron insisted. "He'll be shocked! Mum will be too. I'll write her about it this evening, unless you want to."

"No, you can do it," Harry replied with a smile, thinking of how Mrs. Weasley and Remus would react to such news. He wished he could see Mrs. Weasley's face when she read Ron's letter. He could picture it in his mind – first she'd look disgusted at reading that Snape was up to his usual practice of picking on Harry, then she'd be amazed at what Harry had done, then she'd probably laugh aloud to hear Snape had been forced into making an almost-admiring comment about Harry's potion. "I think I'll go talk to Remus about it after dinner. He can probably do with a good laugh."

Chapter 13 – Threats Revealed

Gryffindor's Quidditch practice was going well. The Creevey brothers, after some initial problems with their timing, were becoming a pair almost as fun to watch as the Weasley twins. They hit the Bludgers with great glee, and apologized irreverently when the Bludger actually hit someone. Ginny and Seamus were now working as a team with Katie as Chasers, their passing seemingly effortless, thinking as a unit instead of three flyers. Ron and Harry watched the others play with great concentration, as well as playing their own positions. Harry had asked Professor Flitwick to show him how to charm Omnioculars so they would include a "record" function, then asked Dean and Neville to use his and Ron's Omnioculars to record their practices so the team could see how they were doing. Using these recordings of their practices was resulting in much more fluid teamwork from everyone. With so many new players on the team, Harry had them practice every afternoon.

Harry was flying low, looking up at the Chasers above him, studying their moves, when he saw the Snitch above them. He zoomed upward at a sharp angle to intercept it, waved and grinned cheekily to Ginny as he approached her at about seventy feet above the pitch. She laughed and waved in return. As he turned back to look toward the Snitch again, the hairs on the back of Harry's head stood up and he quickly looked around, glimpsing a spell flying toward him. As he sped up and gained altitude so the spell missed him, he looked at the ground and saw Malfoy with his wand aimed where Harry had just been.

"Team! Get Malfoy! STUN ONLY!" Harry cried at the same instant he heard a scream behind him. The spell had hit Ginny and she was falling, her broom spinning wildly as it fell to earth without her. Harry's acceleration had already put him on the far end of the pitch and well over 150 feet high. From the goal posts at the other end, he heard Ron yell, "Ginny!" and saw him streaking toward his sister. Harry whipped his broom around and lay flat along the handle, kicking his broom to maximum speed, racing toward the girl's falling body. His heart was in his throat – he was so far away from her. Ron was closer, but his broom was much slower than Harry's. "Go! Go! Go!" he urged the Firebolt.

Ginny was screaming constantly as she tumbled through the air, her arms and legs flailing as if there was something to grab onto. Harry remembered such a fall of his own, then held out his hand and cried, "*Aresto Momentum!*" giving a moment's gratitude to Dumbledore for teaching him the spell in case any of his team fell.

Ginny's speed slowed somewhat and Harry came up beneath her, catching her in his arms. His speed was still so high that the impact of her body in his arms nearly knocked both of them off his broom. The Firebolt shuddered and tumbled a few feet before he could get it under control again. Harry's heart was pounding with nerves as he struggled to get upright with Ginny in his arms and keep his broom under him. Ron came up alongside and steadied them as Harry finally straightened up with Ginny clinging tightly to his neck.

"Are you OK? Ginny? Ginny?" Ron asked anxiously.

She was shaking hard, her arms nearly strangling Harry as she held on around his neck. Her face was buried in his shoulder and she was crying with great, heartbreaking sobs.

Harry stopped his broom in midair and tried to rearrange her so he could fly more safely. "I need to move you a little," he told her. She clutched him tightly, too terrified to move. "You're

all right now, I've got you," he assured her gently. "Loosen your arms a bit, OK? Here, put them around my middle so I can see better." She was trembling hard and still would not move.

"Come on, Ginny, one arm at a time. I'm right here, too," said Ron as he put a steadying hand on her back beside Harry's. Ginny reluctantly let go with one hand, quickly locking it around Harry's back. Then she finally moved the other and held on to him as tightly as she could.

"I'm going to take my arm out from under your legs," Harry said quietly, keeping his voice calm to help relax her, hoping she wouldn't notice his still-racing heart and think there was more reason to panic. "I need you to sit on the broom, so I can have a hand free to steer." Once she was sitting across the broom, with her arms around Harry's chest instead of his neck, he was able to start spiralling slowly to the ground, Ron staying close beside him. He hovered near the edge of the pitch, where his team had Malfoy stunned on the ground.

"Who did the Stunning Spell?" Harry asked, looking around at his team, impressed that they'd been careful and Malfoy was still in one piece and alive.

"I did," Seamus, Katie and Dennis said at once.

"I did the ropes!" Colin cried eagerly.

"Nice job, you lot," said Harry. He looked at his team, thinking quickly. Colin was the fastest flier other than Ginny and Harry. "Colin, you go to the castle and get Professor McGonagall. Don't run fly up and knock on her window. Ginny may be hurt. We need to take her to the hospital wing to be checked."

"Right!" Colin cried, jumping on his broom and racing to the castle.

"Ron," Harry said as he landed gently and steadied his feet on the ground, "can you grab the Firebolt when I pick her up?" He slid his left arm under Ginny's legs and raised her off the broom. As Harry lifted her, both boys heard her moan.

Ron pulled the Firebolt from under them and dropped it next to his broom, then patted his sister gingerly on the back as she lay shaking in Harry's arms. "Ginny? Talk to me. Where does it hurt?"

"My side. My ribs. The broom may have hit me – or maybe it was the spell, I don't know," she said, gasping with pain.

"Do you want to go to the hospital wing now, or can you wait so we can tell McGonagall what happened?" Harry asked.

"Can you take me in, please, Harry?" she said in a small, pained voice. "It hurts."

"All right," he agreed. "Do you want me to levitate you? Or can you walk?"

"NO! No levitation! I can't . . . . Please, please just carry me," she pleaded.

"No problem," he replied, getting a more secure hold on her and being grateful she was so petite.

"D'you want to fly?" Ron asked, holding out Harry's Firebolt.

"No, it's easier to carry her," Harry replied.

Carrying his own broom as well as Harry's, Ron matched his best mate stride for stride as he walked quickly toward the castle. They met Professor McGonagall as she hurried out.

"Potter! What happened? Miss Weasley, are you injured?" Professor McGonagall cried as she hurried toward them.

"Malfoy shot a spell at me while we were practicing. He missed and hit Ginny and she fell," Harry growled, suppressed rage in his voice.

"She fell probably fifty feet before Harry caught her," Ron added in a rush.

"Who witnessed this?" McGonagall asked, her face worried as she tried to look at the injured girl. Ginny kept her face buried in Harry's neck, still clinging to him tightly.

"I saw the spell coming at me and sped up to get away from it. I didn't realize it would hit Ginny if it missed me. She was above me and going the other way, so she just ran into its path, I suppose," said Harry.

"You saw the spell coming? What kind of spell was it? Did anyone else see it? Mr. Weasley?"

"I just saw Ginny falling and Harry racing to catch her," Ron replied.

Harry looked down at the miserable girl in his arms. He was angry that she was hurt, angry that Malfoy had attacked them with no provocation, but he was doing his best to stifle his anger. "I don't know what kind of spell it was, but her broom stopped flying and she says her side hurts. She doesn't know if the broom hit her or the spell caused the pain. We're taking her to the hospital wing to be looked at. I told the team to Stun Malfoy, and Colin tied him up as well. They did a good job. They're still guarding him." He shifted Ginny in his arms a bit. His back was starting to hurt, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold her, but he was determined to finish what he'd started. He'd put her down when she had a soft bed in the hospital wing prepared for her and not before. A sudden thought hit him. "Professor, I had Dean and Neville recording our practice on Omnioculars. Maybe they caught something that will be useful."

"Well done, Mr. Potter. Thank you for telling me that. You boys go ahead and take her in. I'll see to Mr. Malfoy," Professor McGonagall said, her lips very thin and her nose very white. "We'll get this sorted out. I'll be there to check on Miss Weasley as soon as I can." She started to walk away, then turned back. "Potter, how high were you when you caught her?"

"About 20 feet, I think," he replied.

"And how fast were you going?"

"I was flying at the Firebolt's top speed – 150 – to reach her, then slowed down when I got near her. Probably still over 100 miles per hour, I guess." Harry didn't understand why she was asking these questions.

"And are you in any pain yourself?"

"I don't know. My back is a bit sore. I tried to do a Cushioning Charm so I wouldn't hurt her when I caught her, but everything happened so fast. We collided at such high speed, it nearly knocked me off the broom. It could be that part of the pain she's feeling is from the impact when I caught her."

"You get yourself checked by Madam Pomfrey as well, Potter. Mr. Weasley, I'm holding you responsible. You make sure Mr. Potter stays and allows Madam Pomfrey to examine and treat him." She gave Ron her sternest look.

Ron gulped. "Yes, Professor," he agreed. "Harry, why didn't you tell me you hurt your back? Do you want me to carry her?" he offered.

"I'm OK. And shifting her now might be more painful for her," Harry replied as he started to walk again. "Thanks, though."

"I'm right here. You're talking about me as if I'm not," Ginny grumbled, her face still pressed tightly into the hollow of Harry's neck.

Harry stopped walking. "Am I hurting you?" His stomach clenched nervously. He was trying so hard to be careful, not to jostle her, but he was hurrying, too, and he knew she was in pain.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, looking up at him in concern.

"No, I'm fine, just a little sore. I'll get checked on to keep McGonagall happy, but I don't think I'm actually injured," he assured her, hoping he was right.

"Then if it's all the same to you, I'll just stay right where I am. I'm afraid to move," she replied, her voice sounding tired.

"Yeah, I got that," he said, chuckling as he hefted her more securely into his arms. "Let me know if I hurt you, OK?"

"OK," she sighed.

As he and Ron walked toward the hospital wing, Harry could feel her soft breath against his skin. It reminded him of the long hours Ginny had spent taking care of him when he'd been sick, of her courage and trust that he wouldn't hurt her when she released his bonds and threw herself into his arms to try to calm him so he could recover. No, it didn't matter that his back hurt. He owed her a tremendous debt. He'd carry her all the way to London if he had to. He leaned his cheek on her hair a moment and sighed, remembering his fear as he watched her fall.

Ginny lifted her face to look at him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Just relieved you got down safely," he replied. "That was scary." He glanced down into her deep brown eyes and felt butterflies in his stomach. *Just nerves, that's all*, he told himself.

"Yeah," she murmured, and rested her cheek against his shoulder, relaxing into his arms again.

Madam Pomfrey was tutting as she examined Ginny. "Spell burns, yes, and a few cracked ribs," she called to the boys through the curtains around Ginny's bed.

Harry's face fell. "Did I break her ribs when I caught her?"

"No, Potter, the injury is in the same spot as the spell burn. I'm sure the spell caused the broken ribs," Madam Pomfrey assured him. "How fast were you going?"

"Around 150, but I slowed down a bit when I got under her," he replied.

"They shouldn't allow brooms to go so fast," she fussed.

"If his broom wasn't that fast, Ginny would be dead," Ron snapped. "I was a lot closer to her and I still got there after him."

"Well. . ." Madam Pomfrey said, "I suppose you have a point." She finished putting the dressing on Ginny's side and opened the curtains. "Drink that potion right down, Miss Weasley. You'll be fine in two days' time." She turned to Harry. "All right, Mr. Potter, take your robes off. Let's see what damage you've done to yourself this time."

Harry removed his uniform shirt, trying to ignore the aches in his back as he did so, and sat still on the side of the bed as the nurse fussed around him. She poked and prodded and suddenly evinced a yelp from him.

"Aha!" she said. "You've injured your back. I thought as much. You'll be here for a few days as well."

"Injured my back? How?"

"From the impact of catching Miss Weasley and decelerating quickly at the same time, I suspect. You're lucky you didn't fall off your broom or get more seriously injured. I'll give you a potion that will make you sleep and allow you to heal." She walked away for a moment, then came back and told him to lie on his stomach.

Harry heard her opening some kind of jar. Then her hands were on his back again. "Ow, that's cold!" he cried, flinching away from the contact.

"I'm sorry it's cold, but it's good for you. I'm applying some ointment that will help relax the muscles, and tomorrow I'll start massaging your back to restore the muscle to full usefulness. It will take several massages to put you right. You'll be here a few days, that's all."

"A few days? But. . ."

"No arguments, Mr. Potter. You have displaced some vertebrae in your back. I can put them right, but it will take some time for the ligaments and muscles to recover. Your injury is much less serious than it could be, but if you don't take care of it properly now, it will become serious and may trouble you for your entire life. Put these pyjamas on and get in bed." She bustled off to get Harry's potion.

"I'm sick and tired of spending so much time in here," Harry grumbled.

"Yeah, you're sick and tired of being sick and tired," Ron teased. "Hey, mate, at least you're not alone this time. Ginny's stuck here too. Hermione and I will come and visit you loads."

"Speaking of Hermione," Harry said, glancing over Ron's shoulder and seeing Hermione racing into the room along with the Gryffindor Quidditch team. "Hi," he said, grinning at his friends, who called various enthusiastic greetings to him and Ginny. He saw Hermione blush at catching him with his shirt off. He blushed too, but grinned cheekily at her.

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Pomfrey called from across the room. "Pyjamas!"

Harry sighed. "Pull the screen round, would you, Ron, so I can change?"

"Sure, mate. We'll go and visit Ginny while you get settled in. Or do you need help?"

"I'll be fine," Harry assured him, and Ron left to visit his sister. Harry started to put on the pyjama top and yelped. "Ahhh!"

"What's wrong?" Ron said as he rushed past the curtain, his face white in reaction to Harry's cry. "What happened?"

"I'm getting stiff. I can't do this by myself." He winced as he tried to lift his arm to put it in the sleeve.

"Hang on, I've got it," Ron said, coming over to help him.

"Harry!" "Harry, are you all right?" Hermione's and Ginny's worried voices came through the curtains.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he assured them, disgust in his voice. "Stupid hospital pyjamas," he grumbled.

Ron chuckled at his friend's frown.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"You save a girl from certain death. You get the team to stop Malfoy *without* killing or injuring him! You get hurt yourself in the process of saving Ginny. And now your biggest complaint is about the pyjamas you have to wear? You need to sort out your priorities!" Ron was laughing out loud now.

"Well, when you put it that way, it is sort of funny," Harry acknowledged with a smile as he lowered himself carefully into bed. "If I have to be stuck in here, could you make sure I get loads of chocolate frogs to maintain my sanity?"

"You have a free lifetime supply of them coming from every Weasley in the family, mate," Ron said with a grin. "Mum will go spare when she hears what happened. I wouldn't be surprised if you have a huge cake coming by next post."

"Cool!" Harry said, lying back with a grin on his face.

Ron removed the curtains from around Harry's and Ginny's beds so the team could visit both of them at once.

"Wow, Harry! That was some catch!" Colin enthused.

"Yeah, and I got it all on the Omnioculars!" said Neville, a proud grin on his face.

"Really?" Harry said eagerly, lifting his hand toward Neville. "Let's see. Does it show the spell coming?"

"Sorry," Neville said, hanging his head mournfully. "McGonagall took both Omnioculars away from us, and everything happened so fast, I don't know if the spell shows or not."

"Don't worry about it, Neville," Harry assured him. "I told her she might see what happened on them. If there's anything useful on them, she'll just show it to Dumbledore and whoever else needs to see it, then we'll get them back."

"I hope so. I was enjoying helping the team out," Neville murmured sadly.

Harry reached out and punched Neville gently in the arm. "You're doing a great job, too, mate. If she doesn't give them back soon, I'll order some more. It's fantastic to see how the team works together. Your and Dean's recordings are a real help."

Neville's face lit up. "You'll get more?"

"'Course. Find out how long she needs to keep them, and if it's a long time, I'll order more straight away," Harry assured him.

"You can use mine in the meantime, Neville," Hermione offered. "I watched Professor Flitwick show Harry the spell to make them record things. I think I can do it myself with no problem."

"Great, thanks!" Neville grinned, then turned to Ginny. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore, but I'm going to be fine in two days, Madam Pomfrey said. That's not too bad," Ginny said with a smile. "She gave me some potion to take away the pain and heal me, but it's making me. . .s-s-s-s-leepy," she finished with a jaw-cracking yawn. "Sorry," she said, blushing as she put her hands over her mouth. "Couldn't help it."

"You lot need to say your goodbyes now," Madam Pomfrey said as she neared Harry's bed, a flagon of potion in her hand. "Potter will be asleep in a few minutes, and it looks as though Miss Weasley is already dropping off. You can come back tomorrow morning. They should be awake again then."

The team said their goodbyes and left, leaving Ron and Hermione sitting between Harry and Ginny's beds.

"You two don't have to stay," Harry said as he handed the potion flagon back to Madam Pomfrey. "I mean, I'd love it if you did, but I know you h-h-h-have. . ." a huge yawn escaped him, "homew. . ." and he was asleep.

Hermione smoothed Harry's covers and did whatever fussing over him she could think of, as Ron sat staring at his sister, his heart in his eyes, his shoulders slumped and tense. She knew Ron was at a complete loss, not knowing what to do now that the danger was over, and as realization of what almost happened sank in. As she gently removed Harry's glasses and laid them on the bedside table, she glanced at Ron again. He was trembling, tears starting to course down his cheeks as he watched his sister sleep. Hermione moved in front of Ron and took him in her arms, holding him tightly as his shoulders shook with silent sobs. Finally he pulled back and looked at her.

"If. . .if it hadn't b-been for H-H-Harry. . ." he stammered, then stopped. He took a deep breath and blew it out hard, then squared his shoulders, scrubbed his tear-streaked face with his hands and stood up. "C'mon, Hermione. You and I have an owl to send to Mum, and I have no idea what to write," he said as he took her hand and walked out of the hospital wing.

Hours later, Harry woke up to find Ginny awake and watching him. He reached for his glasses and smiled at her as he put them on. "All right there, Ginny?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah, I guess. Nothing hurts if I don't move too much," he replied. "I'm still a bit stiff."

"Same here. I'm sorry I asked you to carry me in," she said with sad eyes. "Your back is probably worse because of that."

"Don't worry about it. I thought it would hurt you more to move you to Ron's arms than to just carry you myself. And honestly, my back wasn't sore then. Or if it was, I hadn't noticed it." He grinned at her. "At least you're getting me out of double Potions tomorrow."

Ginny smiled back at him. "And I'm getting out of double Divination," she chuckled.

"I'll help you with your Divination homework," he offered with a sly grin. "Let's see now. You're going to meet up with a dark haired speed demon on a broom and . . ."

Ginny laughed and threw her pillow at him.

"Oh, don't start with me, young lady," Harry teased. "I'm a professional patient. I've been in this hospital wing so long, I have my own monogrammed sheets!" He waved his hand and a crooked "HP" showed up on the border of his top sheet, his pillowcase, and in the centre of the bedspread. Then he tossed her pillow back at her, much more gently than she'd thrown it at him.

Ginny was laughing so hard, tears were in her eyes. "How did you do that? Ow, I have to stop laughing. That hurts."

Harry sat up quickly, his eyes wide with worry. "I'm sorry, Gin, I didn't mean. . .do you want me to call Madam Pomfrey?"

"No, I'm all right," she replied, settling back in the bed, tucking her pillow behind her. "I just have to laugh. . .carefully. . .I suppose," she concluded, smiling warmly at him. "How did you do that, anyway?"

"You know about the extra classes I've been taking with Dumbledore and Remus. This was a little trick of Dumbledore's. Do you like the monograms? I could've done a fancier lettering, I suppose," he mused, pretending to be seriously considering the artistic qualities of his handiwork.

Ginny chuckled. "Oh, it's lovely, truly," she said in the most posh voice she could muster.

"Shall I do some for you?" he offered, teasing her.

"Certainly, kind sir! That would be divine!"

Harry thought a minute, then gestured toward Ginny's covers. A flowery "G.W." appeared, with vines and roses around the letters.

"That's beautiful! Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Dunno," he said with a shrug. "I'm still figuring it out myself. This stuff is the 'easy first step' in a much more complex process. We can have a go if you want. But you should be resting, not playing with magic right now."

"Why? You're playing with magic," she said reasonably.

"Yeah, well, nobody told me not to!" he laughed, then ducked as she tossed her pillow at him again. It fell to the floor. "*Accio* pillow," he said, then caught the pillow and tossed it back to her. He lay back in his bed and lay looking at Ginny. "Hmmm. *Accio*," he said. Ginny's bed slid over next to his. "Ah, that's better. I was getting a cramp in my neck trying to see you over there." He rolled onto his side and smiled warmly at her.

"You're silly," she said with a chuckle, then turned on her side so they were looking at each other. "Thank you, Harry," she said seriously.

"For moving your bed? You're welcome," he said cheekily.

"No. Thank you for saving my life. Again. That's two life debts I owe you."

Harry sobered. "Nope. You more than repaid me when you took care of me when I was sick. We're even."

"But the Chamber of Secrets – I owe you for that too. And now this. . . ."

"I consider chocolate frogs to be good payment for most debts," he teased, but she wouldn't be teased out of her sudden sombre mood. He sighed and glanced around the room, then returned her steady gaze. "You scared the absolute bloody hell out of me."

"Me too," she said, her eyes wide.

He reached out and gently stroked her cheek. "If . . . . I don't know what. . . ." He stopped, and just lay there looking at her, his hand on her cheek. Finally he said, "I'm so glad you're all right."

"Me too," she murmured. "Thanks."

"So you're awake?" Madam Pomfrey called from her office. "Good, I've brought your supper. When you eat that, I'll give you each another dose of potion so you'll sleep through the night," she said as she bustled over to their beds. "What's this?" she said, looking from one bed to the other, both of which were decorated with monogrammed sheets and covers and were far closer together than normal.

"Erm. . ." Harry began, blushing madly.

"We were just. . ." said Ginny, matching him blush for blush.

Madam Pomfrey waved her wand and separated the beds, then gave Harry and Ginny their suppers. When they'd eaten, she handed them their doses of potion. "Good night. Sleep well," she said. "Nice decorations, by the way. Your work, I suppose, Mr. Potter?"

Harry grinned sheepishly and nodded.

"Put them right when you two leave, then, will you, or all my patients will want them." Madam Pomfrey said with a smile.

"'K," he agreed. He and Ginny took their potions with no complaint other than making faces at the taste.

"It would be nice if potions tasted like ch-ch-chocolate," Harry mused, yawning hugely as he settled back into bed.

"Or strawberry," Ginny agreed. "G'night, Harry." Her eyes were drooping already.

"Night," he replied, then turned over and fell asleep.

"Mr. Malfoy says he was under Imperius," Professor McGonagall told Harry and Ginny the next morning. "Professor Dumbledore is reluctant to use Veritaserum on a student. We're in a bit of a quandary. If he truly was under Imperius, then he cannot be punished for what he did, since he would have done it unwillingly."

Harry flew into a rage. "Imperius! He's a liar!" The pitcher of pumpkin juice on his bedside table shattered, splashing juice everywhere. The stack of chocolate frogs from the Weasley family toppled off the table, and the boxed cake from Mrs. Weasley hit the floor with a crash.

McGonagall made placating gestures with her hands, her eyes worried as she murmured, "There, there, Harry, please. Calm yourself."

Harry was breathing hard, his temper still hot, but he was at least trying to control himself. "Sorry, Professor."

Ginny reached for her wand, pointed it at the professor and Harry and said, "*Scourgify*," cleaning the pumpkin juice off both of them and Harry's bed, then levitated the frogs and the boxed cake back onto his bedside table.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley," Professor McGonagall said with a small smile, then she turned back to Harry. "The Omnioculars show the spell hitting Miss Weasley as well as her fall and you catching her. It's a horrible thing to see. Well done, Harry. Twenty points to Gryffindor for your remarkable catch."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry.

"And I'm giving ten points each to your team mates for their capture of Mr. Malfoy without injuring him. And I'm giving you another twenty-five points for your wisdom in telling them to Stun him only. Well done, all around."

Ginny said, "I'm glad *something* good came out of all this!"

Harry and Professor McGonagall smiled at her remark.

"We will continue investigating this matter, and we'll let you know what we find out," she assured them. "And Slytherin is losing seventy-five points for what Mr. Malfoy did, Imperius or no Imperius."

"Before we came back to school, I was warned that Voldemort," he tried to ignore the flinches of Professor McGonagall and Ginny, "had a plan to attack me using someone who's inside Hogwarts. Does Professor Dumbledore think Malfoy was the one sent to kill me?"

"It's a possibility we're looking into, Potter," McGonagall replied. "However, don't let your guard down. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have other assassins in place as well."

"Yeah, 'constant vigilance.' That's one of the good things I learned from Barty Crouch when he was pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody," Harry muttered. "For a nutter, he was an amazingly good teacher."

On the third morning of his hospital stay, Harry awoke to find Ginny was gone. He gazed at her empty bed, missing her company. The hospital wing door opened and Ginny came in, smiling to see him awake.

"Hi, Harry! How are you feeling?"

"Lonely, just now. When did she let you go?" He put on his glasses and sat up in the bed, wincing as he did so.

"Careful, you're not healed yet!" Ginny scolded. "She let me go me a couple of hours ago. It's time for your massage, and she's going to show me how to do it. I'm going to know loads about being a healer before I ever go for my training!" Her delight was obvious.

"So you're taking care of me again?" He smiled, leaning back against his pillow. "Thanks."

"Unbutton your shirt. I'll help you get it off. Then I'll need you to roll over," Ginny said, opening the jar of ointment and setting it close at hand on the bedside table. "Madam Pomfrey is coming now to get started."

Madam Pomfrey soon had Ginny trained to do the massage Harry needed. She left the girl to finish the job.

"How am I doing? Are you comfortable? Is it too hard or too soft?" she asked after a few minutes.

"Mmmmm," Harry replied contentedly.

She chuckled. "And how do you translate that?"

"You're doing really well," he said softly. He opened one eye and glanced around, then whispered, "Where's Madam Pomfrey?"

"Back in her office. Do you need her? Have I hurt you?" she asked in sudden concern.

"No. I just wanted to tell you – you're doing a much better job than she does. You're gentler than she is, and your hands are softer."

Ginny beamed. "Thanks! Let me know if anything hurts."

"Mmmm. Just keep doing what you're doing," he murmured, sounding sleepy.

Ginny finished his massage by rubbing his back gently with more ointment. By the time she was done, he was fast asleep again. She draped his pyjama top over his back and pulled up his covers. "Madam Pomfrey?" she called softly as she entered the office door. "I'm finished. He's asleep."

"Excellent," Madam Pomfrey replied with an approving smile. "If the massage is done correctly, it relaxes the patient. If it puts him to sleep, you've done a wonderful job. Well done. Full marks, Miss Weasley."

"I wish I could have a grade for this!" Ginny said with a grin.

"I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore. With all the work you've been doing toward your career goal, both now and during the summer, you should have some extra credit. You will certainly have no trouble getting into the healer training programme. You have a natural talent for this work." Madam Pomfrey was quite pleased with Ginny's interest. Not many students cared about the hospital wing beyond trying to stay out of it as much as possible, except for those who liked to skive off the occasional class.

A short time later, Ginny sat by Harry's bed doing her homework. Madam Pomfrey had pulled screens around his bed to give him privacy from the other students who came to get remedies for their various small ailments. Ginny heard occasional movement in the rest of the room, but ignored it and concentrated on her studies. Ron and Hermione came round at one point, bringing Harry's homework.

"Do you want us to sit with him for a bit, Ginny?" Ron asked. "Do you need a break?"

"No, I'm fine. I don't have any classes this afternoon, and I'm learning things from Madam Pomfrey. She says she's going to talk to Dumbledore about giving me extra credit for what I've been doing here and during the summer. Isn't that fantastic?"

"Wow, that's brilliant!" Hermione agreed. "Good for you!"

"Well, if you don't need us," Ron said, reaching out for Hermione's hand.

"You two go on. I'll tell him you were here. Madam Pomfrey said she may let him go this evening if he keeps progressing the way he has been."

"We'll call in after our afternoon classes, then, in case she lets him out," Ron said. "See you later."

By late afternoon, Ginny was dozing in her chair. Harry still slept on. The sound of hurried footsteps outside the curtain roused Ginny a bit, but then she heard a student talking with Madam Pomfrey in her office and thought that someone wasn't feeling well and needed a remedy. She looked at her watch and realized it was time to massage Harry's back again, so she pulled his covers down and lifted the shirt from his back. Her movements barely disturbed him. She started the massage and he woke just enough to smile in contentment at her, then closed his eyes again and relaxed under her hands. Madam Pomfrey bustled in, a flagon of potion in her hand.

"What do you think you're doing, Miss Weasley?" Madam Pomfrey demanded.

"Erm. . .you told me to give him another massage at 4 PM," Ginny said, startled. She was sure she'd heard the instructions correctly. "What are you giving him? I thought you said he didn't need any more potion?"

"This will fix him up," Madam Pomfrey said. "Turn over, Potter. Take this," she said, pulling Harry's shoulder roughly.

"Madam Pomfrey, what. . .?" Ginny began. Something wasn't right.

Still partly asleep, Harry rolled over and sat up a bit, taking the flagon and starting to drink it. "Eauw, what is this?" he yelped hoarsely. "It burns."

"Drink it down," Madam Pomfrey insisted, quickly lifting the bottom of the flagon to force the fluid down Harry's throat.

"*Stupify!*" Ginny cried, pointing her wand at Madam Pomfrey and grabbing the flagon from Harry's hand. "Harry, spit it out! Do you feel all right? This can't be Madam Pomfrey!"

"No," he groaned. "It burns." He was writhing in pain, curled in foetal position, holding his stomach.

"We have to get Dumbledore and Snape here right away," Ginny exclaimed.

Harry glanced at her, nodded, then sat up long enough to send a shaky *Adfero* before collapsing back in the bed. Ginny ran to the fireplace and threw floo powder into it, calling Snape and then Remus and telling them what had happened. She had guessed that the *Adfero* Harry sent was for Dumbledore. Dumbledore arrived in a few moments, quickly followed by Snape and Remus.

"Harry's been poisoned," Ginny said as she handed the flagon of potion to Snape.

"Severus, do you recognize it?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes. I have the antidote here. Miss Weasley described the poison and Potter's symptoms to me when she contacted me." Snape reached in is pocket and took out a small vial of purple fluid. As he lifted Harry's head to give him the antidote, Harry's eyes flew open.

"No!" Harry said weakly, struggling to get away from Snape. "Who are you?"

"I'm Professor Snape," Snape snapped. "Who do you think I am?"

"Tell me something only you and I would know," Harry demanded faintly.

Snape sighed, thinking hard. He leaned down and whispered in the boy's ear, "Your father once saved my life."

Harry looked at him and nodded, then opened his mouth willingly.

Snape put three drops of the antidote on Harry's tongue. "Swallow that. In five minutes, I'll give you three more drops. That should do it."

Harry swallowed and lay back weakly on the bed. He closed his eyes, his face and body contorted in pain.

"Harry?" said Remus, his face creased with worry. "Where does it hurt? Is there anything else we can do for you?"

"Mouth. Throat. Stomach. Burns all the way down," the boy said, his voice whispery.

"We can't give him anything else until the antidote takes effect," Snape commented.

"Hang on, Harry. We'll get you better in no time," Remus assured him, hoping he was right.

Dumbledore looked at the stunned Madam Pomfrey and said, "Well done, Miss Weasley. Come and tell me everything you remember, so we can sort out what happened here." He and Ginny went outside the curtained area to talk. A few moments later, Dumbledore strode off toward Madam Pomfrey's office. Ginny went back inside the curtain and took Harry's hand in hers as she sat by his bed. Within minutes, Dumbledore returned, with Madam Pomfrey beside him, wringing her hands and looking anguished.

"Madam Pomfrey!" Ginny cried. "I knew that wasn't you. Are you all right?"

"She Stunned me, then tied me up," the nurse replied, still wringing her hands, tears on her face. "I can't believe she did that to me. Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry!"

Harry opened one eye, glanced up at her and murmured, "'K." He closed his eyes and lay there moaning.

Remus moved to stand over the body on the floor and shot ropes out of his wand, tying her tightly. "Who is it?" he demanded, looking up at the real Madam Pomfrey.

"Millicent Bullstrode," she replied, shuddering at the memory. "She came in saying she had a headache, and when I went to get the headache powder for her, she Stunned me as I came back toward her. I had my hands full, never had a chance to get my wand out. I can't believe . . ."

"There, there, Poppy, no one blames you," Dumbledore said, patting her back gently. "It could have happened to anyone."

Snape looked at the stunned woman on the floor. "Millicent Bullstrode is not capable of brewing either Polyjuice potion or this poison. She must have had help making them, or someone gave them to her," he mused.

"Hopefully, we'll find out when we question her," Dumbledore replied, glancing at the fake Madam Pomfrey, then back at Harry. He put his hand on the boy's forehead, wiping the pain-induced sweat from his face. "There, there, Harry," he said kindly as the boy's eyes fluttered open to see who was touching him, relaxing as soon as he saw it was Dumbledore.

"Poor Harry. I was going to let him go this afternoon. He was so happy about it," Madam Pomfrey said, tears still in her eyes, rubbing her hands together as if she were trying to wash off some stubborn stain. "Tell me what you've done for him, Severus. Maybe there's something else I can do."

As she and Snape discussed the poison given and the antidote Snape had administered, Ron and Hermione entered.

"What's all this then?" Ron said, seeing the gathering of professors around Harry's bed. Then he saw Harry, white as a ghost with red blotches on his cheeks, drenched in sweat, curled up moaning in pain, and Ron gasped. "Bloody hell! What happened?"

"Harry!" Hermione shrieked and ran to the bed, bending over her friend. "What. . .?" Tears welled up in her eyes. She rounded on the professors. "What happened to him? He was getting better!"

"He's been poisoned," Remus began miserably, then told them the whole story. Hermione was in tears, Ron was white with shock, and Ginny still sat by Harry, holding his hand with both of hers, her face tight with worry.

"Ginny, you probably saved his life," Ron said.

"I bloody well hope so. I'm going to kill Millicent when she wakes up," Ginny said through gritted teeth.

"I'll help," Ron and Hermione said together.

"Now, now, nobody's going to kill Millicent," Dumbledore said calmly. "We will get to the bottom of this and she will be dealt with."

"Yeah, like you lot dealt with Malfoy?" Ron snarled. "He got house points taken away and that was all, and he nearly killed my sister and tried to kill Harry!"

"We have to find out why she did it," Dumbledore insisted. "If she was under Imperius, she is not to blame."

"She's a Slytherin. They all want Harry dead," Ron growled. He jumped as Hermione poked him in the ribs and pointed with her chin at Snape. "Sorry, Professor," he said to Snape, not entirely convincingly.

Snape merely curled his lip at Ron, then checked Harry's vital signs. "It's time for the second dose, and for that other potion, Poppy," he said. "Weasley, make yourself useful. Lift Potter's head and shoulders so I can give these to him without choking him."

Ron sat on the bed and put his arm under Harry's shoulders, lifting him to an almost sitting position. He gently pressed his friend's head into his shoulder, trying to hold him upright and still. "Harry? Mate? You need to wake up a bit. You're going to get more medicine. Harry? Wake up, mate."

Harry's head lolled on Ron's shoulder, then he opened his eyes and looked up at his friend. "Gerrof."

Ron smiled fondly at his friend. "I'm not going to 'gerrof.' You have to take your medicine. Open your mouth."

"It's OK, it really is Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey. You already checked, remember?" Remus prompted.

"Didn't," Harry muttered, shaking his head.

"Didn't what?" Ron asked, astonished.

"Pomfrey."

"Oh." Ron looked up at Dumbledore. "What do we do now?"

Dumbledore looked at Madam Pomfrey. "Tell him something only the two of you would know. Whisper it in his ear so it's private. It will be your password with him."

She leaned down and whispered in Harry's ear, "You have a crescent-shaped scar on your right buttock, but I don't know what caused it. You had it the first time I treated you in here."

Harry looked up at her in surprise. "You looked at. . .?"

She straightened up and chuckled. "Somebody has to bathe you when you're ill, Potter, or didn't that occur to you?"

"No," he said shortly. He looked at Snape, who was waiting with a vial in his hand, and opened his mouth obediently.

Snape administered the extra dose of antidote, then looked at Ron again. "Hold him like that a bit longer, Weasley."

Madam Pomfrey took the top off of the vial in her hand and said, "Open up, Mr. Potter."

"Whassat?" Harry groaned weakly.

"This will help heal you inside," she said. "The pain you feel is because your mouth, throat and stomach were burned by the poison. I believe the antidote got to it before it hit your intestines, so they should be all right. I'll have to give you several doses of this now that the antidote seems to be working."

"How can you tell it's working?" Ginny demanded. "He looks awful."

"Thanks," Harry whispered tartly with a frown at her.

"Well, you do. I'm sorry," Ginny snapped. "How can you tell?" she demanded again.

Snape straightened up and arranged his robes around him haughtily. "He's not dead. That means it's working. That's a very fast-acting poison. If you hadn't contacted me straight away and described it to me as you did so I could bring the proper antidote, he'd be gone now. He seems to have some kind of resistance to poisons. Most people would have died with the first swallow."

Harry looked blearily from Ginny to Snape and back to Ginny, then up at Madam Pomfrey. "'K," he muttered, and opened his mouth for his potion. When he'd finished swallowing, Ron laid him gently back in the bed and Hermione fussed with his covers, while Ginny sat mutely by his side, still holding his hand, tears streaming down her face as realization of how close a call Harry had had hit her.

All of them stood quietly watching his chest rise and fall as he breathed rapidly, as he had done since being poisoned. His breathing at long last slowed as his muscles visibly relaxed and he finally seemed to be past the worst of the pain.

Hermione was the first to move. She got up and calmly walked over to where Millicent Bullstrode lay, the Polyjuice potion having worn off, her heavy body bursting the seams of Madam Pomfrey's extra set of robes, the ropes Remus had put around Pomfrey's slender body cutting cruelly into Millicent's. Hermione stood for a moment looking down at the stunned girl, then started kicking her as hard as she could.

Ron rushed to her side. "Hermione! Stop, you'll get in trouble."

"I don't care! This great . . ." *kick* "fat. . ." *kick* "ugly. . ." *kick* "cow. . ." *kick* "nearly killed Harry!" *kick, kick, kick.*

Ron grabbed Hermione and lifted her, squirming and fighting, off her feet. She suddenly collapsed in tears, wrapping her arms around his neck and sobbing.

"Blimey, Hermione, you do have a temper sometimes!" he said with a chuckle. "Remind me not to get on the wrong side of you."

"Don't get on the wrong side of me," she murmured against his neck, with a small chuckle coming through the tears. "That felt good."

"Kicking her, or being picked up?"

"Both."

"Ah. Just needed to know for future reference," Ron said, giving her a squeeze and setting her back on her feet.

"Harry!" Ginny cried. He'd just opened his eyes. "Are you feeling better?"

Harry took his hand out of hers and rubbed the tears from her eyes with shaking fingers. "Don't cry."

"Sometimes I just have to," she said with a tremulous smile. "Redhead, you know. Temperamental." She leaned her cheek into his hand and asked again, "Are you feeling better?"

"I don't. . .feel like. . . playing Quidditch today," he replied softly.

"Huh?"

"Tired." He dropped his hand and fell asleep.

Chapter 14 – Transfiguration

Two days later, Harry was awakened by the feeling of someone breathing in his face. He opened his eyes to see the large green eyes of Dobby the house-elf hovering above him. They were nearly nose to nose.

"Mr. Harry Potter, sir! You is awake at last!" Dobby cried, ecstatic. "Dobby has been hoping and hoping you would wake up soon. Dobby has been so worried about you, sir!"

Harry squinted at the house-elf, pushing his head farther into his pillow to try to see him in focus, and tried to smile. Dobby backed away a little, then got right back in Harry's face.

"Is you hungry, Harry Potter? Madam Pomfrey asked me to bring soup for you. Dobby has twelve kinds of soup ready for Harry Potter. Dobby didn't know what Harry Potter would like to eat when he's been p-p-poisoned." The house-elf gasped and clapped his hands over his mouth as he finished speaking. His eyes were huge.

Harry managed a wan smile at Dobby. "Thanks," he murmured.

Ron stepped inside the screens. "Hey, you're awake!"

"Barely," Harry grumbled in a whisper as his hand fumbled around on the table by his bed. "Where are my glasses?"

"Oh, sorry," Ron said, picking up Harry's glasses off the table and handing them to his friend. "Here."

Harry put his glasses on and tried to sit up in bed, but not too successfully. Ron hurried to help him.

"Hang on, take it easy," Ron said. "I've got you." He slid his arm behind Harry's shoulders and lifted him, then plumped up the pillows behind him before laying Harry back against them. "Better?"

"Ginny's been teaching you how to be a healer, then?" Harry joked hoarsely. His attempt at a laugh ended in a coughing fit. "Owww."

"Sorry, mate. Here, you need to drink some water. Madam Pomfrey said you have to drink loads of fluids. That's why Dobby's here with all these soups."

Harry drank from the goblet Ron held for him, and looked at Dobby again. "What kind of soup did you bring, Dobby? I am a bit hungry."

"So you should be!" said the ever-hungry Ron. "You haven't had any food at all for a couple of days."

Dobby brought over a tray with bowls full of soups of various colours and fragrances, which made Harry suddenly ravenous. "Madam Pomfrey said chicken broth first, then whatever you want, Harry Potter," Dobby said with a little bow as he offered the soups.

"Sounds good to me," Harry agreed in a hoarse whisper. Ron and Dobby made rather a mess of trying to help Harry eat, but they were all enjoying the effort. After they'd fed Harry as much soup as he could manage, Dobby cleaned everything up with a wave of his hand and prepared to leave.

"Dobby, thanks a lot," Harry said, sounding a bit stronger now. "It was great having so many choices. That pumpkin soup, in particular, was just ace."

"That one is Dobby's specialty, Harry Potter!" Dobby said happily. "I is glad you is liking it. If you wants anything else, you send for Dobby!"

"I will. Thanks," Harry replied, smiling at the elf's obvious delight in pleasing him.

After Dobby left, Ron helped Harry get more comfortable in the bed, then sat in the chair beside it. "Feeling better today, eh?" Ron said.

"Yeah."

"That's good. Dobby's been up here several times a day bringing things for you to eat, but you haven't been awake, and Madam Pomfrey said your stomach couldn't manage food yet anyway. Hermione, Ginny and I have been eating it – Dobby's brought the very best Hogwarts has to offer, fabulous stuff! It took Madam Pomfrey a while to convince him you would only be able to eat soup once you could eat again."

"Has she said when she'll let me out?"

"Nah. You've been pretty sick. Now that you're eating again, it shouldn't be too long, though," Ron said bracingly.

"Hope you're right," Harry replied sincerely. He rested quietly a moment, then turned to Ron again and asked, "What did they do with Millicent?"

"She said she was under Imperius, so there wasn't anything they could do or anyone to arrest for it. They know she got the Polyjuice Potion and the poison from someone else, but they don't know who. They couldn't find out more, even with Veritaserum, because she's been Memory Charmed. Dumbledore was reluctant to use the Veritaserum. He said he's never used it on a student before and really didn't think it was right to do so, but since you've been attacked by students twice now, he thought it was necessary to try it." Ron sighed. "It's just not fair that she should get off, any more than Malfoy should, but they're not getting any punishment beyond losing house points."

"That stinks."

"Too right it does."

Hermione came through the screens, burdened with books, as usual. "Oh, you're awake! That's wonderful! Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Harry replied with a smile.

"I brought your homework. Do you feel up to working on it?" she offered.

"I've missed so many classes, I don't know how I'll ever catch up," he grumbled feebly.

"Well, if you feel strong enough, we can start catching up now," Hermione said brightly, spreading books, parchment, ink bottles and quills on the table by his bed. "I think you'll enjoy what we're doing in Transfiguration," she commented as she pulled out a small wicker crate that had tiny mewling noises coming out of it. "I brought one of the animals we've been working with for you to practice on. Professor McGonagall said I could teach you this spell." Hermione was clearly delighted at the trust the professor had expressed in her abilities.

"So what are we doing?"

"This is a mammal to mammal transfiguration, a preparation for the Animagus transfiguration. She's going to start talking about that in a few days. What we're doing here is turning a kitten into a monkey, and then back again." She pulled out a small black kitten with green eyes. "Isn't he cute?"

Harry scratched the kitten behind its ears, making the little cat purr loudly. "Shame we have to turn him into a monkey," he commented as he stroked the cat. He looked up at Hermione. "What kind of monkey is it supposed to be?"

"That's a good question. Most people concentrated on the transformation itself rather than the right type of monkey. Since they didn't have the monkey's details in mind, they made an awful mess of things. It should be a spider monkey, those sweet little ones with white around their faces. Here's a picture of one so you can get it in your mind."

"How'd you get on with this, Ron?" Harry asked as he looked from the picture to the kitten and back to the picture again.

"My monkey had a cat's head and body and monkey legs and tail," Ron said with a disgusted look on his face. "It was awful. I never did get it right."

"We're all going to practice with this kitten," Hermione said. "We'll show Harry how to do it and we'll take turns until we're really good at it. I'd love for all of us to be able to be Animagi!" She handed Harry his wand. "What you do is, think very clearly of the animal you want it to become, then tap it three times with your wand."

"What's the incantation?"

"There isn't one. When an Animagus is in animal form and wants to become human again, he can't say an incantation. This spell is practice for that kind of transfiguration, so it's done the same way."

"If you're an animal, you can't tap yourself with a wand three times either," Harry said reasonably.

"Once you get proficient at this, it's wandless magic," Hermione explained. "You should be really good at this, Harry."

After several tries, Harry managed to get the kitten to change its colouring to that of the spider monkey, but that was all. He threw his wand down in frustration. "I'm not getting anywhere with this," he muttered.

"Try turning his paw into a monkey hand – just that much. Start small," Hermione suggested.

"Let me see you do it," Harry said, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't feel well, had tons of homework to do and this spell just seemed to be beyond him. He was getting grumpier by the minute.

"OK," Hermione said, then tapped the kitten three times with her wand and a spider monkey sat where the kitten had just been.

"Whoa, Hermione, that's cool," Harry said, impressed with how easy she made it look. "OK, I'll try it again."

"Just a paw at first, Harry," Hermione reminded him.

"'K." He concentrated hard, looking at one of the monkey's delicate hands. One, two, three taps of the wand and suddenly the monkey had a black cat's paw where its hand had been. "Wow, I did it!" He chuckled at the quizzical expression on the monkey's face as it examined its new paw.

"That's great! Now try to do more of it. Little steps at first," Hermione encouraged him.

"That's a lot faster than I managed," Ron grumbled.

"You want a go?" Harry offered.

"No, you go ahead and work on it. I'm doing my essay for Snape," Ron replied with a heavy sigh. He turned back to his parchment, but kept watching Harry's progress out of the corner of his eye.

Three more tries and suddenly Harry had a kitten where the monkey had been. "I think I liked the kitten too much and didn't really want to turn him into a monkey," he said, smiling at the happily purring little cat.

"That could be," Hermione agreed. "Can you turn him into a monkey now? Concentrate!"

A monkey sat in Harry's lap where the kitten had been. "Fantastic! Well done, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Cool," Harry said as he turned the monkey back into the black kitten. He slid down in his bed, still holding the kitten. "What a cute little guy," he murmured sleepily as he cuddled the kitten and tried to get comfortable in his bed.

"I think we've worn you out, haven't we?" Hermione said, helping Harry get his pillows rearranged.

"Yeah. But this transfiguration was just amazing, Hermione. You're a good teacher. Thanks," he said with a smile, giving the kitten a last pat as Hermione took it from him.

"OK, Ron, your turn," she said, handing him the kitten. Laughter rang through the hospital wing as Ron attempted to change the kitten into a monkey. Some of the transfigurations he came up with were amazingly bad, but finally he, too, had it. By the time he got it, Harry had fallen asleep, so Ron and Hermione kept their celebration to a quiet kiss.

"He's right, you know," Ron assured her as they stood in a warm embrace, his chin resting on top of her curly hair.

"About what?" she said, pulling back to look up at him.

"You are a really good teacher – and you're lots prettier than anyone on staff here. I'll bet the boys in class would pay lots more attention if you were teaching."

Hermione blushed in pleasure at the compliment, then said, "Yeah, I've been thinking about being a teacher. I think I'd like to do some other things first, then maybe come back to Hogwarts and teach," Hermione mused as she gave Ron another kiss, then turned to put the kitten back in the wicker basket.

A few days later, Madam Pomfrey thought Harry was strong enough to be let go. She made him wait until mid-morning before he could go so she could make sure he ate enough porridge and got another dose of his pain potion. Ron had brought his robes and books to the hospital wing before breakfast. Now, Harry was sitting on the edge of his bed, already dressed and eager to leave when Ginny arrived to take Remus's place sitting with Harry.

"Oh! She's really going to let you out?" Ginny exclaimed, her face alight with excitement. "Ron said he thought you'd get out today, but I didn't want to get my hopes up."

"Yeah," Harry replied, grinning. "I'm a free man at last! Madam Pomfrey says I have to eat only soup or porridge the next two days, but other than that, I'm fine."

Remus picked up the homework he'd been marking and smiled at Harry. "It will be good to have you back in class," he said. "And Ginny – I appreciate you being here to walk Harry to his class, as I don't have time to take him myself. I suspect he won't be able to stride down the hall with his usual energy yet, so take your time"

"Don't worry," Ginny replied. She and Harry smiled at each other. "I'll look after him."

Remus smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "Yes, I'm sure you will," he said. "Take care of yourself, Harry. I'll see you later."

"See you, Remus," Harry replied, then looked at Ginny. "He says you're doing really well in class."

"That's all down to you, Harry," she said modestly. "The D.A. meetings, and sitting here with you explaining things to me – well, when you've been able to, anyway – I've learned a lot."

Harry blushed a little, then said, "Ready to get out of here? I am!"

"Absolutely!" They picked up their bags and walked out of the hospital wing and headed toward Harry's first class, Transfiguration. The corridors were empty, with most of the students well into their first morning classes. As they crossed the entrance hall, Harry looked wistfully at the main doors to the castle.

"Let's go outside," he said suddenly. "We've still got a little while before my next class. It's been absolutely ages since I've seen the sun or smelled fresh air." They went out and sat on the front steps of the castle. It was a beautiful morning. After several days of rain, the sun shone brilliantly in a clear blue sky, and the air smelled of damp earth and fresh cut grass. Harry breathed deeply, a contented smile on his face. "I've missed this," he said simply.

"Sitting on the steps smelling the air?" she teased.

"Being anywhere there's fresh air and sunshine," he replied, looking fondly around the grounds. The giant squid was sunning its tentacles, waving them gently above the surface of the lake. The trees were robed in scarlet, gold, orange and brown. Autumn flowers sprinkled the gardens with colour. The cool breeze put colour in Harry's pale cheeks. He sat contentedly for several minutes, enjoying the peaceful scene, then sighed.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, concerned. His face had changed from the peaceful look of happiness of a moment before to one tinged with tension.

"I need to talk to you," he said seriously, not looking at her, but studying his shoes instead. His hands had hung relaxed between his knees as he sat on the steps, but now he clasped them together tightly, as if he were about to face something difficult.

"About what?" she asked, her stomach clenching anxiously.

"About us. I mean. . ." he seemed to search for the right words. "About us pretending you're my girlfriend. My feelings have changed."

Ginny's heart sank. "Oh," she said in a small voice, her eyes filling with tears. She blinked back the tears savagely, straightened her shoulders and held her head up high. If she had to face this, she'd face it proudly. She was a strong young woman, after all. "So you want to break up our pretend romance?"

He looked up at her, startled. "No! No, that's not what I meant." He pounded his fist against his knee. "I knew I'd get all wrong-footed. Damn."

"I'm confused," she said carefully. "What are you talking about?"

Harry turned to her and took both her hands in his. "As I said, my feelings have changed. It started quite a while ago, apparently, but I was too thick-headed to notice." He saw the bewilderment on Ginny's face, and felt the nervous tension in her hands. The breeze was lifting her hair, blowing glittering red strands across her eyes. He reached out and tenderly tucked her hair behind her ear. "When you fell . . . ." He stopped, took a deep breath and soldiered on. "We've been good friends, you and I, for a long time now, and become better friends this summer and autumn. When you fell, I realized I hadn't been just your friend for weeks. I fancy you, Ginny. I'd like you to be my real girlfriend."

Ginny gasped, her face lit with joy for a moment, but then she forced down her elation. "Oh, Harry. I've. . .well. . . . Oh, I hope I'm not going to hate myself for this," she began hesitantly, chewing her lip anxiously.

Harry stiffened, and then his shoulders slumped as if all the air had gone out of him. When he found his voice, he said, "Oh. I see. Hermione was right. You don't fancy me anymore." He started to get to his feet. "Right. Well. Um. . ."

"No! Oh, no, Harry, you don't understand!" she replied, then wondered how she was going to manage what she felt she needed to say.

He sat back down. "What don't I understand?"

"Um. . .I have to ask this. I'm sorry. Have you been working with your Pensieve at all?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, why?"

"And. . .um. . .do you remember Casey?"

"Yes. I remember her now." His expression went from confusion to understanding. "Oh, I know. You want to know if I'm over her?"

"Well. . .yes. It's only been a short time, really."

Harry dropped his head, studying his hands, then looked off in the distance. "Casey was . . . I really did love her. It just destroyed me when she died." He glanced at her for a moment. "You know that." He dropped his eyes again. "The memories I have of her are all happy ones. I've been working my way through them, putting them back in my head little by little. I don't want to forget her – she deserves better than that." He glanced at Ginny again, then looked down and watched his hands twisting together nervously between his knees. "I don't know how to explain it. I know it was only a short time ago, but it feels like months, or even years, honestly. I think it must be The Refiner's Fire that caused that. It's as if I've lived five or ten years between then and now. I feel that much older, as if that much time has passed in many ways. It still hurts that she died – it may always hurt. But I can remember her fondly now, enjoy the memories, at least a little at a time." He looked up at Ginny again. "What I felt for Casey was so special – but she's gone. I didn't think I'd fancy anyone again for a long time, but then when you fell, I realized I'd fancied you for quite a while already. It scared me to death to think I might lose you."

"You were probably just afraid of another girl dying. You were feeling responsible for both of us," Ginny offered hesitantly.

"No! That's not it at all!" He paused in thought for a moment. "Well, maybe a little," he allowed, "but not all of it, no. It scared me into realizing how important you've become to me, how much you add to my life . . . how much I care for you. I had a flash go through my mind of how life would be without you, and I. . .I couldn't bear it." He looked at her shyly, taking her hands in his. "I do fancy you, Ginny. Casey is a dear memory, but I don't think she'd want me to mourn her forever. She was too generous for that."

Ginny nodded. "Yes, she was very sweet."

"So are you. And you're spicy too," he teased gently, hope lighting in his eyes as her fingers hesitantly entwined with his. "A perfect blend of sugar and spice." He sat smiling at her, then said, "Do you fancy me at all?"

"Do I fancy you?" she said with a sudden laugh. "When have I not? And it's just gotten stronger as I've gotten to know you better." She blushed as she said this.

"So would you be willing to be my girlfriend for real?" he asked again, then laughed as she pulled her hands from his and wrapped her arms around his neck in a bone-crunching hug. "May I take that as a yes?" he asked as he returned her hug.

"Yes!" said Ginny with laughter in her voice as she pulled back to look at him. "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!" She hugged him again.

"Whew!" Harry said, teasing her. "I've been thinking about having this talk with you for days now. I have to admit, I was a bit worried!" They ended the hug and sat holding hands.

Ginny tilted her head, a puzzled look on her face. "Worried? Why?"

"As I said, Hermione told me you didn't fancy me anymore," he said with a shrug. "She said that was why you were finally talking in front of me, and going out with all those boys." He ducked his head a moment, then looked up at her again, a bit shyly. "I was afraid she was right and that you were just being a good friend to me, pretending to be my girlfriend to get those girls to back off."

"Ha. Shows what Hermione knows!" Ginny beamed. "I went out with those boys when I realized pining after you was getting me nowhere. You had too many other things on your mind to notice me. I got over my shyness by going out with those boys – that's why I was able to talk in front of you then."

"Oh, fantastic!" he replied brightly. "It's nice to hear Hermione doesn't really know absolutely everything." His smile softened as he leaned in and studied her mouth quite seriously.

Ginny lifted her face for her first real kiss with Harry. When they'd been pretending to go out, he'd kissed the top of her head or her cheek, but never a real kiss. He kissed her slowly, tenderly, once, twice, then opened his mouth and ever so delicately touched her lips with his tongue. She responded with heated passion, taking Harry's breath away. When they broke the kiss, his lips travelled down the side of her neck to the delicate skin behind her ear, then he gently nibbled her earlobe. "Mmm, you taste good," he murmured playfully.

She laughed and nibbled his ear in return. "You, too. I think I'll have an ear sandwich for lunch, please," she teased.

"I might need that ear later," he protested mildly, "but I can always use yours." Their laughter died at the sound of the bell. "Uh-oh, I need to go. I've already missed enough classes this year," he said reluctantly. "C'mon, Miss Weasley," he said, standing and offering her his hand to help her get up. "May I carry your books?"

"You're the one who's been sick. I should carry yours," she protested, hoisting her bag onto her shoulder.

"A gentleman never lets a lady carry her own books," Harry said, trying to sound posh and dignified as he took her bag from her. Ginny laughed and they walked back into the castle with Harry's arm draped around her shoulders. "By the way, would you like to go to the next Hogsmeade weekend with me?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and widening his eyes, playfully acting very hopeful, as if afraid she might refuse.

"I might consider it," she teased.

"Please, please, please, please, please?" he begged, his eyes wide and sparkling with suppressed laughter.

"Just the two of us?"

"Well, Ron and Hermione might go with us, but I suspect we can ditch them at some point if we want to – they won't mind time alone together," he replied with a chuckle.

"I would love to go to Hogsmeade with you, Harry," she said with a warm smile, her face alight with happiness.

At the door of the Transfiguration classroom, Harry cupped Ginny's face in his hands and kissed her gently before handing her bag back to her and entering the class. "See you later," he said over his shoulder as he opened the door.

"Yeah," she replied, a dreamy smile on her face. "Later." She watched him enter the room, and heard the explosion of sound that greeted him.

"HARRY!" "HARRY'S BACK!" "Hey, Harry, good to see you!" the calls came from his classmates amidst wild applause. Professor McGonagall was actually smiling despite the din, rather than having her usual stern face on.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, it's very good to have you back," McGonagall said with a warm smile. "As you can see, your classmates missed you."

Harry was stunned by the reception. He walked slowly up the aisle to where Hermione and Ron were saving him a seat near the front. He shook hands and had his back pounded so often it was getting sore again. He was laughing long before he sat down with his friends. "What's all this, then?" he asked.

"Colin worked out how to make copies of the Omniocular pictures," Hermione explained. "He's threatening to make posters of the catch you made when Ginny fell – but he did say he'd talk to you and Ginny first. Everyone in Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff has seen the pictures by now. And then when Millicent poisoned you – well, let's just say the Slytherins don't have many friends right now. People have asked us about you every time they've seen us. Loads of them wanted to come and visit you, but Madam Pomfrey only allowed a few people to see you."

"You should see the list of those who want to be in D.A. now," Ron added. "It's HUGE! The people who didn't believe all the stories about you finally have proof that you really are a hero and are under attack. They want to be on our side now."

Harry was uncertain how to respond to this news. He didn't know if he wanted friends who had to be convinced he wasn't a liar by witnessing him doing something brave. And he didn't consider his catch of Ginny to be brave – it was something that needed to be done, that's all. His musings were cut short by Professor McGonagall calling the class to order.

"Now, class, I told you we'd be starting on the Animagus transfiguration soon. Today is the day." She waited for the excited whispers to die down. "I know you all want to succeed at this spell, but I must warn you. The Animagus transfiguration is an extremely difficult one to master. As you know, we talked about it a bit your third year, but you need to have a good bit of practical magic experience under your belts before attempting it yourself. We introduce the practical application of the transformation in sixth year, but many students don't succeed with it until seventh – and, I'm sorry to say, the vast majority never manage it at all."

Seamus had his hand in the air. "Yes, Mr. Finnegan?"

"So you're saying most of us won't be able to do it?"

"That's right."

"How many people per year manage it?"

"In the last century, there have been only seven Animagi registered," she replied.

"Seven?" Seamus's voice cracked in astonishment. "In a century?"

"Yes. Of course, there may have been more who managed the transformation but didn't register for whatever reason. I know of three such cases myself."

"Why didn't they register?" Seamus asked.

"They were students here and taught themselves how to do it for their own reasons. We only learned a few years ago about these boys' success with the transformation."

Parvati's hand was in the air. "So did they get in trouble for not registering?"

"They might have done, but two of them are dead, and the third is working for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," she ignored the gasp this statement caused and ploughed on, "so he's out of Ministry reach at present. When they do capture him, they will have many more charges to bring against him besides his non-registration as an Animagus," Professor McGonagall said, her nostrils white with disapproval.

"Were the other two dark Wizards too?" Lavender asked nervously. "So maybe those with Dark tendencies do better at the transformation?"

"No, no, not at all. The other two young men were both wonderful students, the best in school, actually. One was head boy, the other his best friend. The third one was a good friend of theirs

too, but he turned out badly." She glanced at Harry a moment, saw no disapproval there, then went on. "I suppose there's no reason not to tell you who they were. James Potter, Harry's father, was a stag when he transformed. Sirius Black, James's best friend and Harry's godfather – who was not a murderer, no matter what you've heard – became a great black dog when he changed. They were both good men and are sorely missed by those who knew and loved them." She looked kindly at Harry as she said this, her eyes sad and a bit misty, remembering two students who she had been quite fond of. She took a deep breath, collected herself and got back on topic. "The third one is Peter Pettigrew, who faked his death and framed Sirius Black for it. Pettigrew's Animagus form is a rat that's missing a toe on his right front foot and has ragged ears. If you see such a rat, catch it. He needs to be punished for his crimes." Her lips drew into a thin, angry line.

The class looked from McGonagall to Harry in amazement. Ron ducked his head, hoping nobody remembered his old rat's missing toe and ragged ears.

McGonagall shook herself out of her suppressed rage at Pettigrew and got back on topic. "The Animagus transformation is essentially wandless magic, as I've told you before. That aspect alone will prevent some of you from managing it. Not all Wizards are capable of the higher forms of wandless magic. Whether you are or not is no reflection on you as a wizard – oh, and just to ease your worries, the Animagus transformation is not in your N.E.W.T.s. If you do succeed with it and can demonstrate it, you will most certainly get extra credit, but it will not be held against you in any way if you can't manage this spell. At any rate. . .just as some people can sing beautifully, some can write excellent poetry, and some can fly brooms with far more skill than others, some wizards are naturally skilled at wandless magic and some simply are not. I am introducing this transformation now so you can practice it for a long time before you leave Hogwarts. By having so much time to work on it, you may have a better chance of success. And, as we saw from Mr. Krum's performance in the second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament two years ago, partial transformations are entirely possible and can be quite useful. Now, to the transformation itself." She moved to the board and tapped it with her wand. A numbered list of words appeared. "There are certain things we must consider when thinking about the Animagus transformation. As you can see, number one is 'Purpose.' Can anyone tell me the purpose of becoming an Animagus? Yes, Miss Granger."

"Animagus skills allow the wizard to move secretly, to spy, to do research quietly, to get into places he normally couldn't go," Hermione said.

"Well done, Miss Granger. Five points," McGonagall said approvingly.

Harry raised his hand and McGonagall called on him. "Being an Animagus means you can do things you couldn't do as a human."

"Exactly, Mr. Potter. Five points," McGonagall said with a smile.

Neville had his hand in the air.

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom?"

"What Harry said – what does he mean, you can do things you can't as a human?" Neville looked genuinely puzzled.

:McGonagall studied Harry for a moment. "Mr. Potter, would you like to answer that? Or shall I?"

Harry thought a moment. She'd already brought up his dad and Sirius. "I can do it." He turned to Neville. "You all know Professor Lupin is a werewolf. My dad and Sirius were his best friends and they decided to become Animagi so they could keep him company when he was in wolf form. Werewolves only attack humans, so they were safe from him, and when they were with him, he was better able to control himself. This was all before the Wolfsbane Potion was invented that keeps him calm during the full moon. He doesn't need that kind of help now, with that potion. And when Sirius was on the run, he could live as a dog, eating rats and things a human wouldn't want to eat, and take care of himself that way."

Some in the class reacted with "yuck" or "gross" when they heard about Sirius living off rats.

"Mr. Potter is quite correct. When you take on the animal form, you gain the abilities of that sort of animal. Therefore, Harry's father, being a stag, was large and strong and could run very fast. He could leap large obstacles with ease, live off the land and fight with his antlers like a stag, if he needed to. Sirius Black, being a dog, could run quickly, live off the land, and fight like a dog if need be. And, being a dog, he could pretend to be a friendly stray and stay near people, where James's stag wouldn't have been suited for staying in a village."

Harry's hand was up.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Can you become a magical animal, and if so, do you take on its abilities?" he asked.

"I recommend you choose a normal animal for your Animagus form, because a magical animal would be more difficult to hide. One of the best uses of the Animagus transformation is stealth. However, if you could manage to transform into a magical animal – and very, very few wizards have managed this feat – then yes, Mr. Potter, you would take on their abilities."

"So if I was a phoenix, I could fly, have healing tears, carry heavy loads, and all that?"

"Yes. But before you go too far wanting to be a phoenix, Mr. Potter, I must remind you that changing into a normal type of animal, particularly a domestic animal, is a much safer choice."

Harry and Ron looked at each other and grinned. When had Harry ever taken the safer choice?

Professor McGonagall had picked up her wand. "Now, as we did with the kitten to monkey transformation, we will start with something smaller. There is no incantation. You tap your wand three times on your non-wand hand and think of the paw or foot of the kind of animal you want to become. I would recommend starting with something familiar, like a cat's paw, since we've just been working with cats. Give it a go, then. And don't worry. If you can't reverse it, I will take care of it."

The class went to work, with no luck and lots of frustration. Near the end of the class period, Hermione suddenly exclaimed, "You did it!" and Ron said, "Bloody hell!"

"Language, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall called from across the room. "What's going on over there?"

Harry sat in wonder, looking at his left hand which was now a black cat's paw, if a large one. At the professor's question, he mutely held it up for her to see.

McGonagall was delighted. "Oh, well done! Twenty points!" She inspected his paw thoroughly, then had him stand up in front of the class. "Show the class your paw, Mr. Potter." He held it up and turned it around so they could see all sides of it, blushing at the attention. "Now show us what it can do."

Harry glanced at McGonagall, not sure at first what she meant, but then he understood. He stretched his "fingers" and long, sharp claws popped out of the fur. An amazed sound flowed across the room as everyone goggled at the claws.

"Excellent! Now let's see if you can change it back," McGonagall instructed.

Harry tried several times unsuccessfully. It didn't help that he was still standing up in front of the class.

"Concentrate, Potter," McGonagall encouraged. She leaned in and whispered to him, "I know you can do this. Don't think so hard about using the wand, just think of the transformation."

Harry nodded and waved his hand more than tapping with his wand, and suddenly the paw was his own left hand again. "Wow!" he breathed.

"Very good, Harry. Sit down and practice. Don't overtire yourself," McGonagall said kindly.

"How did you do that?" Hermione said, rather miffed that she wasn't having any luck at all with the spell.

"No idea. It just . . . worked!" Harry replied, both delighted and astonished.

"Do it again," Hermione insisted.

"'K" Harry agreed, then turned his hand into a black cat's paw again.

"Whoa, Harry, you're good at this! Maybe because your dad was, eh?" Ron said, his eyes wistful as he looked at Harry's paw. He hadn't changed a single hair on his hand no matter how hard he'd tried.

"I dunno. Maybe."

Neville leaned forward to ask, "Does it hurt your hand when you change it?"

"No."

"Oh. Then I'll try harder. I was afraid it would hurt," Neville said timidly.

"What's it feel like when you put your claws out, Harry?" Seamus asked excitedly.

"Like I'm spreading my fingers open wide, sort of," Harry explained. "I don't know how else to explain it. It doesn't hurt."

"Bet those claws would, though, huh?" Seamus said with a grin. "You could take out Malfoy in a heartbeat with those!"

"Yeah, and I suppose she isn't teaching them the same subject?" Ron grumbled. "You watch. I'll bet Malfoy will be good at this too. And he'll become something really nasty like a dragon or something, and there's Harry with cat's claws to fight him."

"Who said I was going to stay a cat?" Harry asked reasonably, stroking the fur on his paw and feeling the strength of his claws.

"So what are you going to become?" Seamus asked.

"Dunno. A cat would be cool, but I love to fly. Maybe a bird of some kind, I dunno," Harry answered, still amazed by his paw.

"Can I see your claws, Harry?" Parvati asked.

"Actually, that's a good idea, Miss Patil," Professor McGonagall said. "Harry, would you please walk around the class and let them see how well your transformation worked." Harry got up and started walking desk to desk, feeling odd that so many people were handling his hand and fingers. "Ask Mr. Potter whatever questions you think of. I can tell you about the Animagus transfiguration all day, but it won't have the impact of your hearing about it from a classmate. I'll start. How does it feel when they inspect your paw? How does your paw feel?"

"It's weird," he said as Seamus held Harry's paw in both of his hands, pressing on the pads to make the claws pop out, then flicking the ends of the claws with his fingernails. "It feels. . .as if they're holding hands with me."

Seamus dropped Harry's hand as if it was hot, which evoked a lot of laughter from the class.

"And when they flick the claws like Seamus was just doing, it's. . .it feels weird. It feels like my fingernails are really long and are being tapped, I guess you could say."

"A very apt analogy, Mr. Potter. And you say the transformation wasn't painful at all, nor is it uncomfortable for you to have that paw right now?"

"No, not uncomfortable or painful. Sirius told me he didn't mind being a dog, and that he even enjoyed it. All he minded was the fleas." Harry smiled sadly at the memory. "He could transform in an instant. It was amazing."

"Very good, Mr. Potter. You may take your seat and transform your paw back into a hand. Class, your homework will be for you to list at least three animals you think you would like to try to become as an Animagus, and why you think each animal would be a good choice for you. List the reasons as stated on the board: 1. Purpose; 2. Effect; 3. Usefulness; 4. Abilities; 5. Potential Problems. This is a two week assignment. I expect you to make good use of the library to research the animals that interest you. You will need to include a drawing and detailed diagrams of each animal chosen. I would like you to choose three animals so you

have a choice of which animal to transform into. Sometimes our first choice isn't the one that will work for us. If you don't succeed with your first choice, perhaps you will with another. I expect at least three rolls of parchment for this assignment. Be sure to do your research thoroughly. That will give you a much better chance of success. When you hand your homework in, we will discuss which animals you picked were good choices and why. There's the bell. Good day."

As the students gathered their things, the professor said, "Mr. Potter. A word, please."

Harry walked up to her desk. "Yes, Professor?"

"Harry, I'm very pleased with how you did today." She actually smiled at him.

Harry knew this was a rare moment. McGonagall wasn't known for giving praise or smiles, and she'd done both several times today. "Thank you, Professor," Harry said, beaming.

"You have a natural talent for this skill, I suspect. I would like you to work with Professor Dumbledore on this spell during your wandless magic lessons. I think he will be able to accelerate your learning. I know you have a great deal of homework to catch up on, but do spend as much time as you can practising this spell. Try turning your feet into paws, for instance. Try turning both hands into paws. That kind of thing."

"Yes, Professor," he agreed. This homework assignment actually sounded like fun!

At the evening meal in the Great Hall that night, Ron and Hermione noticed something different about Harry and Ginny. They'd been pretending to be boyfriend and girlfriend to avoid Harry's fan girl problem, but they'd also become closer friends, especially recently. But a close friendship didn't explain the glow on their faces, the giggles when they caught each other's eye, or when their hands brushed accidentally while passing food around.

"All right, what's up with you two?" Hermione said, tilting her head and trying hard not to laugh.

"What?" said Ginny, blushing furiously.

"Huh?" said Harry intelligently.

"I know something's up. Something's different. What happened today?" Hermione hissed, leaning across the table toward them. "Tell me!"

"Tell you later, OK?" Harry said after a nervous moment when he glanced at Ginny and they both blushed as a result.

Hermione sat back and crossed her arms, a knowing smile on her face. "It isn't pretend anymore, is it?"

"What?" Ginny said again.

"Huh?" Harry repeated, apparently at a loss for words.

"Uh-huh. I thought it would happen sometime. You'll have to tell us all about it after dinner," Hermione said with a smug smile.

"What am I missing?" Ron asked, looking from his sister and his best friend to his girlfriend, a befuddled expression on his face.

Hermione tugged on his sleeve. He leaned down to her and she whispered something in his ear.

"No way! Really? Well, bloody hell, it's about time!" he cried, reaching across the table and thumping Harry on the head. "Bit thick, aren't you?"

"Huh?" said Harry. "And that hurt! Ow!"

Ginny was giggling by now. "We'll talk about it after dinner," she agreed.

After dinner, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione went for a walk by the lake. With a bit of prodding from Hermione, Harry finally spoke.

"You remember I asked Ginny to be my pretend girlfriend to avoid the fan girl problem?" His friends nodded. He glanced down at Ginny and blushed, but reached for her hand, lacing her fingers through his. "When she fell. . . ." He stopped speaking, then swallowed hard and soldiered on. "After that, I realized I felt differently about her than I thought I did. So today I told her I fancy her and asked her to be my girlfriend for real." Ginny blushed prettily as he said this.

Ron whooped with joy and went leaping down the path for a while, leaving the other three laughing at his reaction. He raced back and enveloped Harry in a back-thumping hug.

"It's about time, you great git! Welcome to the family!" Ron chortled.

"Huh?" Harry said again. He'd said all he could manage, and now he couldn't seem to come up with an intelligent response no matter how hard he tried.

"Ronald Weasley!" Ginny cried, standing with her hands on her hips and sounding just like her mother. "You will not give us a hard time! You will not tease us! You will not make Harry uncomfortable in any way! Is that clear?"

"Uh. . .yeah!" Ron said, momentarily abashed, but then grinned at her cheekily. "I'm really happy for you, Ginny. You, too, Harry! And I'm glad you both finally came to your senses and got together for real! Whoopee!" he cried, bounding down the path again.

Hermione stood there shaking her head, watching him bounce around like a four-year-old on too many sweets. "He's so silly sometimes."

"And that's one of the things you like about him, isn't it?" Ginny said wisely.

"Yes, it is," Hermione said fondly, smiling as he bounded back toward them, more like an overgrown puppy than a nearly grown young man.

Harry chuckled at Ron's antics, then wrapped his arm around Ginny's shoulders and smiled down at her. "D'you suppose that means he approves?"

She turned to face him and wrapped her arms around his waist, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at him. "I think so. It's a good thing. I'd hate to have to hex him."

Ron finally calmed down enough to put his arm around Hermione's shoulders, and the two couples meandered down the lakeside path until the sun went down, laughing and teasing and enjoying each other's company.

On Sunday morning a week and a half after Harry got out of the hospital wing, Ron got up and wandered over to his friend's bed. "Hey, mate, get up! You OK? You're usually up long before me. We'll miss breakfast!" He pulled aside the heavy drapes from round Harry's bed and was astonished to see a phoenix lying on the coverlet.

"Fawkes? What are you doing here?" Ron asked. "Where's Harry?"

The phoenix shook its beautiful red and gold head, its green eyes glittering as it stared at Ron.

"Do you understand me? You do, don't you?" Ron asked.

The phoenix nodded, and got to its feet, staring hard at Ron.

"Where's Harry?"

The phoenix looked from Ron to its own chest, then back at Ron.

"Huh? Wait a second, Fawkes doesn't have green eyes. Are you Fawkes?"

The phoenix shook its head hard, and stared at Ron, then bounced up and down on its feet, spreading its wings and flapping them a bit.

"You're not. . .you're never. . .no way. . .Harry?" said Ron, aghast, as the bird leaped up and fluttered its wings as it nodded. "Harry? Is that you?"

The bird bobbed its head vigorously.

"Whoa! You turned into a phoenix? That's bloody brilliant! Change back and tell me how you did it!"

The bird hung its head and shook it, rather sadly.

"You're not. . .stuck. . .are you?"

The bird gave Ron a squinting look of disgust that he recognized as Harry's.

Ron laughed. "Yeah, that's Harry, all right! You want me to take you to McGonagall?"

The bird nodded and leaped onto Ron's shoulder.

"OK, let's go! I never thought I'd be walking around with a phoenix on my shoulder. Wicked!" Ron chortled as he pelted down the stairs, making the bird lift off his shoulder and take flight briefly. It was about to crash into a wall when Ron caught it. "Whoa! You can't fly properly yet, eh? OK, I'll be more careful."

"Hey, Ron," Colin called from across the common room. "Where'd you get the cool bird? What is it?"

"It's. . ." Ron hesitated because the phoenix was pulling his hair with its beak. "It's Dumbledore's phoenix. I guess he flew in our window by mistake. I'm taking it to him."

"Wow, I've never seen a real phoenix before," Colin enthused starting to come toward Ron.

The bird pulled mightily at Ron's hair. He got the hint and hurried toward the portrait hole. "Ow! I've got to go, Colin, Dumbledore will be wanting him. See you later."

"'K! Wow, I can't wait to tell Dennis I saw a real phoenix!" Colin exclaimed as he ran back up the stairs to the boy's dormitory.

As Ron walked down the hall, the phoenix moved restlessly on his shoulder. "What's the matter, are you crowded up there?" Ron asked. "You are a bit big to ride on my shoulder. Ouch, don't pinch me with your talons! Here, get on my arm, and be careful – those claws are sharp!"

The bird looked up at Ron and blinked, then flapped its wings again.

"Ah, you want to fly! I knew you would," Ron said, laughter in his voice. "OK, I'll launch you like you do Hedwig. Is that what you want?"

The bird nodded.

"Here you go!" Ron said as he pushed his arm up quickly to help the bird get airborne. The phoenix spread its magnificent wings and flapped, falling nearly to the floor before it managed to catch some air and coordinate its movements. For a few joyous moments, Harry flew as a phoenix flies. Then he sensed someone coming and thought longingly of McGonagall's office. He needed to get there, and in secret, but how? With a flash of light, he disappeared.

"Harry? Harry!" Ron called, frightened that something had happened to his friend. He didn't find any sign of Harry, so he sprinted down the hall to McGonagall's office, barely apologizing to Snape as he rushed past him. He banged on McGonagall's door. "Professor! Professor, I need to speak to you!" he called.

McGonagall opened the door and looked at him oddly. "Mr. Weasley, do you have any idea why there's a phoenix in my office one that that clearly is not Fawkes?"

Ron breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew! I was hoping this was where he got to."

"Please come in, Mr. Weasley. I believe I'm due a bit of an explanation?" She gestured toward a chair by the fireplace as she closed her door.

Ron came in and sat down on the chair, the back of which was occupied by the phoenix. The magnificent bird was preening its wing feathers with obvious self-satisfaction. "That's Harry, Professor."

"No. It can't be," she said adamantly.

"Do phoenixes normally have green eyes?" Ron asked, honestly curious. Fawkes was the only phoenix he'd ever seen, and his eyes were black, not green. "When I saw this one on Harry's bed this morning, and saw it had green eyes, I asked it some questions and it answered as if it was Harry. I think it is Harry." He turned to the bird. "Are you Harry Potter?"

The bird nodded emphatically. Professor McGonagall gasped.

"I think he's stuck, Professor," Ron said matter-of-factly.

"P-p-potter? Are you. . . stuck. . . in that form?" she asked nervously.

The bird nodded again and jumped down to sit on her knee and look up at her. He nudged her wand hand.

"You want me to change you back?" she asked.

The bird nodded and nudged her wand hand again.

"Very well." She got her wand and tapped him, changing him back to Harry. The real Harry Potter was far too big for her skinny lap and fell to the floor in a laughing, delighted heap.

"Thanks, Professor!" he said as he sat up and rubbed his elbow, which had hit the table as he fell. "Ow!"

"Potter, I am astounded. How did this happen?"

"I finally got the hang of transforming in my lesson last night with Professor Dumbledore," Harry explained. "I turned into a cat, then a raven. Both of them have green eyes and a light zigzag in their colour where my scar is, so I think those are my 'identifying marks' for the registration. Then Professor Dumbledore and I talked about transforming into magical creatures, and I was thinking about that as I returned to my room. After I went to bed, I changed from myself to a cat, to myself, to a raven, to myself, then a dragonfly. That was brilliant!" He looked at Ron. "I landed on your nose and you tried to swat me in your sleep," he said, laughing.

"I woke myself up hitting my face," Ron grumbled. "So that's your fault, eh?" He tried to act angry but couldn't manage it, so he just sat grinning at his friend.

"Sorry," Harry said breezily, then went back to his story. "Then I thought I'd try some magical transformations. I became a thestral and a phoenix, but I was so excited that I'd managed the thestral, I forgot to become human between thestral and phoenix and I think that's why I got stuck."

McGonagall was beyond speech. Her mouth opened and closed a few times as she tried to say something. Finally, she managed to croak out, "You did. . .five. . .transformations in quick succession?"

"Oh, I was transforming all night. I wanted to be as fast as you or Sirius in changing form, so I was practicing, and then it just became so interesting, I didn't stop," Harry said simply, shrugging his shoulders as if what he'd done was the easiest thing in the world.

"How many times did you transform?"

"I lost count. I was trying to go faster each time. Then I started adding other forms."

"And you became a thestral as well as a phoenix? Truly?"

Harry grinned cheekily. "D'you want to see?"

"Of. . .of course!" McGonagall replied, still looking stunned.

"Clear some space, it takes a lot of room. I thought I'd break my bed. They're heavier than I thought they'd be." Harry suited action to words and shoved some furniture aside to make a clear space in the middle of the room. "OK, here goes." The black of his hair seemed to spread all over his body, becoming shinier and slicker with each second. His arms became the forelegs of a reptilian horse and soon a splendid thestral stood before them. Its eyes were a sparkling green full of mischief instead of white and dead-looking, and it had a lightning bolt shaped mark above its right eye. Professor McGonagall's jaw dropped in amazement.

"Where is he?" Ron complained, reaching out to try to find the invisible beast.

"He's just there, Mr. Weasley. Reach out. His shoulder is next to you."

Before Ron could move, he was soundly bumped by the thestral's head. "Whoa! Harry! Don't hurt me!" He felt the head rub his shoulder more gently, then the light brush of a bat-like wing over his hair. "Crikey, he is a thestral!" With that, Harry changed back to a tired but very happy Harry Potter.

Chapter 15 – The Raven and The Thestral

Harry kept his transformations secret from all but Ron. He wanted to surprise Hermione and Ginny, and there was no point in telling the rest of his classmates about them. He would choose one form to register, and the rest would remain his secret. He'd added a dog to his repertoire, and was researching several other things. The next weekend was their first at Hogsmeade for the year. As Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron left the castle for the village, Ron looked over at Harry and grinned.

"It's a nice day for flying," Ron said in as casual a voice as he could muster.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, suppressed laughter colouring his voice.

"What are you two on about? It's Hogsmeade today, not Quidditch," Hermione said curiously.

"Well, honestly, we do need to get Ginny up on a broom, and Madam Pomfrey has finally approved me flying again," Harry replied, his eyes sparkling with mischief as he glanced at Ron. "When we get back from Hogsmeade, we can do some flying, all right?"

"Sure!" Ron agreed.

"OK," Ginny agreed in a more subdued voice. She had avoided Quidditch practice by saying she was still sore from her fall, but Harry was worried that she might have lost some of her nerve. He thought he had a good idea how to get it back for her.

Hogsmeade was crowded. The two couples wandered through various shops, ending up at the Three Broomsticks. As they drank their butterbeer, they laughed and chatted to other friends who passed by. Eventually, the two couples parted and wandered separately through the village.

"D'you want to go to the Shrieking Shack?" Harry asked Ginny.

"Why?" she asked nervously.

Harry had heard from Hermione that Ron had had much the same reaction the first time she'd suggested going there. "It's not haunted," he assured her. "It was built for Remus. I thought you knew that."

"After hearing about it being haunted for a lifetime, it's hard to adjust, if you see what I mean," she said with a small smile. "OK, fine, let's go."

They walked up to the Shrieking Shack and stood holding hands at the edge of the trees on the hill opposite the dilapidated building. "It's pretty up here," he commented, looking at the rolling hills surrounding them.

"Yeah. And the shack looks as if it might have been an attractive house at one time," she replied.

"They built it that way to start with. Amazing, isn't it? And the villagers never noticed that a ramshackle old house just appeared like that, and hadn't been there forever."

"Who built it?" she asked.

"Dumbledore had the house elves build it. He needed them to keep the secret, you see, and house elves can do all kinds of things other than cook and clean." He turned toward Ginny and wrapped his arms around her. "I've wanted to get you alone for weeks, but our timetables just haven't matched up."

"I know, and you had so much homework to catch up with," she agreed, leaning back against his arms and looking up at him. "You're up to date now, aren't you?"

"Yes, thanks to Hermione. I don't know how I'd get through school without her help," he chuckled. "But enough about me. How have you been?"

"I've actually missed our time in the hospital wing. Isn't that silly?"

"I've missed it too. Having all that time with you so close by. . ." he murmured, then leaned in to kiss her. Several lovely snogging minutes later, they broke apart, breathless. "Erm," Harry mumbled, his face scarlet, "you're. . .I'm . . .um. . .let's walk." He took her hand and started walking away from the Shrieking Shack.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ginny teased, walking quickly to keep up with him, but with a happy bounce in her step.

"Nothing," he muttered, walking even faster.

She ran in front of him and put her hands on his chest, stopping him. "Not nothing," she said with a grin.

"Yes, nothing. That's all," he insisted, putting his hands over hers and prying them off of him. He was breathing hard, as if he'd been running.

Her face fell. "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

He kept his distance from her. He had a pained expression as he said, "No, you didn't do anything wrong."

"Then what is it?"

He blushed furiously. "You did everything too right. I had to stop."

She blushed in return. "Had. . . to stop?"

"Yeah, or I would've taken things too far. We're not ready for that. This was just too much, too soon, I think." He hung his head, looking guilty.

She walked a step closer to him, and ducked her head to look into his eyes below the fringe of hair obscuring them. "It wasn't too much too soon for me, Harry," she said quietly.

He looked up at her quickly. "It wasn't?"

"No. We were just kissing. I wouldn't have minded. . .well. . .a little more than that." She blushed an even deeper red.

Harry's whole body sagged in relief. "I thought I was. . .I mean, we've just started going out, this is our first real date, and here I am trying to suck your tonsils out."

Ginny's laughter pealed like bells echoing through the hills around them. "Is that what you were doing?"

Harry chuckled as he blushed and hung his head again. "I guess." He looked up at her shyly through his fringe. "I was afraid I'd frightened you."

"We can go slower if you want, but you didn't frighten me. I think maybe you frightened yourself," she said wisely.

He straightened up and nodded. "Yeah, that too." He put his arms around her and kissed her softly again. "I'm sorry."

"No problem," she said, returning his kiss with one of her own. "I'll let you know when you get too pushy, Mr. Potter," she added with a throaty laugh.

"Thank you. It's always good to be informed," he teased, kissing her and allowing it to go on to the point where alarm bells were going off in his head again. "OK, Miss Weasley, you're the one getting pushy now," he murmured as he kissed her neck. "Time to go."

She laughed and slid her arm around his waist as he put his around her shoulders and they walked happily back to the village.

In Hogsmeade, they found Ron and Hermione sitting on a bench outside the Three Broomsticks, holding hands and looking just as happy as Ginny and Harry felt. "Ready to go back?" Harry asked. "We still have enough time to get some flying in."

"Yeah, let's go," Ron agreed. He and Hermione got up and started walking with Harry and Ginny, the girls in the middle of their foursome.

As they walked down the path between the village and school, the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up. "*Protego*," he murmured, with a small wave of his hand hidden from view down by his side.

"What's up, Harry?" Ron said, a worried frown on his face as they all quickly pulled out their wands, looking around warily. He didn't have to wait for an answer. A spell hit the shield Harry had put behind the four of them and bounced back on the sender. Draco Malfoy rolled on the ground cursing as boils popped up all over his face and hands. The four friends moved to stand over the writhing boy on the ground.

"Problem, Malfoy?" Harry asked cheekily as he looked down at the other boy.

"Shut up, Potter!" the blond boy snarled, his pointed face twisted in hatred. He glared at Ron who was standing by Harry's shoulder with his wand pointed quite seriously at Malfoy's heart.

"You Weasleys are pureblood traitors," Malfoy spat, "and tainting yourselves more hanging around with that filthy little Mudblood and with Potter."

"You need to learn some manners, Malfoy," Ron said hotly. Every time he saw the silvery-haired Slytherin, he had a mental image of his baby sister falling through the sky. Ron was just looking for an excuse to tear Malfoy limb from limb. Harry put his hand on his friend's arm to keep him from attacking the fallen boy.

"You loathsome git," Hermione began, then controlled her temper with a tremendous effort. "That's a detention with Professor McGonagall for your unprovoked attack on fellow students," she snapped at Malfoy. She pulled on Ron's arm. "Come on, he's already been punished, and I've given him detention. That's enough." She turned and started back toward school.

Harry had been as worried about his friends' tempers as his own. He understood completely how angry and frustrated his friend felt – he felt the same way himself. Harry mastered his temper and blew out a calming breath. "All right there, Ron?" he said as he, Ron and Ginny still stood over Malfoy.

"Yeah, I guess," Ron replied grumpily as he turned away from Malfoy.

"How about you?" Harry asked Ginny, who'd shivered, wordlessly, but with her wand held determinedly in her hand, next to him throughout the entire incident. "Are you OK?"

She gulped. "Fine," she said shortly.

Harry turned and looked at her seriously. "You're not fine."

"No, I'm mad as hell," she snarled, her eyes furious but her lower lip trembling, her lashes sparkling with unshed tears.

"Me, too. Come on, let's go," he said, putting a reassuring arm around her and turning to follow Ron and Hermione. Harry leaned down to kiss the top of her head tenderly. "He's not going to hurt you, baby. I won't let him," he promised her, meaning every word of it.

"You've not heard the last of this!" Malfoy roared, finally managing to get to his feet.

"*Protego*," Harry said again, casually waving his hand close to his side again so Malfoy didn't see he was doing wandless magic.

Another spell hit the shield and bounced back at Malfoy, causing him to yelp in pain. Harry, wand in hand, turned around and said, "*Impedimenta*." He studied the results with satisfaction. "That will slow him down for a while." Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron continued on their way to school, their discussion of the problems Malfoy had brought on himself eventually evolving into chuckles.

Some time later, as they reached an area where there was a small glen alongside the path, Harry turned aside and went over by the trees, saying to the girls as he led them there, "I want to show you something."

"What?" Ginny asked.

"Watch," Harry said, a twinkle in his eye. The blackness of Harry's hair seemed to spread over his whole body in an instant, and he was shrinking quickly in size. Suddenly there was a raven where Harry had stood. It flew up and sat on Ginny's shoulder, nuzzling her neck and making her giggle.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "That's brilliant!"

"Shhh," Ron warned her. "He's keeping this a secret. He's been doing this for over a week now. McGonagall and Dumbledore don't want anyone but us and Remus to know about it."

The raven flew off and disappeared, coming back with a pretty red leaf in its beak, which it presented to a laughing Ginny.

"The cool thing is," Ron went on, "ravens can learn to talk. He's been working on that, too."

"Gi-ny" the raven croaked. "My-ne." It ruffled its feathers and then turned its head sharply, looking back up the path. It took off quickly and disappeared, cawing as it went. Malfoy had his gang with him now, and they were striding up the path toward Ron, Ginny and Hermione.

"So where's Potter? Gone to take a pee in the trees?" Malfoy sneered. "Don't have your protector now, do you, you filthy Mudblood?" His laughter had an evil sound to it. He threw a curse at Hermione, which was blocked by Hermione, Ginny and Ron together. Soon there was a full-fledged duel going, with curses, jinxes and hexes flying back and forth. Suddenly, a huge flock of black birds darkened the sky, streaming down toward Malfoy and his gang. The birds pecked and flew in the faces of the boys, then circled overhead and covered them in droppings. As Malfoy and his cronies raced away followed the by massive flock of birds, the lead raven broke off and disappeared in the woods.

"Who's filthy now, Malfoy?" Ron called after them. He and the girls were laughing hard at the horrified expressions on the Slytherins' faces as they were pelted with bird droppings just before they ran off.

A moment later, Harry came striding out, wand in hand, a smug look on his face. "D'you suppose Malfoy has learned his lesson yet?" he said with a laugh.

"Harry, that was really dangerous! What if he'd noticed?" Hermione said, her brow furrowed with worry.

"Dangerous or not, that was bloody brilliant!" Ron exulted.

"You communicated with the other ravens?" Hermione asked in sudden realization.

"Yeah," Harry said offhandedly. "They don't have a lot to say, but if you give them something to do, they love it," he finished with a cheeky grin.

Ginny said, "Why did you come out with your wand in hand?"

"In case they came back," he said, immediately turning serious. "And they may try to ambush us from the trees, so we should get going." Matching action to words, the four friends hurried up the path to Hogwarts and safety. "Are you guys all right?" Harry asked, looking at his friends in concern.

"Yeah, Malfoy and his gang couldn't hit a haystack," Ginny said with a laugh.

"But you three obviously can!" Harry complimented them with a grin. "You actually improved Crabbe and Goyle's appearance with those leaves coming out of their ears. And the rainbow-coloured boils. Who did those?"

Hermione raised her hand, smiling brightly. "Those were mine."

"I thought so. You'll have to show that one to D.A.," Harry said, lifting his hand off Ginny's shoulder to pat Hermione on the back. "Well done, Hermione. All of you did your blocking spells perfectly, too. Well done, all around, you lot."

"Those D.A. lessons have been paying off," Hermione said happily. "And the jinxes in the books in the Room of Requirement are amazing! What a great library!"

"Wish we could've taken points from that lot," Ron growled, still a bit angry. "Now that we've been attacked twice, we could take, say, twenty points from each of those boys for each of us they attacked. Let's see, the four of us were together for the first attack, so that's four times twenty for Malfoy attacking us, that's eighty, and then the four of them attacked the three of us, that's twelve, twelve times twenty is 240 plus the eighty from Malfoy's attack, that's 320 – that's a LOT of points!" He was clearly impressed.

"They deserve to lose that many. And there are three Prefects here, so we could back each other up," Hermione said heatedly, her temper rising again over the unprovoked attacks. "Too bad we can only take points from people in our own house."

"Imagine. Ginny and I could take points off them for the same thing!" Ron said, his expression blissful. "Three times that many points is a LOAD of points!"

"Ron, you know we can't do that," Hermione said, calming down and smiling in the face of his glee. "But it is a nice thought, isn't it?"

"Bloody brilliant!" Ron agreed, giving her hand a squeeze.

"I will turn them in for detention and ask McGonagall about taking all those points you mentioned, though, and Malfoy will be reported for both incidents!" Hermione said with a steely glint in her eye.

"Wicked!" Ron chortled. "I hope McGonagall finds something really disgusting for them to do." He thought a moment. "No, wait! Maybe we should give them detention with Hagrid, instead! He'd make them do something awful if we asked him to." The group laughed and discussed the various horrible things Hagrid might do as detention for the Slytherins all the way back to Hogwarts' entrance gates.

Once they were back on the school grounds, Harry said, "Let's go around the lake to the edge of the woods."

"Why? I thought you wanted to fly?" Ron asked, looking at Harry in surprise.

Harry winked at him over the girls' heads. "I do. I want to go over there first, though."

"Oh, OK," Ron agreed readily, his grinning face lit with understanding.

"What's over there you want to see?" Ginny asked.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," Harry teased.

Ginny's eyes lit up. "You have a surprise for us?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a grin. "For you, in particular, Gin. I think you'll enjoy it."

"Cool," Ginny said, skipping in her excitement.

When they got to the edge of the woods, Harry led them inside to a secluded glade where Hagrid took the Care of Magical Creatures class from time to time to see various animals. "Ron, you keep a lookout, OK?" Harry said.

"'K" Ron agreed.

"Look out for what?" Hermione asked.

"Other people," Harry replied. "OK, Ginny," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and gazing into her eyes seriously. "You need to start flying again. I think I can help you. I hope I can, anyway. Stand just there."

"I don't see any brooms," Ginny began uncertainly.

"That's OK," Harry assured her. He took a step back from her then stood still, looking thoughtful for a moment. The blackness of his hair seemed to grow and cover him in something shiny, and his shape was changing rapidly – and then he disappeared!

"Harry! Harry, where are you?" Ginny cried, alarmed.

"He's just there, don't worry," Ron assured her.

"Just where? Can you see him?"

"No, but I know he won't be far away," Ron replied.

Ginny felt a bump against her shoulder. It was a gentle bump, but whatever was behind it was huge. "What's that?" she said, alarmed.

"It's Harry. He's a thestral," Ron replied quietly. "Keep your voice down, we don't want to be overheard."

"A thestral?" Ginny squeaked, astonished. The invisible winged horse breathed softly against Ginny's face, then nuzzled her neck with its lips, reminding her quite distinctly of Harry. She giggled at the tickling sensation, then reached out to touch its head, amazed by its silky skin.

"He's doing a magical creature as well as a raven?" Hermione whispered intensely. "McGonagall said. . ."

"McGonagall knows all about it, don't worry," Ron assured her.

Meanwhile, the thestral had rubbed its head against Ginny several times, then brushed her with its wing. She trailed her hand down its neck to its shoulder, then felt it go down on its knees. "Oh! He's . . .bowing or something."

"He's probably kneeling so you can get on," Ron told her. "He told me he'd do that. Climb on. It's not as if you haven't ridden a thestral before."

Ginny ran her hands over the thestral's back and found the wing joint, then stepped there to get on its back. "Oh, he's big! He's bigger than the one I rode last year! Taller, and broader, too." She stifled a yelp as he stood up, then she sat still, wondering what would happen next. Harry started walking slowly around the glade, then trotted a few steps, making Ginny squeal involuntarily as she bounced along tensely on his back. She laced her fingers in his long, silky mane and hung on. He cantered, and when he felt her relax into the rhythm of his stride, he spread his wings and took off, spiralling up over the glade, careful to stay below the tops of the trees so an apparently unsupported Ginny wouldn't be seen by anyone. She tensed when he took off and tightened her fingers in his mane, but eventually she calmed down and began to take pleasure in the ride as he flew carefully under her. "This is amazing!" she said, grinning madly at the joy of riding the invisible horse. Slowly, Harry spiralled down to the clearing again, landing smooth as silk in a slow canter, then kneeling to make it easier for Ginny to dismount. As soon as she dismounted, he turned back into Harry and fell spread-eagled on his back in the grass.

"Whew, that's hard work!" Harry said as he lay there sweaty and panting, a mischievous grin creasing his face. "All right, Ginny?"

Ginny sat in the grass next to him. "Better than all right, Harry," she murmured, leaning down to kiss him. "Thank you." She brushed his damp hair away from his forehead. "I hope I didn't hurt you pulling your mane like that."

"It did twinge a bit," he admitted, "but you had to hold on to something." He glanced up at Hermione. "Well?" he said expectantly.

"Oh, Harry, it's incredible that you can change into a thestral. I wish I could've. . .I mean, I wanted to. . ." Hermione began, then blushed.

"What?" Ron asked, surprised at her reaction.

"It just sounds so rude," she replied quickly, ducking her head to hide her embarrassment behind the fall of her hair.

"What?" Harry said cheekily, rolling over to sit up. "What did you want?"

"I, erm, I wanted to. . .erm. . . touch. . . the thestral, since I couldn't see it," she said, blushing again. She shrugged and continued offhandedly. "I guess it feels like other thestrals. I did ride one last year."

"You thought I'd be offended that you wanted to touch me as a thestral?" Harry said, laughing hard now as he stood up and reached out to her. "Come here, Hermione."

"No, you're tired now, that's all right," she said, putting her hands up as if pushing away the offer. But it was too late, Harry had already disappeared and she was being bumped by an invisible, slick, reptilian horse-shaped head. "Oh, Harry! That's . . .that's just. . . ." Hermione, so rarely at a loss for words, clearly had no way of expressing whatever it was she was feeling. She ran her hands over his head and neck, felt the wings, chest and back of the horse, her hands sliding down the back to its skeletal rump and tail, where she jerked her hand away as if she'd been burned. "Oh! Sorry!" she said, blushing furiously.

Harry was himself again, rolling on the grass laughing. "It's OK, Hermione," he said. "That actually felt rather nice," he added with a leering look and a wiggle of his eyebrows at her. "Want to do it again?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, blushing even more. "Stop laughing at me!" She soon joined the hilarity of her friends.

"I'm tired or I'd give you a ride, too," Harry offered as he got to his feet, stretching and rolling his shoulders as he did so. "Flying is hard work, and I was a doing a lot of flying as a raven a little while ago. I'm knackered."

Ginny reached up and massaged his shoulders for him. "My goodness, Harry, you're developing huge muscles here! Have you been flying a lot?"

"I've done some every day since I could transform," he replied. "I'm building up my strength."

"How long have you been able to transform?" Hermione asked.

"Since about a week and a half after the first lesson," he replied as Ginny worked the knots out of his muscles. He grabbed Ginny's hands and kissed each palm, then put them back on his shoulders. "That's wonderful. Thanks!"

"A week and a half. And you can already do two forms," Hermione said in wonder.

"Six," Harry corrected.

"What?" Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Six," Ron agreed.

Hermione rounded on Ron. "Have you seen them?"

"Yeah, all but the thestral. I can't see those."

"And you didn't tell me?" Hermione was incensed.

"Or me?" Ginny was upset too. She stopped massaging Harry's shoulders and moved in front of him, glaring from Harry to her brother and back again.

"Harry wanted to surprise you!" Ron said, backing up defensively. It didn't pay to have either of these witches angry with you and suddenly both of them were livid.

"I didn't want to tell you until I could show you. I've had to do the transformations in our room, or here in the woods, to keep it secret," Harry assured them. "Ron's had to keep a lookout for me so I could have the privacy to practice. If you're going to be cross with someone, it should be me, not Ron, because I made him swear not to tell."

Both girls deflated.

"Forgive us?" Harry asked with his charmingly crooked grin.

"For what?" Hermione smiled as she shrugged off her anger. She couldn't be mad at Harry for long when he smiled at her that way. "What other animals can you do?" she asked, but Harry couldn't answer because Ginny was busy 'forgiving' him.

"Oy, get a room!" Ron teased. Then he remembered who Harry was so busily kissing. "Wait a sec, that's my sister you're snogging!" he protested half-heartedly.

Harry glanced up at Ron and winked at him, then went back to paying complete attention to Ginny. When she let him come up for air, he hugged her and replied with laughter in his voice, "I know. And your point is?"

Ron looked flummoxed and finally gave up on trying to think of a reply. Hermione grinned at Ron, amused by his abnormal speechlessness, then took his hand and led him out of the glade, followed a moment later by Harry and Ginny.

"So Harry, as I was asking, what others can you do?" Hermione asked as they got to the path by the lake where they could walk four abreast and be certain no one else was nearby.

"A black cat, a raven, a black dog – kind of like a Labrador, I think – a dragonfly, a thestral and a phoenix," Harry replied proudly. "The dragonfly is so cool. It's iridescent green, kind of a neon colour, and its wings are solid black. It's a very small dragonfly – it could be a damselfly, I don't know. I saw one once down here by the lake and thought that would be a good insect to try. All the animals have green eyes and a zigzag marking in their colouring above the right eye, like my scar. I'll probably register the cat or dog, and keep the others secret. They should come in handy when I'm an Auror!"

"And have any of these given you any trouble?" Hermione asked.

Ron snorted with laughter. "The phoenix did at first."

"What do you mean?"

"I got up one morning and Harry seemed to have slept in. When I opened the curtains round his bed, there was a green-eyed phoenix lying there!" He and Harry told the girls the rest of the story on the way to the castle.

"If it's so hard to do this kind of transformation, why are you able to do it so easily?" Hermione asked in frustration. "I still can't even turn my hand into a paw!"

"Dumbledore says it's partly the fact that my dad was an Animagus, which means it could be easier for me, but the main thing is the Refiner's Fire. He says he and Merlin – you know they're the only two who survived it before me, right?" They all nodded. "He and Merlin were both multiple Animagi. Merlin could do more than twenty forms. Dumbledore refuses to say how many he can do," Harry concluded with a grin.

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice.

"So don't let it bother you that you can't do it yet," Harry said bracingly. "I have an unfair advantage. We'll work on it. We'll all get it soon enough."

"Well," Hermione said after a moment, "you're welcome to your unfair advantage, Harry. You earned it. We'll just have to work harder!"

"That's the spirit!" he said with a grin as they mounted the castle steps. When they got to their rooms, Harry changed out of his sweaty clothes and the boys and Ginny grabbed their brooms. The four of them went to the Quidditch pitch, where Hermione stood guard while the others prepared to fly.

"Are you ready for this?" Harry asked Ginny as they walked to the centre of the pitch.

Ginny was obviously nervous. "I guess. . ."

"Come on, then," he encouraged as he got on his Firebolt. "Ron and I will be right beside you." Ron mounted his Cleansweep and stood on the other side of Ginny, ready to take off. Ginny hesitated, crouched as if to kick off and then stopped.

"What's wrong?" Harry and Ron both said, coming closer to her.

"I just can't. It's one thing to fly on a thestral who's really your boyfriend, knowing he'll take care of you. It's quite another to fly on a broom with only yourself to depend on." She was visibly trembling.

"Your fall wasn't your fault. Hermione is watching out to make sure nobody bothers us," Harry assured her.

"Ginny, you're a great flyer!" Ron added bracingly.

"I'm scared, Ron, can't you understand?" Ginny snapped, on the verge of tears.

The boys looked at each other, perplexed. Harry scratched his head, thinking hard. "OK, sweetheart. You trusted me when I was a thestral. Trust me now. Get on my broom with me. We'll get you used to flying again that way."

She looked at him a long moment before giving him a tiny nod. Her face was white and tense, her hands trembling, as she dropped her broom and got on Harry's behind him. She wrapped her arms tightly around him and buried her face in the back of his shirt.

"Ready?" Harry asked, uncertain now that he was doing the right thing. She was shaking so hard, she was making the Firebolt vibrate. He felt her nod against his back. "Ron's going to be right next to us. You're as safe as you can be," he assured her. "OK, we're kicking off now," he said, "flying low and slow at first. Help me kick off." He felt her push off with her legs, an instinctive movement after so many years of flying, from nicking brooms from her brothers to fly long before she was allowed to, to being Seeker on the Gryffindor team last year. They took off slowly, just cruising gently along, making lazy sweeps of the Quidditch pitch. She continued to hold Harry's waist in a death grip, hiding her face, trembling so hard he could feel the broom still vibrating in response. "Ginny? You need to look around now," he said gently. "Go on, look round. See how high we are." He felt her tense up more, but she did as he'd asked and moved her face away from his back. They were only a few feet off the ground, her dangling toes nearly brushing the grass. A startled laugh escaped her when she saw how low they were.

"I thought. . ." she began shakily.

"You thought we two mad fliers were going to take you up high and go fast and scare you more, didn't you?" Ron teased gently. "We're trying to take good care of you, Gin."

She smiled tremulously at her brother, who was flying knee to knee with Harry. Ron's big hand was just behind her back, and apparently had been the whole time. If she'd leaned back at all, she would have felt it. They were doing their best to look after and help her. The knot in her stomach released a bit and she said, "Thanks, both of you. OK, Harry, let's do some actual flying." She sounded braver than she felt, but it was time to act like a Gryffindor, after all.

"Are you certain?" he asked, glancing back toward her.

"Yes," she responded, leaning forward to look around his shoulder and see where they were going. Her grip on his waist was still tight, but she wasn't trembling as badly anymore.

Harry sped up a little and began spiralling upward, gaining altitude a little at a time. As he felt her relax, he increased the speed and began doing some turns then made them tighter and more daring, making Ginny squeal, but with delight now, not fear.

Ron started having trouble matching Harry's quick turns. "Oy, mate, maybe it's time for her to try on her own," he called.

"Yeah, maybe so," Harry agreed. "Ready?" he asked her.

"I suppose so," she replied. They landed and she got on her broom, her brother on one side of her and Harry on the other. She flew nervously at first, then with more confidence, finally beginning to show the nerve and skill that had always marked her flying. When they finally landed, Ginny had a big grin on her face, which was matched by Harry's and Ron's.

"All right now?" Ron asked.

"Yeah. Thanks, both of you. I mean it. I love to fly. I just got scared."

"With good reason," Harry agreed.

She looked at Harry's broom wistfully. "Thanks for the ride, Harry. I wish this old broom was smooth like that. This stupid thing jerks if you try to turn quickly."

"You can use my broom if you want," Ron offered quickly.

"No, you need to use it as Keeper." She saw her boyfriend opening his mouth, his broom held out in front of him. "And before you offer, Harry – I'd much rather you were the one on that Firebolt so you can catch me if I fall again. I won't use your broom. Thanks anyway."

"Where'd you get that broom, anyway?" Harry asked.

"It was Charlie's old broom when he was at Hogwarts," she replied. "I thought using it would bring me luck, but I think it's just worn out."

"You're a great flyer, Ginny, no matter what broom you're riding," Harry replied, giving her a one-armed hug. "Well done!"

"That was fantastic, Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed as she joined them. "I wouldn't have the nerve to do that."

Harry laughed. "You should've heard Hermione when we were on Buckbeak! Screamed like a banshee!" he teased, ducking as she aimed a playful punch at his heavily muscled shoulder. "Ow! Don't hurt me, I've been in the hospital wing enough this year!"

"I did just fine on the thestral last year," Hermione said with a 'so there' in her attitude.

"Yeah, you did," Harry agreed, ruffling her curly hair a bit, "but on Buckbeak. . . ." He chuckled, enjoying teasing her.

Hermione blushed prettily, doing her best to regain her dignity. "Well, I was younger then," she said dismissively. Her friends all simply smiled, knowing she still hated flying.

As they walked back to the castle, Harry said, "Our game with Slytherin is next week. I'm going to schedule extra practices to get Ginny and me back in form."

"That's a good idea," Ron agreed.

Harry draped his arm around Ginny's shoulders and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "And if you want any extra flying sessions, just let me know, OK?" he said, chuckling.

"Special treatment by the team captain?" Ginny teased. "Cool!"

"NO! NO!" Harry screamed. "STOP! *NO!*" The youngest boy in the family, a toddler, was being spun about in mid-air. Then he was hurled against the stone wall of the house. As his small body fell limply to the ground, Harry could see brain matter and blood splattered across the stone wall. The boy's horrified parents and older brother and sister were in full body binds, incapable of moving anything but their eyes, and could do nothing. The boy who looked nearly old enough for Hogwarts was released from his body bind, then slowly ripped to pieces before Harry's horrified eyes, the Death Eaters tearing chunks off of his body with casual flicks of their wands. When he died and his body was too torn up to provide much more

entertainment, the girl, who looked about thirteen years old, was suspended upside down in the centre of the circle of hooded and robed men, her pyjama top falling around her head revealing her small, delicate breasts. The Death Eaters laughed as one of their group reached out and squeezed the shrieking, squirming girl's breasts hard enough to leave dark red marks. They sent her spinning through midair from Death Eater to Death Eater. They were beating her, pinching her breasts, and slapping her buttocks and face as she was thrown from one to the other. When they became bored with their sport, they casually impaled her on the iron fence around the garden and left her to die a slow, painful death. The father was torn limb from limb and then disembowelled. Then the mother was hit with Cruciatus after Cruciatus. Harry screamed until his throat was raw.

"Harry! Harry, wake up!" Ron called, trying to disentangle his friend from the snarled bedclothes. Harry was pale and sweaty, his scar livid against the whiteness of his skin. "Harry!" Ron couldn't wake him. "Neville! Go get McGonagall," he called over his shoulder. "Seamus, Dean, help me!"

"What do we do?" Seamus asked as he and Dean ran to Harry's bedside.

"Bring some cold water. Maybe we can wake him that way," Ron suggested, still trying to straighten out the bedclothes so he could free his friend. Harry was struggling so much that he was making things worse, tying himself up in the bedding. Dean grabbed a section of blankets and tried to wrestle it away from Harry. Between him and Ron, they had their friend nearly untangled by the time Seamus returned with a pitcher of cold water.

"Hang on, he's quieting," Ron said, stopping Seamus from pouring the water on the still sleeping boy. Harry lay there exhausted, gasping for breath, sweat pouring off him, then screamed again and renewed the fight with his covers. Dean finally managed to rip the covers completely off the bed as Ron grabbed the pitcher and poured water on Harry's face and chest. All the boys stood back, watching in fear as Harry sputtered and gasped, then finally woke up, only to lean over the side of the bed and vomit violently.

McGonagall arrived just then. "What's wrong?" she said, looking at the boys surrounding Harry's bed. They parted and she saw Harry, his skin tinged green with illness, his hair and clothes soaked with sweat and water, his green eyes glittering hotly in his wan face. She hurried to his side. "What's happened?"

"Scar," he muttered faintly. "Family. . ."

"You boys," McGonagall began, thinking rapidly, "let's see. . . . Mr. Thomas, run to the hospital wing and get Madam Pomfrey. Mr. Finnegan, go get Professor Dumbledore. The password is Mars Bar."

"What can I do?" Ron asked.

"You stay here with him. Mr. Longbottom, go get a bowl of water and a flannel so we can clean him up." She glanced at the sick on the floor, muttered "*Evanesco*," and it disappeared. When all the boys but Ron were gone, she did a Drying Charm on Harry's pyjamas and bedding, then sat on the edge of the bed. "Tell me," she said to Harry.

"Death Eaters. Tortured a family. Killed the children, horrible, horrible," Harry said, his head rocking back and forth, his voice breaking with grief. "Tortured the mother. Cruciatus, over and over. Ripped the father limb from limb. All dead but the mother. She's in a bad way. They. . .I think they were starting to rape her when Ron woke me up." He shuddered, horrified at the things he'd seen.

McGonagall's eyes flashed as she leaned intently over the boy. "Where? Did you recognize them?"

"No. A stone house, iron fence around the garden. Father's red-headed and balding, mother has dark hair down to her shoulders, two boys and a girl. One boy was a toddler, the other almost old enough for Hogwarts. The girl looked like a young teenager. They abused her before they killed her, pinched her breasts, hit her and threw her around. . . . . I couldn't hear what the Death Eaters said to them beyond calling them 'Mudbloods' and things like that. I think. . ." he hesitated, "I think the Death Eaters were just . . .playing. Lucius Malfoy was there, I recognized his voice, and Crabbe and Goyle. There were several others, but they were hooded and didn't speak, so I don't know who they were." He was panting with the effort of speaking by this time. "I thought they were all in jail. The Ministry. . .last term, Dumbledore captured them and turned them in. Did they get out?"

McGonagall's face softened into regretful lines. She sighed. "Yes, Harry, I'm afraid they did. You rest now, and Professor Dumbledore will explain everything to you soon." Neville showed up with the basin of cool water and Professor McGonagall tenderly bathed the sweat off of Harry's face and chest. He'd ripped up his pyjama top in his desperation to get out of his bedding, scratching himself with his own nails in the process. "Some of these look a bit nasty, Harry. I'm sure Madam Pomfrey will be able to fix you up."

He looked aghast. "No! Not the hospital wing! Not again!"

"Calm down, I don't think it's that bad," said McGonagall. She patted his shoulder comfortingly, then wiped his sweaty forehead with the flannel again. He grabbed her hand and held the cloth over his scar. "What is it?" she asked, perplexed by his action.

"It's cool. Feels good on my scar," he muttered miserably.

Dumbledore came striding in, followed closely by Madam Pomfrey and the boys who had been sent after them. While the nurse fussed over Harry, McGonagall filled Dumbledore in on what had happened and what Harry had said. Dumbledore moved to the boy's bedside. McGonagall shooed the other boys out of the dorm to give them privacy, then rejoined them and Ron by Harry's bed.

"Are you feeling better?" Dumbledore asked with concern.

Harry nodded weakly.

"Can you tell me how you saw this happen? From what vantage point?"

"I was Voldemort again," Harry said miserably.

"Did you do your Occlumency before bed?"

"I tried, but I was so excited about how my transformations are going, it was hard to concentrate and empty my mind. I suppose I didn't do it well enough," the boy replied miserably. He stared into Dumbledore's eyes. "Why? Why did I see that? Why are they doing those awful things?"

"They're escalating the war, Harry. It's to be expected. You need to work hard at your Occlumency so you don't see such things again. You cannot allow Voldemort to get into your mind. Did he notice you were there?"

"No, I don't think so," Harry said dismissively. "But if you can find the mother, maybe you can save her!"

"I'm afraid it may be too late for her, but yes, I will send people out to find the family. Can you remember anything else that might help us locate them?"

"Sunflowers. There were tall, dried sunflowers along the garden fence at the back. They caught the light from the house windows. It's a stone house, with a stone wall along the side of the garden. There were sparkly things near the door, like wind chimes, maybe. And bushes, maybe roses by the garden gate. Iron fence with points on top, like spear heads." He grimaced, his face twisting at the memory. "The girl is impaled on that fence. She wasn't dead yet when I woke up, but she was nearly gone, I think." His voice broke as he said it.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that, Harry. Your description is a good one and should be quite helpful. I'll send messages out, try to find out who it was. Do you think the mother is still alive?"

"She was when I woke up."

"She's most likely out of her mind between the horrors she's seen and multiple Cruciatus curses," McGonagall said darkly.

"Professor," Harry asked Dumbledore, "how did they get out of Azkaban?"

Dumbledore sighed, the wrinkles in his ancient face deepened by his sadness. "The Dementors who were guarding the prison left to join Voldemort, as you know, Harry. The Ministry has had Aurors guarding Azkaban since then. Voldemort and the Death Eaters he had left attacked recently and released the imprisoned Death Eaters. The Ministry lost several people in that battle. Voldemort has been keeping quiet, gathering his forces and making plans. Now that he has all his remaining Death Eaters at his side, things will start getting messy."

Harry's eyes had widened in horror the longer Dumbledore spoke. "Then. . .then is it time. . .for me to. . .?"

Dumbledore laid a reassuring hand on Harry's shoulder. "No, dear boy, it's not time for you to face him yet. You are not ready. He knows more magic than any living wizard, and you must be fully prepared before you do full-fledged battle with him. We are doing everything we can to protect you while we train you in what you need to know."

Harry's heart constricted. It was kill or be killed, he knew that. He knew he wasn't ready. He didn't know how to prepare for such a battle. How could he possibly defeat Voldemort?

Dumbledore looked at the boy kindly. "You still have time, Harry. Try not to worry too much. The caution and restraint you've been showing this year are exemplary. I could not be prouder of you."

Madam Pomfrey bustled back into the room with a flagon of potion in her hand. "Drink this, Mr. Potter. It's Dreamless Sleep potion."

"Password?" he asked before accepting the flagon.

"Scar on your bum," she whispered in his ear, a smile on her face. "You will have to tell me that story sometime, Mr. Potter."

"Yeah, sometime," he grumbled, then downed the potion in one gulp, already asleep as he fell back on his pillow.

Chapter 16 – Harry Rocks his World

The *Daily Prophet* was carrying more and more stories about atrocities committed by Death Eaters. It appeared that Voldemort was whetting a taste for mayhem in his new followers by allowing them to do whatever they wanted to Muggle victims of their choice. He was careful to keep them away from wizarding families because Muggles usually had fewer defences against wizards.

"I'll bet if this were happening in America, all the cowboys there would be shooting the Death Eaters," Neville growled at breakfast after glancing at the lurid photos in Hermione's copy of the *Prophet*.

Hermione giggled. "Neville, America isn't full of cowboys, and people don't all go around carrying guns."

"They did in the film I saw with Dean during the holidays," he protested.

"Films are usually fiction, made up stories. Don't believe everything in them. They're as full of hot air as the print media like the *Prophet*," Hermione said with a dismissive sniff.

"At least the *Prophet* is finally reporting what's going on," Ron said darkly. "They can't say Harry's a liar anymore."

"Oh, just give them time," Harry said with an irritated shake of his head. "They'll find some way to make me look bad. It seems to make them happy."

"Did you read what happened to the woman you saw being tortured?" Hermione asked softly, her eyes filled with concern as she saw the grim look that appeared on Harry's face when she asked. "It's in today's paper."

"Dumbledore told me she lived for a few hours after they found her," Harry replied, his body tense and his voice dangerously quiet, full of anger and grief he was attempting to suppress. "They had to sedate her heavily because she was so hysterical and in a lot of pain. He said she probably preferred to die after all she and her family went through. I just couldn't read about it in the paper. I know more details than they'll print. No point in my getting angry over that or anything else right now, is there?"

Hermione put her hand on his arm, wishing she could think of a way to comfort him. She knew he was tired, upset and his nerves were frayed by what he'd seen. How could she help him stay calm? How could she comfort him? She was at a loss, and Ron wasn't being much help, either. He was as confounded as she was in the face of their friend's torment. Madam Pomfrey had Ginny helping her mix potions in the hospital wing this morning, so Ginny wasn't available to try to console Harry.

Harry glanced at Hermione's hand on his arm, then looked up into her sympathetic eyes. He put his hand over hers and leaned his shoulder against hers, bending his head until his cheek was on top of her curly hair. Between the nightmarish vision he'd had and the news about the woman's death, Harry was feeling very low this morning. Hermione's caring gesture touched a place in his soul that needed reassurance that kindness still existed in the world. "You're a good friend, Hermione," he sighed.

"Hey, Potty, you stealing your best mate's girl now?" Malfoy jeered from across the Great Hall.

Harry sat up straight and pulled his hand and arm away from Hermione as a blush suffused his face. What if that's how it appeared to other people? What if that's how Ron saw it? He was so grateful for Hermione's intuition and compassion – now what had he done? A quick glance at Ron showed Harry that Ron had seen Hermione's quiet comforting of Harry. Ron looked tense but the glance he gave Harry was friendly, not frosty. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as Ron tossed, "Get stuffed, Malfoy!" over his shoulder without bothering to look Malfoy's way. Harry's temper was rising, but he did his best to stifle it.

"What's the matter, Potty, one girl not good enough for you? Or have you tired of Weasley's baby sister? She has a face like a weasel! I don't blame you for tiring of her, but to change from the weasel girl to the chipmunk? Going from loser to loser. That says a lot about you, Potty!" Malfoy's sneering laugh rang across the hall. His gang laughed raucously, watching Harry avidly to see his response.

Harry seemed to be swelling up as his rage built. He suddenly looked taller, broader, much more menacing than the Harry the Gryffindors knew. They cringed away from him, unnerved. He stood up and stormed away from the table, breathing hard. Hermione jumped up from her seat to follow him, but he turned back and, with a violent shake of his head, said, "No, Hermione. You stay here."

"But. . .," she began.

"Stay here," Harry insisted. He moved closer to her, softened his tone a bit and continued. "Don't you listen to him, Hermione. You are a beautiful girl, inside and out. So is Ginny. Malfoy's just jealous because amazing girls like you and Ginny won't give him the time of day, much less go out with him." He glanced up at Ron, who was standing resolutely by his side. "What?"

"I'm coming with you," Ron said, nervous but determined. "And thanks for that. Hermione needed to hear it."

"It's the truth, and we both know it," Harry said. He walked back and touched the girl's shoulder briefly. "I have to go and blow off some steam. It won't be pretty. I don't want to be worrying about your safety, so stay here, please?" he said softly. "We'll be OK, don't worry." Harry was still vibrating with rage, but he knew he needed to force it down long enough to reassure Hermione. When she nodded mutely to him, he turned to Ron. "Ready?"

Ron nodded. The two of them left the Great Hall with long, determined strides.

"What? Gone to have a duel over chipmunk-face, have you?" Malfoy called after them. Harry and Ron kept going, ignoring Malfoy's crack.

Professor Snape glided silently to a stop in front of Malfoy. Dumbledore and the rest of the staff watched with interest from the staff table as the boy looked up, startled. Malfoy had been concentrating on Harry and Ron and had not seen his Head of House approaching.

"Mister Malfoy," Snape drawled in his silkiest tone, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Baiting Potter. He needs to be taken down a few pegs every so often so his head doesn't explode," Malfoy quipped with absolute arrogance. His smile faded as the look on Snape's face registered. "What's wrong, sir?"

"It is very unwise to 'bait,' as you put it, Mr. Potter. You will, in future, leave Mr. Potter and his friends alone. No more teasing, no more catcalls, no more unprovoked attacks, verbal or physical, of any kind. Do I make myself clear?"

Malfoy sat up straight, his face a study in disbelief. "What? Why?"

"Potter's temper is legendary, as you well know, but he seems to be controlling it now, doesn't he? And an angry wizard who can control his temper has an awesome force at his command. Do not provoke Mr. Potter again. You will regret it. In the meantime, ten points from Slytherin for your unprovoked attack on Potter, and another ten points each for your slurs against Miss Granger and Miss Weasley." Snape looked as if taking thirty points from his own house was one of the more difficult things he'd had to do in his life. "And another thirty points for forcing me to take points from my own House." He gave Malfoy the look of supreme loathing he normally reserved for Harry and Neville.

"What? *Sixty points?*" Malfoy squeaked, appalled.

"Yes. Sixty," Snape confirmed. "And more if you continue to show me such disrespect."

Malfoy leaped to his feet, causing his bench, and his friends seated on it, to topple over. His pale face was contorted in rage. "When I tell my father what you've done, humiliating me in front of my friends. . ." he growled, all pretence of a respectful attitude gone.

"Your father has every right to withdraw you from Hogwarts," Snape replied, unperturbed. "In the meantime, I am your Head of House, and I have taken house points from you because of your misbehaviour, which is perfectly within my rights. You've just earned a week's detention for your cheek, as well. See me at six o'clock in my office, Mr. Malfoy." With a swirl of his black cloak, he strode away, leaving Malfoy spluttering incoherently.

"I'll get Potter for this," Malfoy growled when he could speak plainly again. His friends had set the bench back up and they were all seated around him, commiserating with him over his punishment and how unjust it was.

"Yeah, and we'll help," said Crabbe defiantly.

"Wonder what made Snape change his tune about him?" Pansy Parkinson mused, gazing at Hermione's back where she still sat at the Gryffindor table.

Ron and Harry kept up a brisk pace until they were well past Hagrid's cabin at the edge of the woods. "Harry, what d'you want to do?" Ron asked uncertainly. Harry didn't answer, but kept walking with long strides, getting farther and farther away from the castle and Hagrid's hut. "Where are we going?" Ron asked, growing more nervous as he saw his friend's rage growing, not abating. Harry still didn't answer. "Erm, Harry? Would you give me a ride on the thestral?" Ron asked, hoping to distract him somehow. "It's a nice day for flying, and you promised to give me a ride sometime."

"Not right now, Ron," Harry growled. He kept walking in silence, Ron doing his best to keep up. Finally, Harry stopped. He was so enraged, he was panting and his face was white, with bright red blotches on his cheeks. They were standing in front of a massive boulder in a clearing near the edge of the woods. Several smaller boulders were ranged around it.

"What are we doing here?" Ron asked tentatively.

Harry was glaring at the boulder with great intensity, still panting but trying hard to control his breathing. He glanced at his friend, as if just becoming aware that Ron was still there. "Stand still," he commanded.

"What?" said Ron, paling rapidly when he saw the absolute fury in Harry's eyes.

"Stand still. I'm going to put a shield around you. Don't move." Ron nodded mutely, trembling now, as Harry completely encased him in as strong a shield as he could create. Harry turned his attention back to the boulder. He began breathing more rapidly, letting the rage build inside him, finally accepting the anger, grief, torment that he'd forcibly controlled all these months. He stretched his right hand toward the boulder, his fingers cupped and reaching as if for a Snitch. With a tremendous growl, Harry unleashed his anger on the boulder, remembering at the last instant to put a shield over himself. With a resounding *"**BOOM!**"* the massive boulder and all the rocks around it turned into shrapnel, gravel and dust that blew in all directions.

Back in the castle, bedlam reigned as the ancient castle rocked with the explosion. Those students who were still at breakfast in the Great Hall were shrieking and running everywhere until Dumbledore's voice rang over the tumult. "SILENCE!" They stopped and stood looking at him, bewildered.

"Prefects, take your classmates to their House Common Rooms, please. Do a count to be sure no one is missing," Dumbledore instructed. "Teachers, please check the castle for damage and see if anyone's been injured. Please escort any stray students you find to their House Common Rooms. If any students are missing when you make your counts, please let me know as soon as possible." He turned to Remus with a twinkle in his eye. "Professor Lupin, if you would accompany me."

"Please, Professor?" Hermione called, an anxious look on her face.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore replied kindly.

"Harry and Ron went outside, I think."

"Thank you for letting us know. Professor Lupin and I will look for them."

Moments later in the Gryffindor Common Room, Parvati and Lavender rounded on Hermione. "What's up with you and Harry?" Parvati asked in a stern voice.

"What do you mean?" Hermione replied, taken aback.

"He was acting awfully friendly. Have he and Ginny broken up?" Parvati demanded.

"She's such a cow. I don't know what he sees in her," Lavender added off-handedly.

Hermione flew into a rage. "For your information, Ginny and Harry are JUST FINE! Harry's my best friend in the world. When he's not feeling his best, whichever of his close friends is nearest him helps him out. It just happened to be me this time. I'm with Ron. Harry's with Ginny. And you'd better hope neither Harry, Ginny nor Ron ever hear you call Ginny a cow or you'll have boils that won't disappear for months! I may give them to you myself!"

The other two girls took a step back, then looked at each other. "OK, then, tell me this," Parvati said hesitantly after a moment. "You looked scared of him just before he left. Why?"

"I've seen Harry in a true rage and it's not something you want to witness. He was close to it then, and I was worried about him. If you have any sense at all, if you see him getting angry, try to calm him down somehow, or else get completely away from him," Hermione warned.

"Why?" snapped Lavender, obviously not believing Hermione. "What's he do?"

"That's Harry's business, not yours. Just believe me – Harry in a full-fledged rage is very dangerous."

The other girls looked startled. "Has he. . .hurt. . .or killed someone?" Lavender asked nervously.

"Harry would never hurt a friend intentionally," Hermione said evasively. "I'm a Prefect, I need to take names and see if anyone is missing. Just leave him alone, all right?"

Lavender and Parvati looked at each other, dumbfounded, as Hermione stalked off to make a list of those students who might be missing.

As Remus and Dumbledore left the castle, Remus asked, "You think it was Harry, then?"

"I'm certain of it. Mr. Malfoy provoked Harry beyond all endurance this morning, and he was already greatly disturbed by the vision he had last night. I was wondering when this would happen." Dumbledore almost seemed more amused than concerned. "I can't tell you how pleased I am with how well he's been controlling his temper. This day had to come sometime, and he's just proved that he's developed some wisdom in dealing with his anger. He took it outside, at a distance from everyone, before he let it loose. It will be interesting to see how Harry deals with losing his temper to this extent, and after controlling it for so long."

"Do you think he and Ron are all right?" Remus wasn't nearly as amused as Dumbledore. The boys could have been seriously hurt by whatever Harry blew up.

A silvery flash of light gently hit Dumbledore's temple at that moment. "Ah, an Adfero from Harry!" Dumbledore said in delight, but then a frown creased his face. "He says he's fine, and he's digging Ron out. He hopes Ron is unhurt, but he hasn't reached him yet, so he isn't certain." He quickened his pace toward the dust cloud hovering over a place near the woods far beyond Hagrid's cabin. In the distance, they could see Hagrid pelting down the path toward the site, Fang at his heels. When they arrived, they found both Harry and Hagrid digging into a tall mound of dust, stone and gravel.

"Is Ron in here, Harry?" Remus asked as he bent to the task.

"Yeah. I put a shield over him, so he should be fine, but I haven't heard anything from him. I don't know how much air he has in there," said Harry, his forehead furrowed in worry and tears streaking down his face. He glanced up at Dumbledore for a moment. "I didn't know, Professor, honestly, I didn't think it would. . . ."

"It's all right, Harry," Dumbledore assured him kindly. He smiled briefly and added, "Might I remind you that you are a Wizard? Stand back, all of you, please. Harry, follow my lead." Dumbledore lifted his wand, watching Harry to be sure he was following along. When the boy had his wand lifted similarly, Dumbledore said, "Swish and flick, Harry. First year Charms." Harry looked gob-smacked, then did a simple swish-and-flick and said *"Wingardium Leviosa"* along with Dumbledore, and the rocks, gravel and dust lifted off a shielded Ron and were deposited safely a few yards away.

Harry ran to his friend and removed the shield. "Ron! Are you OK? I'm so sorry, I didn't. . ."

Ron took a deep, shuddering breath, then said, "'S all right, mate, honestly. Thanks for the shield!" He grabbed his friend and hugged him tightly.

Harry returned the hug. "I thought I'd killed you," he said after a moment, his voice breaking.

Ron patted Harry's back comfortingly, then pushed away so he could look his friend in the eye. "Nah. I knew you'd take care of me. You always do."

Harry shook his head ruefully. "Most people don't get their best mates in danger as often as I do with you and Hermione."

"Just part of the excitement of being your friend, Harry," Ron said bracingly. "And this time you kept Hermione out of it. Thanks for that."

"Yeah, no problem," Harry replied with a small smile.

"Feel better now?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, actually, I do!" Harry said with a grin.

"Oh, good," Ron said, relief apparent on his face. "I'd hate for that to have been a wasted effort!"

"Erm. . .would someone min' tellin' me what happened here?" Hagrid said tentatively.

Harry looked at Ron and both of them burst into laughter. "Would you like to explain this one?" Harry asked Ron.

"Nope, you do it," Ron said with a grin. "I still don't understand it all."

"Another interesting question is," Remus added, "how are we going to explain this to the rest of the school?"

Dumbledore put his hands up to calm the rising tide of nerves and questions in the group. "First, Hagrid. What happened here today never happened. Harry had nothing to do with it. At least, that's what we'll tell the school."

Hagrid looked confused, but nodded.

"We need to come up with a cover story. Any ideas?" Dumbledore asked the group. The boys and Remus all looked confused, but Hagrid had a concentrated look on his face.

"Well," Hagrid began after a moment. "I was thinkin' o' puttin' in a pond near here, fer some ducks an' geese, y'know, to keep fer the kitchen. I've bin tryin' ter keep 'em on the lake, but the squid takes an awful lot of 'em. I've heard o' somethin' Muggles use ter make big holes or tear down buildings. . . ."

"Dynamite," Harry supplied, the faint traces of a grin just starting to show on his face.

"Yeah, that's it! It's noisy and makes big holes, blows things up, right, Harry?" Hagrid asked, beaming at the boy.

"Yeah! That's brilliant!" Harry replied gratefully.

"And I honestly haven't used dynamite before, so I, well, I. . .overdid it a bit," Hagrid said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well done, Hagrid! All right, we'll say the boys came down to watch. That will explain their being here and being so dusty – although we should clean you up a bit before you go back to the castle to keep Mr. Filch happy," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Now, Harry, if you would, please. I'd like to know what really happened here."

Harry hung his head, ashamed of what he'd done. He hated having to explain himself. He could see no justification for his actions. "I'm sorry, Professor. I shouldn't have done it."

"Apology accepted. Please go on," Dumbledore encouraged.

"Well. . . Malfoy. . ." Harry began hesitantly.

"Yes, I heard about what Mr. Malfoy did this morning," Dumbledore replied.

"I was so angry about what he'd said. I was already upset because of the vision I had last night of that family dying. Malfoy was just . . .more than I could bear, I suppose," Harry said. He was holding himself tensely, trying to stay calm and not let himself get upset again.

"Relax, Harry. Deep breaths, as I showed you," Dumbledore said kindly. "You are not in any trouble. I just want to know what happened."

Harry looked up sharply. "I'm not in trouble?"

"None at all."

The boy took the deep, calming breaths Dumbledore had taught him and went on with his story. "I could feel a huge amount of rage building up inside me, and I wanted to see what I could do with it, quite honestly. I wanted to see if I could control the power it created. So I came out here where I knew this big boulder was in a clearing and well away from the castle and Hagrid's hut. I thought my anger would just bounce off a rock that big, so I shielded Ron to protect him from my spell in case it bounced back."

"What spell did you use?"

"Honestly, I didn't use one. I just concentrated my anger and aimed it at the rock," Harry said with a confused shrug. "I didn't know what it would do. I thought maybe it might inflate and lift a bit like my Aunt Marge did that time, or maybe just disappear. I didn't think a boulder was fragile, at least not like glass, so I didn't think I'd break anything."

"Show me what you did," said Dumbledore.

"I held my hand out, curled a bit as if I were reaching for a Snitch," Harry replied, demonstrating. "Then I let go of all the constraints on my anger and concentrated them so they flowed through my hand. You can see the results." A crater fifty feet across and ten feet deep lay before them. Every boulder in the clearing had been reduced to small rocks, gravel and dust. Trees surrounding the area had been mowed down by shrapnel from the rocks. Shreds of wood surrounded the hole like so much mulch. Everyone was silent for a few moments, gazing in awe at the destruction before them.

"That'll make a fine pond, Harry," Hagrid said encouragingly. "Thanks for doing it where you did."

Harry blushed and smiled slightly at Hagrid. "Thanks for taking the blame for me. I owe you."

"No, you don't! You've helped me out loads o' times, and I really was going ter make a pond fer ducks and geese. That part o' the story is true. I just hadn't started digging yet. You saved me a ton o' work!" Hagrid patted Harry on the shoulder so hard, Harry felt his feet sink into the ground a few inches. He smiled up at Hagrid, more grateful than ever for his friendship.

"Harry, I must say, I'm quite proud of you," said Dumbledore.

"What for?" Harry was dumbfounded.

"For many things. Number one, you controlled your temper until you got to a place where it was safe to vent it. Number two, you prevented other people from coming with you, and the one who was with you, you shielded admirably. Number three, you acknowledged that what you did was dangerous and that you shouldn't have done it. However, on this point, I must disagree with you."

"Sorry?"

"You needed to know what you could do if you concentrated your rage. Emotions are powerful forces. Both love and hate are strong emotions, and what you do with them determines if you're a light or dark wizard. You, Harry, are more interested in protecting those around you than in protecting yourself."

"I did put up a shield for myself once I thought about it," Harry offered sheepishly.

"Yes, but before you let your anger fly, you made certain Mr. Weasley was safe. What you did today was an excellent experience for you. You have learned that you have power beyond all imagining, and that you can control that power long enough to protect those around you. That's a very positive thing, Harry."

Harry stood a little straighter, his head tilted and his face thoughtful as he let Dumbledore's words sink in.

"Professor Snape has taken sixty house points from Mr. Malfoy for his actions this morning," Dumbledore added. "For your actions, let's see. I think. . ." he stopped, considering for a moment. "Ah yes, this will do nicely. All right then. Thirty points for protecting Mr. Weasley. Twenty points for controlling your temper until you were in a place safe enough to do this experiment. Twenty points for protecting yourself. Ten points for notifying me via Adfero as quickly as you did, so we wouldn't worry unnecessarily. And Hagrid, how many points shall we give Mr. Potter for digging your pond?"

"You're *giving* me those points, not taking them away?" Harry was astonished.

"Yes, *giving* them to you," Dumbledore assured him.

"I'd say that pond is worth a good fifty points," Hagrid said, beaming at the chance to be so generous to Harry.

"Fifty it is, then. Let's see, that totals. . .one hundred and thirty points. Not a bad morning's work, eh?" He smiled at Harry, his eyes twinkling.

"No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. I mean. . ." Harry fumbled around, trying to find the right words. Finally, they occurred to him. "Thank you, sir! And you, Hagrid!" He grinned at both of them.

"Now, Harry, we do need to work on controlling that power. I'll have to think of some way for you to practice that skill safely. I'm very pleased you've discovered how to control it as much as you have," Dumbledore said, patting Harry on the shoulder. "This was just a continuation of the accidental magic you've done before, you know, such as when you inflated your Aunt Marge, or made the glass on the snake case disappear. Your anger made those things happen without you controlling it. This time you controlled your anger and channelled the power it created. Well done!"

Harry smiled, warmed by his Headmaster's praise. Then he grew thoughtful. "Erm, Professor?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"Did you feel the explosion in the castle? It rocked the ground pretty hard here. Knocked me flat in spite of my shield."

"Yes, the castle shook a bit. No damage or injuries that I know of. Don't worry about it," Dumbledore assured him serenely.

"And Hagrid won't get in trouble with the Board of Governors for this either, will he?"

"No, I will tell them I gave him permission to use the dynamite."

Hagrid elbowed Harry none too gently, a big grin on his face as he winked down at the boy. "Hey, Harry – if you want, you can practice out here again. I need a channel dug from the spring ta this pond ta keep it filled, an' an overflow channel dug ta the lake."

Dumbledore looked delighted. "Hagrid, what a wonderful idea! Thank you!" He winked at Harry and added, "I think our problem is solved."

"I know what ta do with the debris here, too, Headmaster. If you good wizards would give me a hand – well, use your wands, I mean it will go much more quickly," Hagrid said, his beard curling to show he was smiling.

"What would you like us to do, then?" Dumbledore asked cheerfully as he pushed up his sleeves.

"The wood – that's nice mulch, that is. I was goin' ta mulch the garden anyway. If you could just transport it there. An' the gravel. Ya know that marshy spot on the path around the lake? I'd planned ta do summat about that soon. This gravel will do the trick. The dust, I s'pose we can just spread around that little rocky beach. It'll mix in there readily enough, I think."

Harry, Ron, Remus and Dumbledore soon had the debris from the explosion distributed where Hagrid had suggested they put it. "Ar, but that's a good day's work!" Hagrid said with a chuckle as he rubbed his hands together. "And I didn't have ta get any blisters to get it done!"

At breakfast the morning of the first Quidditch game of the year, Harry was encouraging Seamus Finnegan to eat at least a piece of toast. The Creevey brothers didn't seem nervous at all about facing their first Quidditch game as players, but Seamus was a fabulous shade of green.

"I felt the same way before my first game," Ron said encouragingly. "You'll soon get used to it."

Harry grinned at Ron, remembering that it took a lot of games and practice before Ron himself stopped being interesting shades of green before a game.

The post owls arrived, and a long, skinny package landed in front of Ginny. "What's this?" she said curiously. She looked at the label and saw it was for her, then ripped into the wrappings, her friends and brother all watching avidly. Inside was a brand-new Cleansweep 7 like Ron's. "WOW!" she cried as she lifted the broom gently from the wrappings.

"Who's it from, Ginny?" Hermione asked curiously, casting a curious eye at Harry, who shrugged innocently.

"Fred and George!" she exclaimed, tears of delight in her eyes. "Wow! This is fantastic!"

Ron leaned over to Harry. "You had something to do with this, didn't you?"

"I might have made a small suggestion," Harry admitted with a grin. "I couldn't buy it for her myself – I didn't think your parents would approve of such an expensive present from a boyfriend."

Ginny looked over every inch of the broom, then up at Harry. "You had something to do with this, I know you did." Harry did his best to act innocent, but she leaped up and gave him a big kiss anyway, whispering "Thank you!" in his ear when she finally stopped kissing him. Harry's ears were as red as Weasley hair, but he was grinning broadly as he held his delighted girlfriend in his arms.

"Welcome to the first Quidditch game of the year," Dean Thomas said. He had taken over Lee Jordan's position as announcer, as Lee had finished Hogwarts last term. "And it's Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Here comes the Slytherin team. Captain and Seeker Draco Malfoy, Keeper Adrian Pucey, Chasers Montague, Pritchard and Warrington, and Beaters Crabbe and Goyle." As he announced the team members, boos and catcalls erupted from the stands. "And Captain Malfoy lands in the centre of the field to await the arrival of Gryffindor Captain Potter! And here come the Gryffindors, holders of the Quidditch Cup for the last three years! Captain and Seeker Harry Potter, Chasers Katie Bell, Ginny Weasley and Seamus Finnegan, Beaters Colin and Dennis Creevey – another brother team, we'll have to keep our eye on them! And champion Keeper, Ron Weasley!" Cheers erupted from three-quarters of the stadium as the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs joined their voices to those of the Gryffindors in cheering the team. Luna Lovegood's lion hat roared in greeting as the team entered the pitch.

"The captains are shaking hands – Malfoy, don't even think about trying to crush Harry's hand! He's bigger than you now!"

"Mr. Thomas, please keep your comments to announcing the game," snapped Professor McGonagall.

"Sorry, Professor. I thought I *was* announcing the game," Dean said with a cheeky grin, not the least bit perturbed by the reprimand. "And Madam Hooch has released the Snitch, the Bludgers are away and the Quaffle is in play! Katie Bell in possession, go, Katie go! She passes to Ginny Weasley, who passes to Finnegan, who . . .drops the Quaffle. It's picked up by Pritchard and. . .NICE Bludger work by Colin Creevey! The Quaffle is now in Ginny Weasley's possession, and she SCORES! Ten points to GRYFFINDOR! That's a new Cleansweep 7 Ginny's riding – looks like she's getting on well with it!"

Ginny flashed Dean a thumb's up and a grin as she flew away from the goal.

"And a foul is called against Slytherin Beaters Crabbe and Goyle for hitting Bludgers at Chaser Weasley long after she released the ball. Nice work dodging those Bludgers, Ginny!" he called, and she waved gaily in return. "Ginny Weasley will take the penalty shot. Come on, Ginny, you can do it. . .YES! She scores!"

The game went by quickly, the new players making groaning mistakes at times, but overall, the play wasn't bad. The Creeveys were crowd-pleasers like Fred and George Weasley, cheeky and irreverent but also terribly polite. They apologized to each person they hit with a Bludger, but their kind natures didn't keep them from cheerfully whacking Bludgers at every Slytherin within range. Seamus finally got over his first-game jitters and actually scored a

goal. Katie and Ginny were adept at stealing the Quaffle from the Slytherin Chasers, and racked up the points continuously.

"And it's Warrington with the Quaffle racing toward the Gryffindor goals. Keeper Ron Weasley is circling, gauging which hoop the Quaffle will make for – ah, it's the left hoop! Weasley leans down and makes a one-handed catch below his broom! Magnificent! He tosses to Chaser Ginny Weasley and we're off again. She SCORES! And it's Gryffindor 110 to Slytherin's 30! Well done, Ginny Weasley! Well done, Ron Weasley! Weasley is our King! And our Queen! We need a new song!" Dean cried, and the Gryffindors took up the song they'd revised from the Slytherins original cruel lyrics. The song now sang the praises of Ron Weasley, who'd saved the game and the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor last term.

"Look out, there goes Potter after the Snitch! He grew a lot over the holidays, and offered to step down as Seeker in favour of someone smaller and lighter, but look at the reach on him! His arms are half again as long as Malfoy's, and can Potter FLY! There's never been a Seeker like Harry Potter! Go, Harry, go!"

The Snitch was hovering near the Slytherin goal posts when Harry spotted it. He flattened himself against his Firebolt and urged it forward at breakneck speed. He ducked and dodged as two Bludgers came his way, hit by Crabbe and Goyle. The Creevey brothers soon had the Bludgers in their control and used them to chase Crabbe and Goyle away from Harry. The Creeveys were like gnats compared to Crabbe and Goyle in size and speed, and like gnats, they were constantly buzzing around, annoying the slow-flying Slytherin beaters.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Malfoy streaking up the pitch toward him. The angle of their paths to the Snitch gave Malfoy the advantage, but Harry wouldn't give him the satisfaction of winning and soon caught up with him. Malfoy pulled close to Harry's side and began a heated battle with him, shoving Harry's broom and hitting Harry's face and arms as two Seekers hurtled toward the fluttering Snitch. Harry gave as good as he got, shoving or pushing back whenever Malfoy attacked him, but Harry's attention was on the Snitch, while Malfoy's was on Harry and only partly on the Snitch. The Snitch suddenly zoomed down toward the ground and Harry followed it recklessly, dives being his speciality. The ground was coming up faster and faster. He could feel Malfoy's breath on his neck, the other boy was so close to him. Harry felt a heavy tug on his Quidditch robes and realized Malfoy was actually hanging on to him! "Gerrof, Malfoy!" he cried, swinging an elbow back to ward off the other boy. Malfoy ducked, and in that instant, Harry pulled up the front of his broom to avoid hitting the ground, skimming along just inches above the grass still in pursuit of the Snitch. He heard a crash and curses behind him as Malfoy ploughed himself into the ground. Harry stretched his arm as far as he could and caught the Snitch by one fluttering wing. He curled his fingers around the golden ball and pumped his fist in the air, spiralling up in the air with a triumphant grin on his face. The whole team converged on him in a massive red-and-gold coloured, screaming, moving hug.

"And Gryffindor WINS, two hundred and ninety points to thirty! WELL DONE, GRYFFINDOR!" Dean announced, then joined the cheering of his classmates.

Somewhere amidst the clamour of the team's celebration, Harry managed to grab Ginny and whisper "Well done!" in her ear before kissing her soundly. The team's cheers redoubled as they laughed at the blushes Harry and Ginny sported as the team spiralled slowly to the ground.

The party in Gryffindor tower that night was one of the rowdiest ever. Neville and Hermione had recorded the game on Omnioculars, which were passed around among all the Gryffindors so they could relive every wonderful moment of the game. Harry and Ron had nipped off to Hogsmeade to get butterbeers and sweets, and Dobby had brought some treats up from the kitchen. After a while, Harry and Ginny were able to get away from their well-wishers and find a quiet corner where they could talk. Harry turned a squashy armchair so its back was to the party, and sat down, pulling Ginny down into his lap.

"Now, young lady, about your fear of flying," he began with a smirk.

"What fear of flying?" she asked innocently.

"Exactly!" he said with a huge grin. He kissed her playfully, then rested his forehead against hers. "Seriously? I am so proud of you. Well done!"

"My team captain did a good job of training me," she giggled, "and the extra sessions really helped!" She gave him a playful peck on the nose, then laced her fingers in his hair and pulled him down for a serious snog.

When they came up for air, Harry chuckled and said, "Anytime you need extra training, let me know!"

"I'll remember that," she replied, smiling up at him. Harry took a length of her long red hair and tickled her nose with it, then made it a "moustache" on his own face, then hung it over his ear where it rested like one bright red sideburn against his black hair. Ginny giggled, resting back against his arm and enjoying his playfulness. Harry was serious so often these days, it was wonderful to see him being silly.

The D.A. meetings had been postponed until the Quidditch season began. With the first game completed and everyone's practice and game schedules set, it was possible to work out a meeting time for the D.A. Dumbledore had given them the use of the Great Hall, since so many new people had signed up for it. At the first meeting, Harry put Hermione and Ron in charge of the returning members, while he had a talk with the new ones.

"For simplicity's sake, we're going to call you lot 'First Year D.A.' and the other group 'Second Year D.A.,' no matter what year you are at Hogwarts," Harry began. "If you progress quickly or your skills are especially good, we'll move you up to the Second Year group. Those in the Second Year group – are you listening over there? – who are still having trouble with the lower level spells will come over to this group until your skills improve. That's no reflection on your abilities or intelligence or anything like that. Some people just learn at different speeds, and it's easier for everyone if you're grouped according to your skill level. You will be working with partners, practicing whatever spells we're working on. You will stop when you hear a whistle blown. Usually when I do that, it's because things are getting out of hand, or people are making mistakes, or I see something that needs to be improved before we go further. I will have some of the Second Year D.A. members helping to supervise you so I can teach both groups. I'll teach you a skill, or review it if it's a spell you should already know, and then I'll turn you over to other people who will watch you work." He studied the group thoughtfully for a moment. There were some rebellious looks among them already, as well as many whose faces showed they weren't taking this meeting seriously. "These helpers have the same authority I do, so don't give them a hard time. They can hex you into next week

if you cheek them," he said with a grin, teasing them. A shocked silence was followed by nervous laughter. "What we do in D.A. is fun, and I want you to enjoy it. But it's also deadly serious. We are at war, and the skills you learn here will help you if you find yourself in danger." He glanced around the group, now seeing some eager faces, some full of nervous anticipation, and some just plain scared. "Don't be afraid – we won't let anyone get seriously hurt. These are exercises, but they do work in the real world. I've been there, and so have the people who will be supervising you. We know these spells work in real combat." The gathered students looked awe-struck. A tentative hand went up. "Yes?" Harry said, pointing to the tiny first-year student with her hand in the air.

"Mr. Potter, sir?" she said timidly, her blond curls bouncing as she trembled with nerves.

Harry laughed. "I'm Harry, just Harry. I'm a student like you. No 'Mr.' anybody here, unless Professor Lupin joins us sometime. What's your question?"

"Erm. . .when you said 'combat,' what did you mean? I mean, when you said you and these other people have been in combat?" When she finished speaking, she put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide, apparently unnerved by her boldness.

"What's your name?" Harry asked kindly, squatting to get on her eye-level.

"Megan. Megan O'Reilly," she answered with a quiver in her voice.

"Nice to meet you, Megan. Let's all sit down, shall we? I don't know about you, but I've already had a long day," Harry began as he sat cross-legged on the floor. "Come on, gather round," he invited. Once the First Year D.A. students were settled, he looked at Megan. "What I meant by combat was actual face-to-face fighting with Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort." At the collective gasp resulting from his saying Voldemort's name, he looked around at the group sternly. "Professor Dumbledore says 'fear of the name increases the fear of the thing itself.' 'Voldemort' is just a name, like 'Potter' or 'Weasley' or 'O'Reilly.' Don't be afraid to say Lord Voldemort's name, and don't cringe and gasp or be frightened when you hear it. Reactions like that give him more power than he already has. The simple truth is, Lord Voldemort is the enemy. Get used to it."

A young girl in the front row raised her hand tentatively.

"Yes? What's your name?" Harry asked.

"Margaret Boyle. Hi, Harry!," she said with a giggle and a small wave.

"Hi," he answered, wondering what she had on her mind. "Go on."

"Well. . ." she began breathlessly, then said in a rush, "I've got your Quidditch poster and your Famous Wizard Card. Will you sign them?" Her comment stirred choruses of "Me, too!" "Sign mine, will you?" and similar calls from the new D.A. students, as well as giggles and much avid whispering among the girls who'd been following him around all term. The Second Year D.A. students paused in what they were doing and looked at the new group, chuckling. They knew Harry well enough by now to know what his answer would be.

Harry was blushing furiously. "Erm. . .no, no autographs, sorry. I don't do that. I'm just Harry. That's all."

"No, you're famous!" "Please, Harry!" the crowd encouraged him.

"No!" Harry's temper was rising dangerously. He took some deep breaths and calmed himself. "Look. I'm flattered and all that, but we're here for a serious reason." Glancing around at the group, he began to wonder. He took a deep breath and said, "OK, how many of you are here to learn how to fight Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort?"

A shudder went through the gathering, and very few hands were raised.

"How many of you are here because I'm the one leading it?" he asked. Nearly every hand shot up. Harry slumped, shook his head and sighed. This wasn't the right attitude for them to have, not at all. "Look, you lot," he replied angrily. "We're here because we're at war and we need to get better at defending ourselves. If you're just here to see Harry Potter, you can leave right now. I will be happy to teach you all I can to help prepare you for the war, but I will not give out autographs, interviews, hugs, kisses or anything else! Those of you who are here for the wrong reasons can leave right now!" He waited, but no one moved a muscle. Even the girls who'd spent the last several weeks openly lusting after him seemed to be holding their breath. Silence reigned for a while, then a boy's hand wavered uncertainly in the air. "Yes?" Harry asked, stifling his anger the best he could. "What's your name?"

"Bill Miller," the boy answered timidly. "Second year, Ravenclaw."

"Is your question about defensive spells and what we're doing here, or not?" Harry snapped.

"About what we're doing here," the boy said hesitantly, quailing in the face of Harry's temper.

Harry sat back, relaxed a bit and grinned at the boy. "Great! Nice to meet you, Bill. What's your question?"

"You said face-to-face combat with D-d-d-Death Eaters and L-l-l-Lord V-v-v-. . . ." He couldn't go on.

"Yup. That's 'Voldemort.' Learn to say it. And your question?"

"How could any of you fight them and survive?" the boy responded nervously.

"That's what we're here to learn!" Harry said encouragingly. "OK, I imagine you want proof." He sighed and looked over at Hermione, who was busy correcting the wand work of one of the returning D.A. members. "Hermione, have you been listening?"

"Yes," she said, turning to him.

"I could use some ideas here. I don't want to spend the entire time telling stories."

"Then ask what they've heard and answer those questions. That should lead you to tell the stories they want to hear."

"OK," Harry said, sighing. "You lot have to realize, it's not fun for me to relive any of these things. I had loads of help. . ."

"Not on the first task where you faced that Hungarian Horntail!" piped up one voice from the older D.A. group.

"Not in loads of other cases, Harry," someone else called. "Get on with it and just tell them what happened!" There was general laughter in the Second Year group at this statement.

Harry blushed, then shrugged and chuckled. "I can see they aren't going to give me any peace. Tell me what you've heard and that will give me a starting point." The usual questions about the Sorceror's Stone, the Basilisk and his Patronus came up, and Harry explained those. Then someone asked about Cedric Diggory's death and Harry told them about seeing Voldemort return. Telling that story was still quite hard for Harry, but he could see they needed to hear it from him, despite having read about it in the paper and in magazines.

"All of those things are amazing, Harry, but they were all you. You said some of the D.A. has also fought . . . erm. . .You-Know-Who," Bill said.

"No, I said they fought Death Eaters. None of them faced Voldemort. That was me, the other times. Again, I had help. Dumbledore fought him last year and saved my life." He told them about the battle with the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries and took that opportunity to stand up and call over Neville, Luna and Ginny. "This is Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom. They'll be supervising your work while I'm working with the Second Years. They, Ron and Hermione and I were the ones involved in that battle with the Death Eaters last year."

"Some of us fared better than others in that one," Ron commented, raising an eyebrow and smiling at Harry.

"Some of us, me included, need to learn to curb our curiosity," Harry retorted with a rueful laugh. He and Ron grinned at each other over the heads of the students between them. Harry's insatiable curiosity had led him to actually want the dreams that drew him into and guided him through the Department of Mysteries in the first place, and Ron's had led him to summon a brain to him which tangled him up in thought threads and kept him in the hospital wing for a while after everything was over. Harry turned to his listeners again. "Neville, here, is living proof that you need to use a wand that chose you, if at all possible, not a hand-me-down wand. He used his dad's wand until it was broken in that battle last year. With his new wand, his spell work is fantastic. His dad's wand worked fine for his dad. It just never worked as well for him. Ron Weasley – give us a wave, Ron, so they know who you are – had the same situation. He used one of his brothers' wands for a while, but then it broke. Since he got his own, his spell work has improved tremendously. So if you're using a wand that didn't choose you and your spell work isn't what it should be, consider getting a new wand if it's at all possible. A new wand might make a huge difference for you, as it's done for Neville and Ron. That new wand working properly for you may mean the difference between life and death."

There was a stunned silence among the First Years, then one of the younger students raised a nervous hand.

"Yes? What's your name?" Harry said.

"Sean Freeman," the boy responded. "So you're saying we really can't do magic with other wands than the one that chose us?"

"I'm saying the wand that chose you will always work best for you. But once you're good at the spells, you can work them with any wand. Here, Ginny, let me borrow yours a sec," Harry said, reaching out for her wand. "OK, I'll do a little demonstration. This is my own wand," he said, holding his wand in his right hand, high enough for everyone to see. "Watch." He pointed the wand at Ginny and said *"Wingardium Leviosa."* Ginny rose several feet above the floor, giggling while floating above them. "Ginny, are you OK up there?"

"Yes."

"OK if I play around a bit?" Harry said with a crooked grin.

"I trust you, Harry," she said with a warm smile.

Harry turned to the gathered students. "I wouldn't do this with someone who isn't a good flyer. It might make them sick. Ginny's a terrific flyer, so it shouldn't bother her." With that, he used his wand to fly her around the room, even having her turn somersaults. She giggled and squealed with glee through the whole exercise. *She sounds as if she's on an amusement park ride,* Harry thought, a brief memory of Casey flashing through his mind. He pushed the memory down, then looked up at his beautiful red-haired girlfriend, who was waving down at him. He couldn't help grinning at her. She made him so happy. He lowered her gently to the ground and switched wands. "Now I'll do it with her wand. Ready, Ginny?"
"Yes."

He repeated the performance, which went just as well as it had with his own wand. When Ginny was standing beside him again, Sean piped up again.

"Can you do that with my wand?"

"Right," Harry agreed, taking the offered wand and turning to Ginny. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Harry did the same things he'd done the first two times and set Ginny gently on her feet next to him again.

"Wicked!" Sean and a few others breathed.

"But that's a first year Charms spell," one of the older new students commented. "I thought we were going to learn useful spells."

"Ron knocked out a mountain troll and saved Hermione's life – and mine, too – with that spell in our first year," Harry commented dryly.

"He did?" The new students looked with new respect at the gangly redhead still leading the older D.A. members.

"Right, then. Let's start with that spell and see how you do," Harry told the group as he handed the wand back to Sean. Luna handed around feathers and she, Ginny, Neville and Harry supervised the group as they all attempted to make their feathers fly. Harry did some corrections in technique, then stood back and watched his helpers teach. They were doing very well, so he went back to the older group, where Ron and Hermione were reviewing spells they'd done the past year.

"How are they doing?" he asked Hermione.

"Pretty well, actually. We've reviewed most of the basic spells and jinxes already, just briefly. Some people need to brush up on them, but nobody's seriously behind yet. I think we'd all like to work on our Patronus spells, and that will certainly impress the new people, too," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Nothing like blowing their socks off in the first class, right?"

Harry laughed. "I like the way you think." He looked at the Second Year D.A. members and raised his voice above the din of flying spells. "You lot!"

"Yeah?" "Hey, Harry!" "Nice of you to join us!" "We thought you'd never pay attention to us!" the group called cheerfully.

"Yeah, nice to see you too. I'm glad you all came back this year. I think we're going to learn a lot, especially with the school actively supporting us rather than us having to do it in secret!" This comment elicited general laughter. "All right, I'd like to see how you've done on perfecting your Patronus spells over the holidays. Everyone do your Patronus – and if you haven't managed one yet, don't worry about it, we'll spend a good bit of time on them this year." The Second Years cast their spells amid much laughter and teasing, as some people had their Patronus chase the Patroni of other people. The First Years stopped what they were doing and gaped at the silvery forms gambolling around the Great Hall.

"All right, First and Second Years both, everyone sit down and we'll have a group session. We need to explain to the new people what the Patronus charm is, why we use it, and why some of you still don't have it conquered," he said with a teasing grin as he glanced around at the Second Years. He began a discussion of the purposes of the spell and how it was conjured, and the types of happy thoughts that seemed to work best. Then he added, "We've just been working on creating them. They have a serious purpose. They aren't supposed to just be pretty, although many of them are. I've asked Professor Lupin to find us a Boggart to work with so we can practice them against a Dementor."

"If it's a Boggart, where will we get the Dementor?" asked a tiny first year student.

"A Boggart is a shape-shifter, and it takes the form of whatever scares you most," Harry began. "In Ron's case, it's usually a spider." Ron shuddered. "In Seamus's case, it's often a banshee." Seamus gave a similar shudder to Ron's. "In my case, it's a Dementor. You'll be learning about Boggarts in your Defence classes, so don't worry about how to get rid of Boggarts right now. We don't want to get rid of our Boggart, we want him to keep coming out as a Dementor so we can practice on him." He looked around the room. "Which of you seen or been near Dementors?" All the second year and above students raised their hands. "Yes, I thought so. Some came on the Hogwarts Express last year. Who wants to tell us what it's like to have Dementors around?" He looked around at the raised hands and called on Colin Creevey.

"It gets all cold. The windows of the train frosted up. My water bottle froze. And I thought I'd never be happy again," Colin said with a shudder.

"That's right, Colin. Thank you." Harry turned to the rest of the group. "Those of you who know Colin know he's one of the most cheerful people you'll ever meet. It's almost impossible to catch him without a big happy grin on his face." There were some chuckles at this comment. Colin's relentless cheeriness was well-known throughout the school. "Imagine, then, something horrible enough to make someone so cheerful think he'd never feel that way again." A sudden nervous silence filled the room. "What he said was completely true. You'll feel very cold, you'll become very depressed, and you'll relive the worst memories of your life. And if you aren't careful, they can do the most awful thing to you I've ever heard of."

"What's that?" Megan asked timidly.

"They can suck your soul right out of your mouth and you'll be an empty shell. Your body will live, but you won't have any mind, any personality, any soul at all. It's worse than death," Harry intoned seriously.

"There's only one person alive that anyone knows of who knows what a Dementor looks like under its hood," Hermione added quietly. "Harry was about to have his soul sucked out when he was saved by a Patronus."

"Wow. . .who saved him?" someone breathed.

Hermione gulped. She had said too much. She glanced at Harry, who shrugged and said, "I saved myself. I thought it was my dad, but he's been dead since I was a year old. I saw a stag on the shore across the lake just before it charged the Dementors – my dad was an Animagus and his form was always a stag. I thought it was him. But it was me."

"How in the world were you two places at once?" Ernie McMillian asked. He'd never heard this story.

"We had a Time-Turner. Long story, and we can't go into details, but we went back in time. . ."

"By 'we,' who do you mean?" Ernie asked insistently.

"Hermione and me," Harry answered. "And I honestly am not at liberty to tell you a lot more except that we had a Time-Turner and went back in time a few hours, which is what saved our lives. Hermione had already fainted from the Dementors surrounding us, and my Patronus just wasn't strong enough to fight them all off. . ."

"How many?" Dean asked. He hadn't heard the story either.

"Over a hundred. Anyway, one Dementor pushed back his hood and I saw its face – it was gray, slimy and rotten looking, like a corpse that's been underwater, I guess, and there was only one opening, a huge mouth. It had me in its hands and was forcing my head back, ready to give me the Kiss, when the stag came charging across the lake and chased them all away. When I was there later, after using the Time-Turner, I waited to see my father, or whoever it was, cast the Patronus that saved Hermione and me, but then I realized it had to be me who

did it. Nobody else was there. So, since I knew I'd done it, I was able to do it, and I've been able to do them ever since." He shrugged as if this weren't a big deal.

"Did the stag run on top of the water, or splash through it, or what?" a wide-eyed girl asked.

"It ran across on top of the water, but you can see from what we've done here that they're just vapour – kind of." Harry shrugged again. "I don't know how else to explain it. The Patronus charm is ridiculously difficult, over N.E.W.T. standard, but since the Dementors have been turned loose on the population by Voldemort, it's important we all know how to fight them." He glanced at his watch. "Our hour is up. Good work tonight. Sorry there was so much explanation and so little practical work, but now that we've got that behind us, we'll be working hard each session. I'll try to have a Boggart for the Second Years by next time. Keep working on your Patronus charms. And First Years, work hard on all the charms and spells you've learned in school. We'll be reviewing them here. If you're already good at them, you'll progress faster. Thanks for coming, everyone. Next week, same time. Good night!" He stood up and started picking up feathers, along with Ginny. Hermione held open a bag and said, *"Accio feathers,"* which solved the problem neatly. Harry and Ginny laughed at being caught doing things the "Muggle way." As they put their supplies away and moved the House tables back in place, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione chatted about the various students who'd joined them.

"I think you've got a fan problem in these new girls, Harry," Ginny said in a teasing tone. "Want me to do something about them?"

Harry laughed and pulled her into a hug. "I'll try to hold my own against them, but if they gang up on me, you're welcome to have a go at them!"

"I think it went very well, overall," Hermione commented as the four of them finished tidying up and prepared to leave the Great Hall.

"I thought you were going to get yourself and Harry in trouble with that Time-Turner story," Ron chided, stopping before they left the Hall. "We've got to be careful what we say in here. We don't know if all of these people are actually on our side."

"You're right, Ron. I don't know what I was thinking," Hermione said.

"Yeah, that wasn't like you. Where was your mind?" Harry asked, looking at her curiously.

"I don't know. It just sort of popped out. It seemed like the right thing to say," she said with a shrug. "I hope it doesn't cause any trouble."

"Well, we didn't say when it happened, or who else, if anyone, was involved, and Dumbledore and McGonagall gave you permission to have the Time-Turner, so it should be OK," Harry said reassuringly, hoping that he was right.

Chapter 17 – Christmas Shopping in Hogsmeade

"Ron?" Harry said one evening as they were getting ready for bed.

"Yeah?"

"I need to talk to you about D.A. I've had an idea."

"'K," Ron replied, turning to sit on his bed. "What's up?"

"Well. . ." Harry began, trying to organize his thoughts logically, "Casey and I went to a film this summer that was about war. They had strategies and generals and stuff. The generals stayed in a command area and kept track of the troop movement, sending reinforcements to places where they were needed, making troops move back when they'd taken enough ground in other areas."

"What's that got to do with D.A.?" Ron asked, a puzzled look on his face.

"They said in the film that battle strategy was like a chess game. That interested me, and I read some books about battle plans. I thought you'd be a good general for D.A."

"Huh?" Ron said, a truly bewildered look on his face.

"You're a chess master!" Harry insisted. "You're brilliant at strategy, planning moves several steps ahead, that kind of thing. I'm not. We both know you're a far better chess player than I am, and that I don't plan things well. So I thought you could be the general, and Hermione, who we both know is great at planning things, could be your assistant. Then the two of you could supervise where the D.A. members go, how they strike, where they pull back, that kind of thing, so we're more effective than if we all just go in and fight as individuals. Does that make sense to you?" Harry spread his hands and tilted his head in a hopeful way.

Ron went through various emotions and thoughts, all of which showed plainly on his always-transparent face. At first he was confused. Then he was thoughtful as he considered what Harry had said. Then a dawning awareness showed on his face. "Wait a minute!" he cried. "You're trying to keep me and Hermione out of the fight!"

"No, I'm not!" Harry insisted. "I'm trying to make the best possible use of our resources. I'm going to ask Ginny to lead a healer squad. I'm going to divide the D.A. into squads of ten people each, with a leader for each group who answers to you. We'll choose the healers first, from those who have some experience, hopefully, or those who want to learn." Harry leaned forward intently, willing Ron to understand his thinking.

Ron thought a while longer. "You're not just trying to protect us?"

"I'd like to protect everyone, especially you three, but I'm putting Ginny, in particular, in a lot of danger. In Muggle armies, the medical people have to go into the field of battle to tend the wounded, and they're too busy working to be able to fight. Do you think I'd put Ginny in that kind of position if there was a better way to do it?"

Ron thought a while longer. "Actually, it does make good sense. An organized force instead of a group of individual fighters would have more power to control the situation, I think."

"That sounds like a general talking," Harry said with a laugh. "So you'll do it?"

"Yeah! Have you talked to the girls about this yet?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you about it first. Your position is the most important."

"What will you be doing, if I'm the general?" Ron asked suddenly.

"Fighting Voldemort," Harry replied grimly. "That's my job. It's my. . .destiny."

"What do you mean, your destiny?"

Harry sighed. He'd been avoiding telling his friends about the prophecy he'd learned last year, but it seemed to be time to tell Ron, at least. "If I tell you, you have to promise not to tell anyone else. I don't want anyone worrying too much about me," Harry said grimly.

"Not even Hermione or Ginny?" Ron asked, aghast.

"Especially not them," Harry replied, his mouth set in a thin, firm line of determination. "I mean it. Nobody."

Ron stared at his friend. Whatever it was, it was terribly serious or Harry wouldn't be acting this way. "OK. I promise."

Harry took a deep, calming breath. It didn't seem to be doing him any good. Knowing there was no easy way to tell the story, he just plunged into it. "The prophecy we went to the Department of Mysteries to get? It was about me and Voldemort."

"Yeah? The sign made me think that," Ron said, nodding his head and concentrating on Harry's every word.

"It says. . .it says I have to kill Voldemort, or he will kill me." Harry gulped, trying to swallow the fear that leaped into his throat every time he thought of the prophecy.

"So? Everybody's known that for ages," Ron replied, confused.

"So? It's PROPHESIED! I have to . . .*kill* him."

"I sussed that, Harry," Ron said, his open face earnest.

"You did?"

"Yeah. Didn't you?"

"I have to KILL somebody, Ron! Voldemort!" Harry said desperately, trying to make Ron understand how it hurt him to think about it.

"Somebody's got to do it, and it seems you're the only one who can, other than Dumbledore. And if Dumbledore could do it, he would have last year, wouldn't he?" Ron said reasonably.

"I don't know. I don't know why he didn't do it then, except that this prophecy says I have to do it. It's a kill or be killed thing, you know?"

"Yeah, and he's been trying to kill you for ages. I get that," Ron replied.

"So it doesn't freak you out that I have to kill somebody?" Harry was astonished.

"No. I thought it would come to that someday."

"How can you be so calm? I have to KILL somebody!"

Ron laid a calming hand on his friend's arm. "Harry. If anyone can kill You-Know. . oh, all right, V-v-voldemort," he said with a shudder at the name, "it's you. And it won't be like killing a human being, or a nice person. He's not human anymore. It will be like killing a bug – a big nasty one, but something that needs to be destroyed. You're fighting for your life as it is. When you face him, you'll be fighting for your life. Self-defence isn't against the law. You don't have anything to worry about except him. And he's plenty to worry about."

Harry's face was still troubled, his heart in his anguished eyes. "But killing someone. . .that's just wrong!"

"And that's the difference between the two of you," Ron said wisely. "He doesn't care. He doesn't think it's wrong. I believe in you, Harry. You'll defeat him when you're ready. And until you're ready, we'll all just do the best we can to get through whatever he throws at us."

Harry was quiet for a while, dumbfounded by Ron's complete faith in him. Harry wished he had such faith in himself. When he was calm again, he went back to working out his idea. "OK. Well. . . ." He took a deep calming breath and got back on task. "While I'm dealing with Voldemort, the rest of you will have your hands full with the Death Eaters. If it's at all possible, it would be a great help to me if the Death Eaters are kept occupied so they can't interfere with me and Voldemort."

Ron held out his long-fingered, big-knuckled hand. "I'll be your general, and watch your back. I guess that leaves you the title of 'Hero?'" he added with a grin.

"More like David," Harry replied, shaking Ron's hand firmly.

"David?"

"Have you ever heard the story of David and Goliath?"

"Oh, yeah, him I've heard of. Yeah, David. That fits. And he's a winner!" Ron said with a grin.

"Let's hope I can follow in his footsteps then," Harry said quietly.

Lupin found a Boggart for the D.A. and brought it to the meeting in a locked crate. The D.A. members, both First and Second Years, stood around wide-eyed and nervous, waiting for the meeting to begin. Harry and Ron helped Lupin place the crate in front of the staff table.

"May I stay and watch?" Remus asked Harry.

"Of course! I was hoping you'd have time to help with this session," Harry agreed. He turned to the gathered students. "Professor Lupin has found us a Boggart. You will need to get rid of any ideas you have about whatever is the scariest thing to you. Dementors are far scarier than anything you can think of. If they're around you long enough, they drain you of every happy memory, every positive emotion, leaving you with nothing but depression and fear, and that's if they haven't sucked out your soul. You will feel very cold, and then you will feel as if you'll never be happy again. If you've seen horrible things in your lifetime, as some of us have, you will relive those in vivid detail. You must be stronger than these memories and feelings. Before the Dementor comes out, you need to have the best possible happy thought ready in your mind. Hold onto that happy thought no matter what you feel when you see the Dementor, and say "*Expecto Patronum*" to conjure your Patronus. You Second Years know all this already, but you haven't faced a Dementor or even a Boggart posing as a Dementor before. I trained by using a Boggart posing as a Dementor, and it made me feel exactly the way the real Dementors do. This method will work, if you let it. So right now, before we start, convince yourself that Dementors are the scariest thing ever." He waited a few moments, watching the faces of the assembled students. "All right. I'll go first so you can see how it works. And believe me, Dementors still call up those bad memories for me, but I can see my way past them because I know I can conjure a strong Patronus." He took a deep breath, then turned, grim-faced, toward the box and nodded at Lupin. "Let's do it."

Lupin unlocked the box and a Dementor rose out of it. Screams, squeals and gasps erupted from the gathered students. The Dementor reached out to grab Harry, but Harry stood there with an indomitable look on his face and cried "*Expecto Patronum!*" A huge silver stag shot out of his wand and ran toward the Dementor, chasing it back toward the box, where Lupin captured it and locked it safely away. Harry was panting as if he'd just run a race by the time the Dementor was safely back in the box. He stood glaring at the box for a moment, then turned to the rest of the students.

"That's how it's done," he said, his face still grim from the encounter. "I never said it would be easy. Chocolate makes you feel better after facing a Dementor, so I have a large supply of it here for you. The good news is, the more times you conquer Dementors with a Patronus, the easier it gets for you, and you may not need chocolate after a while. I've done without chocolate after such encounters myself with no problem, but you lot are going to be stuffed with it tonight to make sure you're all right. OK, line up. Who wants to go first?"

There was a general shuffling of feet as everyone took a step backward, leaving Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville standing alone in front. "I see you lot have been volunteered by the rest of the group," Harry said with a chuckle. "Who's first?"

Hermione stepped forward, taking a deep breath as she did so. "I'll try it."

"Great!" Harry encouraged her. "Got your happy thought in place?" She nodded. "OK, you tell Professor Lupin when you're ready and he'll release the Dementor."

Hermione nodded again, her face very serious. She took another deep breath and blew it out, then raised her wand and said, "OK" in a shaky voice. The Dementor rose from the box and loomed over her, reaching toward her with its slimy hands. "*Expecto Patronum!"* Hermione cried. "*Expecto Pa. . .Expecto. . .*" and she fainted. While Lupin put the Dementor back in the box, Harry bent over Hermione, pushing some chocolate between her lips.

"Wake up, Hermione. It's all right, it's just an old Boggart," Harry assured her.

"'Mione?" Ron asked, kneeling swiftly at her side, aghast that he'd let her go first. "'Mione? Wake up!"

"She'll be OK, Ron, she's just passed out," Harry assured Ron, hoping he was right. At that moment, Hermione's eyes fluttered open.

"Oh! What happened? How did I get down here?" she asked.

"You fainted," Harry replied. "Here, eat this, it will help," he added, giving her more chocolate. He looked up at the rest of the group. "I never said this was going to be easy, mind you. But it's important. While Hermione rests, who's next?"

Ron stepped forward, his body tense and his face resolute. He looked from Harry to Lupin, then said "Go" as he raised his wand. He managed to get a small silver vapour out of his wand, but it dissipated quickly. Lupin stuffed the Boggart back in the box.

"Well done, Ron!" Harry cried.

"Not well done," Ron replied. "It was only mist."

"That's better than my first few tries," Harry insisted. "Do it again."

Ron looked at Remus and nodded. "Go." The Dementor rose and Ron cast his Patronus, but it was still just silver mist. He held onto it, shaking hard with the effort. Harry sent his Patronus to chase the Dementor back to the box and handed Ron some chocolate.

"That was great!" Harry cried sincerely. "Sit down and rest while someone else has a go. Next?"

"I'll try," Neville offered. He moved nervously to the spot where Hermione and Ron had each stood, shaking so hard his wand was wobbling badly. "G-g-go," he muttered. Lupin released the Dementor, and Neville cast his Patronus. An actual shape came out of his wand and the Dementor hesitated, then blew through the silvery mist.

"Have another go, Neville! That was great!" Harry encouraged.

Neville cast his Patronus again, and again an actual shape emerged, but it didn't last long. He was trembling so hard, he sat down hard on the floor when Harry's Patronus chased the Dementor away.

"I told you all this is a really difficult charm," Harry said to the group. "But look at the results we've already had! Ron got some mist out and Neville had a shape, almost a corporeal

Patronus. That's outstanding for a first try!" He looked at Ginny, who was looking uncertain but determined. He walked over to her and whispered in her ear, "What's your happy thought?"

"Flying," she murmured quickly.

"That's not good enough. I tried to use that for my happy thought and it just didn't work. What else have you got?"

"I don't know, I can't think. That thing scares me," she said, nodding toward the box.

"It scares me too," he assured her.

"But your Patronus is very strong," she protested.

"Because I know I can do it. And I have a wonderful happy thought," he added with a tender smile.

She looked up at him. "What?"

"I think about you. You're my happy thought," he whispered, then kissed her on the cheek. "Try to come up with something that strong, that happy."

Ginny's face lit up. "I can do that!" she said with a smile. Harry backed away from her and she glared determinedly at the box. "Go!" The Dementor rose up and Ginny cried "*Expecto Patronum!*" A silver horse flew from her wand toward the Dementor. It dissolved before it conquered the Dementor, but it was an excellent beginning. Ginny laughed and clapped her hands. "I did it, I did it!"

"Yes, you did!" Harry said, his pride in her obvious.

"Harry, what did you say to her?" asked Justin Finch-Fletchley. "You gave her some kind of help you didn't give the others."

"I wanted to see how all of you would do on your own first. I honestly thought Ron and Hermione could manage without help, but it is such a tricky spell, and doing it with a Dementor right here makes it extra difficult. And they went first, which took a lot of nerve on their part. Neville finally has a wand that chose him, so his spell work is improving tremendously. I didn't think I'd need to help him, and I didn't. And he'd already seen the Dementor three times before he had to deal with it himself, which I think may have been some help to him. Ginny is my girlfriend, as most of you know. She looked pretty uncertain for a moment there, and I thought her happy thought might not be strong enough, so I suggested she use something else. It worked."

"What did you suggest to her?" Justin demanded.

"What works for Ginny won't work for you," Harry reminded him. "You need to find your own happy thought."

"So what's yours?" Justin asked impatiently. "And what did you tell Ginny to choose?"

"I didn't 'tell' Ginny anything except that her first choice probably wasn't strong enough. I told her my own happy thought and that she might consider choosing something similar."

"And what was yours?" the boy demanded again.

Harry looked at Ginny and blushed. "Ginny."

"And mine was Harry," she said proudly. "And no, none of you can use Harry as your happy thought. He's mine!" She giggled at her own audacity and at the interesting shade of pink that suffused Harry's cheeks.

"OK, that's enough personal stuff. Who else wants a go?" he asked, and the class continued amid lots of nervous and embarrassed laughter and many pounds of chocolate.

At the next D.A. meeting, Harry presented the concept of using actual battle strategy, and introduced Ron as the general, Hermione as his assistant, and Ginny as head of the Healer Squad.

"You're just trying to protect your friends!" snapped Parvati.

"No, actually, Ginny and the healers will be in a lot of danger, since they'll be out there in the middle of an ongoing battle, unable to fight because they're tending the wounded. And good commanders try to take out the command post, so Ron and Hermione won't be any safer than the rest of you. I do have to say, all three of them protested about being taken out of the battle, but these are important jobs and I believe they're the best people for the jobs. Ron is a chess master – he's beaten everyone he's played, unless he's been distracted. Hermione's job is to keep him focused and help him with planning. Planning is one of her great strengths. It's one of my biggest weaknesses, so I appreciate her being so good at it. Ginny's had a lot of experience as a healer, and has been studying with Madam Pomfrey for months. They're the best Hogwarts has to offer for these positions."

"But you're our leader!" someone called. "Why aren't you the general?"

"I have to fight Voldemort. The D.A.'s job is to fight the Death Eaters and Dementors," Harry said quietly. "I can't be the general and do my own job at the same time."

"Who said you have to fight Voldemort?" the same voice asked.

"Voldemort," Harry said simply.

"Why?"

"I wish I knew, but he has chosen me. This scar," he pushed up his fringe to reveal the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, "is his way of marking me as his adversary. He's been trying to kill me all my life. You all know that. The stories you've heard about Voldemort and me are true. It's my job to deal with him. It's your job to deal with everyone else."

"We'll help you fight him!" Colin shouted eagerly.

Harry smiled fondly at the boy. "Thanks, Colin. If all of you do your job with the Death Eaters and Dementors, my job will be much easier. I've had to face all of them, plus Voldemort, by myself before. It will be great to have you lot there with me, knowing I don't have to do it all alone."

The room was almost eerily silent for a while. When he felt the tension lift and their task becoming accepted by the D.A. members, Harry went on, "OK, who among you has any experience at all with healing, or is interested in healing? We'll need a squad of healers." A few hands went up, and the selection process was on. Harry divided the D.A. into squads, moving people between squads as needed to get as equal a balance of skills as possible. Then he appointed a leader for each squad. "You leaders will meet with Ron regularly to learn the battle strategies. He's studying and planning them now, so these meetings should begin just after the Christmas holidays. After you leaders understand the strategies, you will get your squad together and practice them. Then once every squad has their job learned well, we'll have drills in the strategies with the entire D.A. Right. Now we'll get back to learning new shield charms."

It was a cold, snowy day when the Hogwarts' students had their November Hogsmeade visit. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were bundled up against the cold as they headed to the village to do their Christmas shopping. The boys and girls split up once they had purchased presents for nearly everyone but each other. Harry and Ron had already found things for each other's girlfriends, but finding just the right thing for their sweethearts was giving them trouble, and Harry still needed a present for Ron. Ron headed for the book store to find something for Hermione, while Harry browsed through several places before finding himself in a jewellery shop.

"Hello, young man. I'm Mr. Joyero, the proprietor. How may I help you?" a tall, thin man with wavy black hair, deep brown eyes and an olive complexion asked Harry.

"I'm just looking," Harry replied carefully, not wanting to be rushed into a decision by a pushy clerk.

After Harry had browsed a while, Mr. Joyero asked, "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Well. . .it's for my girlfriend," Harry began awkwardly.

"Ah, I see," the man said kindly. "Perhaps a few questions can help us narrow down your choices?"

"OK."

"How serious are you? Would you be interested in a ring, perhaps? " Joyero asked, gesturing toward a case full of rings, some with diamonds in them.

"Erm. . .not that serious," Harry responded, blushing madly. "We're still a bit young for that, I think."

The man smiled in understanding. "Then possibly a nice necklace? Young ladies usually like necklaces and bracelets, or might she prefer earrings?"

"Let's see some necklaces," Harry agreed. The proprietor opened a glass showcase and pulled out a wide assortment of gold pendants on various kinds of chains. Some were much too gaudy to look right on Ginny. Some looked like they'd suit a much older person than Ginny. Others looked like something Harry thought she might enjoy. He pointed at a simple but elegant gold Gryffindor lion pendant that had a ruby under the lion's upraised paw. The delicate chain was so fine, it was nearly invisible, just making slight glints of gold as it caught the light. "That one's nice."

"All right, let's set it aside. Do you see anything else you fancy?"

A heart-shaped pendant set with a ruby also appealed to Harry and was set aside. After a bit of thought, he had some misgivings about the heart – it seemed to imply things about his feelings for Ginny that he wasn't ready to admit to yet. He settled on the lion pendant and got his money out of his pocket as the man removed the price tag and wrapped the pendant. Harry's movement caused his fringe to shift, and his scar was exposed.

"Oh! You're Harry Potter, aren't you?" Mr. Joyero exclaimed excitedly.

Harry was instantly cautious. "Erm. . .yes."

"Oh, Mr. Potter, it's such a privilege to meet you! I've read all the articles about you, and I must say many of them have been most unkind."

"Uh. . .yeah. Thanks." Harry was uncomfortable with the man's praise, but at least he was on Harry's side – that was good, right? He tried hard not to blush under the man's intense and enthusiastic scrutiny.

"When I read the one about your being there when You-Know-Who came back. . .oh my, how horrible! And you fought him! And again last year, from what I've been reading."

"Well, Professor Dumbledore actually. . ." Harry began honestly.

"I'm just so honoured you've chosen my shop for your purchase. I'll give you a hefty discount, shall I?" the proprietor said as he tore up the receipt he'd been writing.

Harry stared at him a moment, then grinned and said, "Thanks!"

"I remember when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was murdering and torturing people before you stopped him, years ago. My own sister and her family were all killed by him and his Death Eaters." Joyero shuddered when he said this. "You've been able to stand up to him when no one else has. I have the utmost admiration for you. If there's ever anything I can do to help you, please let me know," the man finished sincerely.

"Thanks! I appreciate that. And the discount!" Harry said with a grin, then he sobered. "And I'm very sorry about your family."

The jeweller nodded his thanks, then shook off the gloomy mood and got back to taking care of Harry. "Shall I give this pendant any powers? Love charms, what have you?"

"You can do that?"

"Of course."

"Um. . .not love charms. How about protection charms? Can you do those?"

"I do have some I can use. They protect the wearer from various poisons and other insidious forms of attack. They won't protect her from direct attack, such as spells and so on."

"How much extra will it cost?" Harry asked, mentally counting the money in his bag and calculating how many other things he still had to buy.

"It will be my pleasure to do it for free, for you, Mr. Potter," Joyero said with a smile.

"Thank you! That's great!"

The jeweller took the necklace out of the box and performed some charms on it, then re-boxed it and handed it to Harry. "I hope she enjoys it," he said as he put Harry's payment in the till, then shook the boy's hand. "I have earrings to match that if you have need of a gift for her in the future," he added.

"I'm sure she'll like it, and I'll keep the earrings in mind. Thanks again!" Harry grinned at the man as he left the shop. He soon found Ron walking with his hands in his pockets, looking dejected. "What's up?"

"I can't find anything for Hermione," Ron grumbled. "How's your shopping going?"

"I found something great for Ginny," Harry said, pulling out the pendant and showing it to Ron.

"Whoa, that's really nice! Where did you get it? Do they have less expensive things?" Ron asked.

"We can find out. Come on." A small bell jangled as Harry and Ron entered the jewellery store. The proprietor came into the shop from the back room and smiled warmly at Harry.

"Did you decide you wanted those earrings, Mr. Potter?"

"No, but my friend Ron needs a gift for his girlfriend, and I thought you might have something that would do," Harry responded.

"Not as expensive as what Harry bought," Ron interjected quickly.

"How about something in silver, then? We have some lovely things here," Joyero offered. The choices were soon narrowed down to a charm bracelet and a charm that looked like a book, into which Ron could put whatever photos he wanted.

"Cool," Ron breathed. "And how much is it?"

The proprietor looked from Ron to Harry, realizing this redhead must be Harry's best friend from the way they acted together. He glanced back at Ron. "You're in luck, young man. This item is on a 30 discount today. Will that fit your budget?"

"Wow! Yes, thanks! I can afford that!" Ron said gleefully. He held the bracelet and charm up for Harry's inspection. "What d'you reckon?"

"I think she'll like it a lot," Harry assured him.

"Which pictures should I put in it?" Ron asked as the proprietor took the bracelet and charm to remove the price tags and box them up.

"It will take four, right?" said Harry.

"Yup."

Harry thought about it a moment before answering. "How about one of the two of you, one of you alone, one of the four of us and one of Crookshanks. That should make her happy."

"Cool!"

As the boys left the jewellery shop, a commotion up the street caught their attention. A massive group of Dementors was gliding down the street, filling the street from shop-front to shop-front. People were running for shelter, screaming loudly, dropping their packages, knocking each other over in their haste. In front of a shop, a little boy was knocked flat. A Dementor glided over and picked him up, preparing to Kiss him. A lone, dainty figure with long curly hair was defiantly trying to cast a Patronus at them over and over, but failing. Harry sent a Patronus to protect the boy, then sent another to follow Ron's, which was headed toward Hermione and the Dementor who now had her locked in its hands, bending her head back to Kiss her Harry sent two more stags in quick succession to chase the rest of the Dementors out of the village.

"Hermione! Hermione!" Ron screamed as he raced up the street following the great bear that was his Patronus. His bear caught the attention of the Dementor but when it actually reached the Dementor, the bear dissipated into mist rather than fighting. The Dementor holding Hermione didn't let go of her, but bent its head again to perform the Kiss. Just as its face nearly touched Hermione's, Harry's stag Patronus galloped up and lifted the Dementor on his antlers, tossing it in the air and chasing it up the street after the other Dementors who were fleeing Harry's other stags. Hermione fell limply to the snow-covered ground. Ron gathered her up in his arms, tears streaming down his face. "Hermione! Wake up! Hermione, you have to be all right! Wake up!" he sobbed, his voice breaking.

Harry slid to a stop on his knees beside Ron and handed him a chunk of chocolate. "Get this into her," he instructed tersely. "Break it up as small as you can. Slide slivers between her teeth and cheeks so it can melt in her mouth." Then Harry ran to the side of the little boy who'd also been attacked. The boy's father was holding him, weeping uncontrollably. Harry looked at the child and touched his cheek, then found the pulse in the boy's neck. He felt the reassuring beat under his fingers, turned to the father and said, "He didn't get Kissed. He'll be all right. He's just passed out. Give him all this chocolate. It will help him feel better." As Harry handed the man a good-sized chunk of Honeyduke's Best Chocolate, the little boy's eyes fluttered open. Harry smiled down at him for a moment before returning to Ron's side. "How is she?"

Ron was holding her tightly against his own body and inside his cloak, trying to warm her. "She opened her eyes a little bit a minute ago, but then she closed them again. Do you think she's going to. . .?" Ron choked back a sob and stared at Harry with desperate pleading in his eyes.

"She's going to be fine, Ron, don't worry. It didn't Kiss her," Harry insisted, praying he was right. "Hermione? Come on, wake up. You need to eat some chocolate," Harry insisted, tapping her cheeks with his fingertips to try to waken her. "Wake up! C'mon, Hermione, you're scaring poor Ron to death!"

Ginny raced up to them and dropped to her knees beside Harry. "What happened?" she asked, aghast at Hermione's pallor.

"Dementors," Harry said grimly, holding Hermione's ice-cold hand in his and trying to rub some warmth into it. He'd slipped some chocolate between Hermione's lips, but she had been unresponsive. He remembered something he'd seen on one of the medical dramas Aunt Petunia liked to watch. He pressed his knuckles into Hermione's breastbone and rocked them back and forth, hard. Suddenly she gave a little gasp and coughed. Her eyes opened slowly, blinking hard as she tried to focus. Harry sat back, amazed something from one of Aunt Petunia's programmes had actually worked.

"Ron? What happened?" she murmured, looking up at him blearily.

"A Dementor nearly got you," Ron said, his voice breaking. He had a lock of her hair squeezed so tightly in his hand, the knuckles were white. He realized what he was doing, then opened his hand and tenderly smoothed the unruly curls back from her face.

"Here, eat this chocolate," Harry insisted. "It will help, honestly."

Hermione turned her head to see Harry and smiled feebly. "Harry. You saved me, didn't you? Thanks."

He just shrugged, but added, "Ron's Patronus distracted the Dementor – he's the one who saved you."

"No, Harry, your Patronus saved her," Ron began stubbornly, disgusted with the pitiful performance of his own Patronus.

"Yours got there in time to make it hesitate about Kissing her. Take credit for that, Ron," Harry said seriously. "You did well."

Ron's face brightened when he realized what Harry was saying was true. "My Patronus did help, didn't it?" he said in amazement. "And it was a bear! It's never had a clearly defined shape before."

"You just needed a stronger incentive than you had in class, I guess," Harry said, clapping his friend on the back. "Come on, let's go to the Three Broomsticks. Lying in this snow isn't helping Hermione get warm. She could do with a butterbeer, after she eats *all* this chocolate," he finished, waving a large chunk of chocolate under her nose and giving her a cheeky grin.

She wrinkled her nose prettily at Harry and took the chocolate, taking a good bite out of it before being lifted bodily off the ground by Ron.

"Ron! I can walk!" she protested.

"You're still weak. I'm taking care of you," he said adamantly, carrying her toward the pub down the street with long, determined strides. Harry and Ginny looked at each other and grinned. Ron made quite a dashing hero, his long wavy red hair blowing in the crisp breeze, his face unguarded and showing his deep feelings for Hermione. As Harry and Ginny started to follow their friends, Harry felt a touch on his arm.

"Mr. Potter, sir?" the weary looking middle-aged man said humbly.

"Yes?"

"It was my son you saved," the man began. "Is the young lady going to be all right?"

"Yes, she'll be fine, thanks. Is your son all right?"

"Yes, thanks to you. I have something I want to give you. If you could just give me a moment of your time and come along to my shop?" the man asked respectfully.

Harry hesitated, looking at Ginny. He didn't sense any danger here, but he had learned the hard way to be more cautious. "Where are we going?"

"I own Dervish and Banges. I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself. Ben Dervish. It's an honour to meet you, Mr. Potter, and your young lady, as well."

"We've been to your shop many times," Ginny said politely. "I'm Ginny Weasley."

"Pleasure," the man said sincerely, shaking each of their hands in turn. "I have some rather. . .um. . .special books that I think will be of interest to you, Mr. Potter. I think you should have them. I can explain more in my shop." He looked around nervously at the crowd that had materialized as if by magic in the street once it was clear of Dementors. Those who'd gathered to see how Hermione and the boy were after the Dementor attack had finally gone on about their business, although many still cast curious glances Harry's way.

"OK. Hang on," Harry said. He jogged down the street toward the Three Broomsticks until he was in hailing range of Ron. "Oy, Ron!"

"Yeah? I thought you were right behind me," Ron said, a puzzled look on his face as he turned to face Harry. "Where's Ginny?"

"Ginny and I are going to Dervish and Banges for a few minutes. We'll catch you up in the pub, all right?"

Ron looked down at Hermione, who seemed perfectly happy to be in his arms and eating chocolate. "All right with you?" Ron asked solicitously.

"Yes, that's fine," she answered, smiling up at him.

"All right there, Hermione?" Harry asked, still a bit concerned about her.

"Never better," she said with a radiant smile at Ron.

They'll never miss us, Harry thought with a chuckle as he jogged back to Ginny and Mr. Dervish. "All set. We'll meet them in the pub," he told Ginny. They followed Mr. Dervish into his shop. He made sure no one was looking, then took them behind the back shelves of books and wizarding supplies and moved a cabinet, revealing a small door. Harry was nervous about the hidden room for some reason, and pulled out his wand.

"No worries, Mr. Potter," Dervish assured him with a warm smile. "You're a hero here. You're safe."

"I'm just being careful," Harry said, keeping his wand out.

"You know best, I'm sure," Dervish said agreeably. Once inside the room, he pushed several sets of shelves aside, revealing a mouldy portrait hanging on the wall. He whispered something to the portrait and it swung aside, revealing a safe built into the wall. "This is where I keep the truly valuable books and papers – or those that are particularly dangerous," he said ominously. He opened the safe and pulled out a stack of large books, turning and handing them to Harry. "I'm sorry they're so dusty. I haven't been in the safe for many years. Once I put these in there, I didn't want to open it again."

Harry held the books gingerly. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up, always a dangerous sign. "Erm. . .what are they?"

"These are the first three volumes of a twenty-volume set of books on dark magic," Mr. Dervish explained. "These are extremely rare books. I came upon them in an estate sale. The man who sold them to me wanted to get rid of them quickly, so he took a very minimal price for them. He was afraid to destroy them due to the enchantments on them. When I saw what they were, and who had owned them, I locked them away."

Harry gulped. He was pretty sure he already knew the answers, but he just had to ask. "What are they? And who owned them?"

"I did some research on them, circumspectly of course, several years ago. They are supposed to be the most valuable resource for those who are interested in the Dark Arts. They belonged to . . .You-Know-Who," Dervish answered in a nervous whisper. "I think you may benefit from reading them, so you'll be prepared for the battles ahead. I only bought them to keep them from getting into the hands of Dark wizards. I didn't know what to do with them. And then today. . . . It seems right for you to have them."

Harry cautiously opened the cover of the top book. "T. Riddle" was inscribed on the title page, and scribbled out, with "Lord Voldemort" written in a far bolder hand beside it. Harry opened the book, leafing through pages at random. What he saw there set his teeth on edge. Scary stuff. "I don't know what to say, Mr. Dervish. These are quite valuable, aren't they?"

"They are, but I won't sell them. I won't even display them. He and his followers killed so many good people. My brother and his family, many dear friends. . . . Well, I don't want to dredge up sad memories. I know you have them too."

Harry nodded.

"Suffice it to say, I've been trying to do my bit to protect the world by keeping these books hidden. Now I think it's time they were of some use to fight You-Know-Who." Dervish hesitated, and then went on, "Meaning no disrespect, Mr. Potter, but I believe that, since you're still a student and so young, you should probably have Professor Dumbledore and your Defence teacher look at them before you get too involved in them. I don't want what's in these books to harm you in any way. They'll know how to look out for you."

"May I ask why you never gave them to Dumbledore?"

"I tried once, but he said it wasn't time yet, and he wasn't meant to have them. I think now is the time, and you're the right person to give them to," Dervish said simply.

Harry looked at the books in amazement, then at the shop owner, his eyes shining as he gazed at Mr. Dervish. "Thank you, sir. These are a brilliant gift." He thought a moment, then said, "I don't have any way of carrying twenty books this size, and they should probably stay hidden. . ."

"I can put a Shrinking Charm on them so they'll fit in your bag."

"The enchantments on them will allow that? On the whole set?"

"Yes. That's how I brought them here when I purchased them."

"Fantastic. Thanks!"

Harry handed the books back to Mr. Dervish, who set them and the rest of the set of books on the floor, dusting off each book with a rag from his pocket as he stacked them. Then he did a Shrinking Charm on them, tied them in a small bundle, and inserted the neatly bound stack into Harry's bag, where they barely made a bulge. He closed the safe and the portrait and dusted off his hands and clothes. "Sorry about the dust, really. Such a mess."

"No problem," Harry assured him, then he and Ginny followed the man to the door to the shop.

"Let me make sure we won't be seen coming out of here," Mr. Dervish said as they approached the small door back into the shop. He stepped out and walked away from the door a bit, checking to see if anyone was near that part of the shop.

Harry used the power of his glasses to see around corners to check things out, as well. He and Ginny had their wands out, ready for trouble.

Dervish came back and said, "It's fine, come on." As soon as Harry and Ginny were out of the back room, Dervish sealed the door, and pushed the cabinet back in place to hide the door from view.

"Someone's coming," Harry whispered as they approached the front of the shop, his wand steady despite the sudden jolt of nerves in his body. "We need a diversion."

"Quidditch," Ginny whispered.

"Yes, that's good," Harry murmured with a smile at her. "So do you have any more books on Quidditch, Mr. Dervish?" he said in a normal voice, putting his wand in his pocket, but holding on to it. Ginny did the same. "I already have the ones I've seen on that shelf."

"There are one or two new ones out, I believe, Mr. Potter. Let me show you the catalogue, and you can order them if you wish," Dervish replied, getting into the spirit of the thing.

Harry and Ginny followed him to the front counter and looked at the catalogue with him, ignoring Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, who were prowling the shop. Apparently, they were the ones who had set off Harry's internal alarms. "Oh, that one looks good. Could I get it in time for Christmas?" Harry said, indicating a book on the list.

"Seriously?" Dervish asked quietly.

Harry nodded and grinned. "How much is it?" He turned to Ginny. "I'll give it to Ron for Christmas – I think he'll like it, don't you?" She smiled and nodded.

Dervish thought a minute while looking around the shop at the other customers, some of whom were openly staring at Harry. "Mr. Potter, since you saved my son's life, there will be no charge for the book." He gave Harry a small wink as he said this.

Harry understood what Dervish was doing. Other people had seen Harry save the boy's life, and would think it natural for Dervish to thank Harry in some way. And Dervish's generosity would probably lead to word-of-mouth advertising for his shop. Harry thanked the man sincerely and made arrangements for the book to be delivered to Hogwarts before the Christmas holidays. "Thanks again," Harry said as he and Ginny left. "Happy Christmas!"

"And a Happy Christmas to you, too, Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley. Always a pleasure to see Hogwarts students," Dervish called after them.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle watched Harry and Ginny leave. "I thought you said Potter was up to something, coming in here," Goyle said grumpily.

"I thought he was," Malfoy said with a shrug. "I was just certain he looked a bit sneaky when I saw him and the Weasley girl coming in here. I guess he was just shopping for that boneheaded Mudblood-loving loser friend of his."

"Yeah," muttered Crabbe. "Let's get out of here. All these books give me the creeps."

"I'll bet they were off snogging behind the stacks when we couldn't find them," Goyle said with a leering grin.

"What's the matter, Goyle? Jealous?" Malfoy sneered as they walked out of the shop.

Goyle looked flummoxed. After a while he said, "Well. . .she is awfully pretty."

"Yeah," Crabbe agreed glumly. "What a waste that she likes Potter."

"Huh," Malfoy grunted in surprise. "And here I thought you two hadn't noticed girls yet. Or that you fancied each other!" he finished with a snort, his derisive laughter ringing in the cold air. Crabbe and Goyle both looked at Malfoy with disgust, then trudged behind him down the street as he continued to shadow Harry's movements.

"Hermione! How are you feeling?" Ginny called as she and Harry neared Ron and Hermione's table in the Three Broomsticks.

"Much better, thanks!" Hermione said with a smile. "Ron's been taking care of me." She smiled fondly up at him. Their chairs were close together and Ron had his arm around her back, gently rubbing her shoulder with his hand.

"I'll get us some butterbeers," Harry said as Ginny sat down.

When Harry returned, Ron asked, "Why'd you go to the bookshop? Did you forget something?"

Harry mulled over his answer. He couldn't say too much here in the pub. "The boy I saved was the owner's son. He wanted to thank me."

"What'd he do?" Hermione asked, interested in anything to do with books.

"I'll tell you later," Harry murmured, glancing around, then continued in a normal voice, "You'll find out soon enough! Christmas is coming, after all!"

Hermione and Ron looked from Harry to Ginny then back at Harry. It was obvious he was keeping something from them, and that he had every intention of telling them later.

"Are you done with your shopping?" Hermione asked.

"Yup! Got the last one taken care of just now," Harry replied.

Ginny nodded, "I'm done too. You?"

"We're both finished. Let's head back to school. I'm really tired," Hermione said.

"And well you should be," said Harry. "You're going straight to the hospital wing for a check-up when we get back, young lady!" he added with a grin.

"Yeah, Ron already said that," Hermione agreed.

Harry and Ginny finished their drinks and the four friends started the walk back to school. The boys took the girls' bags from them and rattled them gently, trying to guess what their Christmas presents might be. Their laughter echoed back from the woods along the path to school. Harry's neck prickled again, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle staring after them.

"Slytherins behind us," he murmured. He and the others all got their wands out, ready to fight if they had to. But Malfoy and his cronies stayed where they were, apparently satisfied that Harry and his friends were just going back to school.

As they walked down the path, Hermione tired. They stopped and let her rest several times, but she'd been through quite an ordeal and was simply worn out.

"Tell you what," Harry said. "I'll do the Thestral and fly you home."

"Oh, Harry, that's so sweet," Hermione said, "but you know how I hate flying."

"Ron and Ginny can come too. I'm really good at flying as a Thestral. I don't think I could carry all three of you very far, but it's a short hop across this section of the woods to Hagrid's, and it's not too far to the castle from there. It's a long walk following the path." Harry grinned at his friends, daring them to accept his offer. "Aw, c'mon. No point in Hermione getting exhausted, is there?"

"If you think you can manage it, sure, Harry, that's great! Thanks!" Hermione agreed.

"Ginny, can you carry my bag?" Harry asked.

"Yes." She took the bag from him and watched him disappear, much more quickly than he had the last time she'd watched him transform into a thestral. She giggled when the leathery lips of the invisible reptilian horse nibbled her neck. She put her hand on his head, then slid it down his silky neck until she felt him kneel down so she could get on. "I'll ride in front, Hermione can ride behind me, and Ron at the back, how's that? Ron, your arms are long enough to reach around both of us to hold on, aren't they?" Ginny asked before she mounted.

"Yeah, that's a good plan. Get on," Ron urged her. He helped Hermione get on behind Ginny, then climbed on behind Hermione. The three of them squeezed together as much as possible in order to fit well on Harry's back. They felt the lurch as Harry got back to his feet, then started trotting, then cantering to take off gently so he wouldn't unseat them.

As they topped the trees, a red spell shot in front of them. Ron looked around and cried, "Malfoy's spotted us!" He let go of Harry's mane with one hand to pull out his wand. Hermione and Ginny did the same. Spells came rapid-fire from the three Slytherins on the ground. Ron, Hermione and Ginny shot back at Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, hanging on for dear life as Harry ducked and weaved beneath them, trying to avoid being hit while not unseating his passengers. They felt him shudder and falter as three spells hit in quick succession.

"We're going to fall!" Hermione screamed.

"No, we're not!" Ron yelled with determination. "Levitation Charm on Harry, all together! *Wingardium Leviosa!"* With the help of the levitation charms, they managed to stay aloft. They could feel Harry fighting to keep flying, but they knew he was injured.

"Hang on, Harry, I can see Hagrid's hut from here. We're almost there!" Ginny encouraged, rubbing the tears off her face roughly with the wrist of her wand hand. She, Hermione and Ron were still maintaining their Levitation Charms the best they could.

"I didn't know a Levitation Charm would work if the wizard wasn't on the ground," Hermione said, amazed. "Great idea, Ron."

"I didn't know it would work either. I just couldn't think of anything else," Ron muttered. "How badly do you think he's hurt?"

"He's struggling more and more," Hermione said quietly. "Ginny!" she cried suddenly. "What's that on your robes? Are you hurt?"

Ginny looked down at her leg, which was covered in blood. The bright red against the black of her robes made her shudder. "It's not me," she said in a small voice. "It's H-h-harry."

Chapter 18 – Where do wings go?

Harry tried valiantly to descend gradually into the clearing behind Hagrid's hut, but he was having tremendous trouble controlling his flight. He crashed through some tree branches, nearly knocking his friends off his back. His left wing wasn't getting any lift at all anymore, and the pain from his injuries was excruciating. With only one good wing to fly with, they were spinning nearly out of control now. They were still so high. He had to get them all down safely. The Levitation Charms were helping somewhat, but his three friends couldn't really control their flight, only help give him a little lift, and it just wasn't enough. He fought frantically to stay aloft, to glide on wind currents, but with only one serviceable wing and three passengers, it simply wasn't possible. He kept trying anyway.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" his three friends shouted repeatedly, trying to keep all of them aloft with their Levitation Charms, but it was hard to do a nice "swish and flick" with their wands when the ground was rushing up at them, and panic was blocking their magic.

The thestral screamed as Harry's strength gave out, and all four of them tumbled through the air for fifteen feet or so, and then crashed resoundingly to earth. Ron, Hermione and Ginny lay moaning for a few minutes, grateful for the pine boughs that had slowed their fall, and the deep bed of snow where they'd landed, since they only had the wind knocked out of them and received a few scratches. When they caught their breath, they got up and went to find Harry, who was still invisible to them. Ron tripped and fell over the thestral's body. His head hit the edge of Harry's hoof, giving Ron a nasty gash on his forehead that bled freely for a while.

"Harry! Harry, wake up! You need to transform so we can get you to the hospital wing," Ron said, running his hands over the animal's invisible body as he tried to find a shoulder to shake, some way to wake his friend up. His hands came off sticky with blood. There was no response. "Hermione, can you change him back?" Ron rubbed the back of his arm across his forehead to rub the blood from his injury out of his eyes and found his arm covered with his blood on the top, Harry's blood on the bottom. What a mess.

Hermione sat spread-legged in the snow, holding her head in both hands, extremely dizzy from her fall. When Ron spoke, she looked up at him with bleary eyes. "I. . .I don't think so. I'm not good at the Animagus transformation. You know I'm still stuck at the paw stage," she said in great frustration. She shook her head trying to clear it.

"That's better than the rest of us," Ron muttered, still working on waking his friend, "except for Harry, of course. Are you all right?" he asked, noticing her swaying where she sat.

"Bit dizzy still. I hit my head when I landed. It's getting better." She took a deep breath and finally looked up at her boyfriend. "Oh, Ron, you're hurt!" Hermione cried, noticing his wound. "Here, hold this against your cut," she said, offering her muffler. After he'd wiped off a bit of the blood, she added, "It doesn't look too bad. Head wounds always bleed a lot. What did you land on?"

"His hoof, I reckon. His hoof – that just sounds weird, doesn't it?" Ron said, pressing her muffler against his wound while continuing to search for the source of Harry's bleeding. "We need to find out where his wounds are – there seems to be blood everywhere. I don't know where to press to stop it," he said anxiously.

"Hermione, could you please at least try to change him back?" Ginny begged. Like Ron, she was running her hands over the thestral's body, searching for his wounds. She found a huge gash in his side and pulled off her Gryffindor scarf, pressing it against the wound as hard as she could. "I think it's that Restoring Spell Remus and Sirius used on Scabbers, isn't it? You lot saw them do it, I didn't. Haven't you learned it?"

Hermione sat holding her head in her hands again, greatly frustrated, and still very dizzy. Her eyes wouldn't focus straight and she just couldn't think. "No, I never learned that one. And it took both of them to change Scabbers back into Pettigrew anyway. I don't know that a single Restoring Spell would do it." She straightened up and sighed, watching Ron and Ginny trying frantically to find Harry's wounds and stop the bleeding. She shook her head again, trying to clear it, then got to work on changing the invisible winged horse back into Harry Potter. She did her best, but all she managed after a great deal of work was to reveal a hazy image of jet black hair lying on the ground near the thestral's invisible head.

"At least we can see where he is now," Ron said encouragingly. "Keep trying. In the meantime, this wing is a mess," he said looking up in the air as if he could see what he was touching. "Oh, I'm sorry, mate!" he said remorsefully as the wing flinched away from his hand. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"How bad is it?" Hermione asked in a quavering voice.

"There doesn't seem to be any wing fabric between the bend in his wing and his body. There's shredded skin on the rest of the wing, I think, but if I touch him very much, I'm going to hurt him," Ron said. "I can't figure out where to put pressure to stop the bleeding on his wing. The blood seems to be coming from every part of the wing I can feel."

Both girls groaned and choked back sobs when they heard Ron's description of Harry's injuries.

"I'll keep trying to transfigure him, but we need to find Hagrid," Hermione said, trying hard not to cry. The small glimpse they had of Harry via that still hazy patch of hair had shaken her. That, combined with Ron's description, made the seriousness of his injuries seem all the more real. "I'm sure he can heal thestrals."

"OK, you stay with Harry. Ginny, you and I will go look for Hagrid," Ron said, his face grim.

"I'm keeping pressure on this wound," Ginny objected.

"Hagrid takes care of injuries all the time," Ron told his sister gently. "He can probably sort Harry out. If both of us look for him, we'll find him faster."

"All right, I'll help you find him, then," she agreed reluctantly. "Hermione, can you hold this cloth tightly on this injury?"

"Yes." Hermione was still pale and trembling from her encounter with the Dementor and their crash landing. The smears of Harry's blood on her cheeks made her pallor even more apparent.

"Stay warm, Hermione," Ron said with concern as he removed his cloak and wrapped it around her. "You're not strong yet yourself."

Ginny had already taken off, shrieking "HAGRID! HAGRID!" at the top of her lungs, her voice ringing in the crystal cold air.

"Ginny, no! What if. . .?" Ron cried, then gave up and followed her, hoping nobody else was nearby and would discover an injured thestral who was in reality Harry Potter. "Bloody hell, I could've shouted," he grumbled as he raced off after his sister.

Heavy footsteps pounded the earth as Hagrid came running in response to Ginny's screams. "What's wrong? What is it? Ginny? Ron? What's up? Yeh've got blood on ya! Where are you hurt?"

"It's not us, it's Harry," Ginny cried, tears streaming down her face and freezing in the frigid air. "Come with us." She turned and ran back the way they'd come, Ron and Hagrid right behind her.

"Harry? Where is he? Wha'. . .?" Hagrid asked, following them as they'd asked. "I see Hermione over there. What's that she's sittin' by? 'Tain't Harry. . ."

"It's a thestral – you can see it, right?" Ron asked.

"O' course! Who hurt one of me thestrals?" Hagrid roared in rage as he rushed toward the scene.

"It's not really a thestral," Hermione sobbed, smearing more of Harry's blood across her face as she tried to dry her tears. "It's Harry. He's an Animagus."

"No. Not . . .Harry? A thestral? Nah, nobody's ever done tha'. 'Tain't possible," Hagrid muttered as he dropped to his knees in the bloodstained snow by the injured horse. "There now, son, easy, nobody's gonna hurt you, that's a good boy," he soothed the wounded animal as he began examining him.

"It's really Harry, Hagrid, not a thestral. Honest. We watched him transform, and we rode him here. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle attacked us when we were flying," said Ron, kneeling next to the gamekeeper and feeling around until he had his hand on the animal's neck. "None of us can see him. How badly is he hurt?"

"His wing's torn ter shreds," Hagrid said in disgust. "And he has a deep gash on his shoulder. It's pretty bad." He lifted the thestral's lip and pressed his thumb against its gum, noting its pale colour and that the gum didn't pink up quickly after he released the pressure of his thumb. "He's in shock. Looks like he's lost a lot o' blood." He turned to look Ron in the eye. "Yer absolutely positive this is Harry? Not a real thestral?"

"Yes, we're certain. We've watched him change before, and we were with him when he changed today. He kneels so we can get on easily," Ron explained, not sure how to convince Hagrid. "Oh, wait. All of Harry's forms have a light mark like his scar above their right eye. Look at his face. Can you see the mark? And if he opens his eyes, you'll see they're green."

Hagrid bent down and looked the horse in the face, lifting its head slightly so he could see the right side of his head, which was covered with snow. He gently wiped the snow away, and then sat up quickly, his eyes wide in amazement. "Great galloping gargoyles. It is Harry! I

never would've believed it." He started to lower the horse's head into the snow, but Ginny moved quickly to his side.

"Don't put his head in the snow," she said, sniffling bravely as she tried not to cry. "I'll hold it." She sat cross-legged where Hagrid showed her to, and he lowered the animal's head gently into her lap. Ginny stroked the silken hide tenderly, then sobbed when her fingers found his forelock, only the ends of which had been revealed by Hermione's spell. She ran her fingers through his forelock and smoothed it, over and over, while the other hand stroked the soft expanse of the horse's cheek. It felt remarkably like Harry's own hair and skin. Ginny thought her heart would break any moment.

"There now," Hagrid said as he watched Ginny with the invisible horse. "Tha' should comfort 'im some." He shook his bushy head. "I'm not sure how ter treat an animal that's an Animagus. I need Madam Pomfrey's help. Hmmm. Ron, run up to my hut and get into th' box under my bed. There's clean rags in there. There's a kettle on the fire with hot water, as well, and a box of medicinal moss in the cupboard over the sink. Bring those back here, and I'll bind up his wounds fer now. I'm afraid ter use the ointment I'd normally use. When he's a wizard, who knows where those wings go? I dunno, I just don't know. . ." Hagrid muttered as he continued his examination. "And Ron? Bring blankets, too! We need ter keep 'im warm."

"Right," Ron said, and raced down to Hagrid's hut, returning moments later to find the gamekeeper had already torn up his own shirt to try to stop the bleeding from the Thestral's wing. The shirt was soaked bright red with blood. It was a strange sight, apparently suspended in mid-air and getting redder by the minute. Hagrid sat with only his hairy vest covering his chest and back. He looked oddly white in the pale sunlight, the thick black hairs on his arms and chest looking stark against his skin. His moleskin coat was draped over the thestral's body.

"Is his wing broken?" Ginny asked.

"No, but the skin that goes between the bones, that forms the fabric of his wings, I guess you'd say – that's shredded like mulch, and it's worst close to his body," Hagrid replied, his face full of concern. "He's holding 'is wing open because of the wound in 'is side, I suspect, or maybe it just hurts too much ter fold 'is wing closed." He shook his head again, thinking hard. "Yeah, that's probably it. We need Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey here as soon as possible – or ter take Harry ter them. I can carry a thestral if I have ter, but it would be a sight easier if he were Harry." Hagrid used the water, moss and rags Ron had brought to bathe and bind up the wounds as well as he could. Then he leaned down and started to pick up the animal. Just as he did so, the thestral woke up and screamed in agony, the sound coming out like the bellow of a horse in great pain.

"Harry! Wake up! You need to transform! Harry!" Ginny cried, her hands blindly holding the animal's head.

"His eyes are openin'. Hmm, green eyes. Never seen a green-eyed thestral before," Hagrid commented, amazement mixed with tremendous concern on his face. "Wake up, Harry! Come on, lad! We need you ter turn back inta yourself so we can get you ter the hospital wing. Can you manage it?"

The horse blinked at Hagrid and tried to shake its head. Then it blinked again, took a deep shuddering breath and groaned.

"Oh, he's in so much pain," wailed Ginny, tears streaming down her face.

"Harry – if you can, send an Adfero to Dumbledore. You need him and Madam Pomfrey to help you," Hermione urged. "I wish we could see you," she said, stifling a sob. "I don't know if you heard me or not."

The thestral opened its luminous green eyes, which were clouded with pain. It lifted its head slightly, pulling away from Ginny's hands. At a gesture from Hagrid, Ginny, Ron and Hermione moved back, not knowing what Harry was doing, but aware of his movement. The thestral rolled onto his belly and tried to gather his legs under him to rise.

"Now, now, you don't need to do tha'," said Hagrid, patting the thestral gently. "Just change back inta Harry, there's a good lad."

"What's he trying to do?" Ginny asked.

"It looks like he's gonna try t' get up on his feet," Hagrid replied quietly. "That's what horses do when they're hurt, they get up and go down, over and over, exhausting themselves if they aren't helped. Thestrals are a lot like horses that way." He leaned over the wounded animal's body, patting it gently, his face creased in worry. "Harry, you're bleeding too much to make that kind of effort. Lie still. Don't think like a thestral, Harry. You're a wizard. Hold on to that. Transform. It'll make everythin' much easier."

The animal struggled, trying to rise to his feet and crashing to earth with a thud they all felt. He lay there gasping in pain, unable to think, to move, to do anything. A tiny spark appeared in his mind, a small voice that sounded a lot like Hermione's: *"Start small. Just a paw at first."*

"Look!" Hermione squeaked a moment later. The thestral's right front hoof was now Harry Potter's right hand. Then his left hand appeared. Then his arms. Slowly but surely, Harry Potter emerged from the thestral's form. He lay there panting, exhausted, shivering. Sweat poured off of him in rivers. His clothes were shredded where he'd been hit with the spells. His hair was matted and sticky with sweat, as well as with the blood from Ginny's clothing and from his own wounds.

Hagrid pulled his moleskin coat off Harry and grabbed for the blankets in Ron's arms. As he took them, he noticed Ron was shivering, wearing just a sweater over a shirt. "Ron, put your cloak on. We don't need you getting sick on top o' everythin' else here. Hermione, wrap up in this," Hagrid said kindly, offering his hairy vest when he noticed Hermione had Ron's cloak. He wrapped the blankets and his moleskin coat around Harry and lifted him in his arms. The boy screamed in agony and the blankets quickly became stained as blood poured out of his wound again. "Och, I'm sorry, Harry. Let's try it this way, then, shall we?" Hagrid said gently, changing the boy from lying across his arms to being held upright against his shoulder to keep weight off the young man's injured shoulder blade. Harry screamed again when the half-giant gently tucked Harry's injured arm between their bodies so it wouldn't flop and cause more damage to his side and shoulder. The boy's groans finally subsided once he was settled in the half-giant's arms.

Bare-chested, Hagrid began marching toward the castle, holding his young friend tenderly, the boy's head nestled in the hollow of Hagrid's massive, heavily-muscled shoulder.

"Harry, if you're awake enough, could you send a message to Dumbledore?" Hagrid asked. "I've never been much good at sending those Adfero messages myself." He felt the smallest of nods against his shoulder. "Good lad," he soothed, lengthening his stride still more. He saw a tremulous silvery light shoot from Harry's limp fingers toward the castle. "Well done. You got it off. He'll be here soon and he'll know how ter sort you out," Hagrid said, hoping he was right.

In the castle, Harry's message rang faintly in Dumbledore's head. "What?" Dumbledore said aloud. "Fawkes!" he called urgently. "Take this to Madam Pomfrey right away," he said as he handed his phoenix a hastily scribbled note. As Fawkes disappeared in a flash of light, Dumbledore threw a pinch of Floo powder in his fire and called "Remus Lupin!"

Remus's head appeared in the fire. "Yes, Albus? How are you?"

"In a great hurry at present. Please meet me in the Entrance Hall right away. Bring your cloak, we're going outside," Dumbledore said urgently. He took a deep breath, then gently said what had to be said. "Harry's hurt, Remus."

"He's hurt?" Remus answered, shocked. "What. . .?"

"No time, now. Meet me," Dumbledore insisted, heading for his office door.

"I'll be right there," Lupin answered and disappeared from the fire.

Lupin and Dumbledore were striding across the snow-covered lawn as quickly as they could. In the distance, they could see Hagrid's giant figure holding what appeared to be a large cocoon, with long legs dangling beneath it, up against his shoulder. Behind him, they saw Ron, Hermione and Ginny struggling to keep up with Hagrid. "What happened, Albus?" Remus asked, appalled at the sight before him. He could see Hagrid's arms were bare, and his moleskin overcoat was wrapped around his burden.

"I don't know. Harry was very weak when he sent the Adfero. We need to teach his friends how to send them. We just haven't had time to do it," Dumbledore muttered, obviously distracted. "His message said: 'Hurt. Hagrid. Come.'" He shook his head. "Harry usually sends messages with good detail. You know that," he added, glancing at Remus, who nodded. "For Harry to say only three words, and those very hesitantly, very weakly – that told me he was the one who was hurt, and somehow Hagrid was involved. Hagrid would never hurt Harry, so he must be helping him, or Harry was near his hut. Anyway, that was my thinking. I've sent Fawkes with a note to Madam Pomfrey so she'll be ready for us."

By this time, Hagrid's huge stride had brought him within calling distance of Dumbledore and Lupin. "Professors!" Hagrid cried. "Harry's lost a lot of blood. Malfoy and his gang attacked him."

Dumbledore's face blanched. "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this," he murmured as Hagrid drew near. "Let me see him," he said aloud to Hagrid when the gamekeeper reached them. Hagrid opened his arms a bit and the blood-soaked blankets were exposed. "That's enough. Keep moving," the old wizard urged, hurrying along beside the half-giant's stride. "Harry, can you hear me?" he said gently.

The boy nodded weakly.

"You're going to be fine. Madam Pomfrey is waiting for you," Dumbledore assured him. He sent an Adfero to Professor McGonagall to go find Malfoy and his friends before they got back into the school buildings and keep them under guard until he joined her.

"Harry?" Lupin said softly, rushing along beside Hagrid as well.

Harry opened one eye and glanced at his godfather. "Remus," he breathed.

"I'll stay with you," Remus said stoutly. "You're going to be fine in no time at all."

Harry just nodded and closed his eye, relaxing into Hagrid's enormous shoulder again. Dumbledore and Lupin dropped back, unable to keep up as Hagrid lengthened his stride, taking the castle stairs six at a time, hurrying to get his friend to the hospital wing.

"What happened?" Dumbledore asked Ron, Ginny and Hermione as they caught up and the entire group followed Hagrid toward the castle. Ron was supporting Hermione, who was still weak from the Dementor attack and had Harry's blood on her face. "What's wrong, Miss Granger? Are you injured too?" asked Dumbledore.

"Dementors attacked her in the village," Ron answered. "One was about to Kiss her when Harry's Patronus got it."

"Yours helped, Ron," Hermione insisted. Lupin raised an eyebrow at Ron.

"I'll tell you about it later," Ron told Lupin, who nodded.

"What about the blood on your face, and on Ginny's?" Lupin asked, studying their faces as carefully as he could while they rushed toward the hospital wing.

"It's H-h-harry's," Ginny sobbed. Lupin put an arm around her comfortingly.

"How did he get hurt?" Dumbledore asked.

"It's my fault he's hurt, Professor," Hermione began miserably. "He turned into a thestral to fly us back to school because I was so tired from the Dementor attack. We checked before he changed and there was nobody anywhere near us. We were in a hidden glen off the path when it did it. It should have been safe! But it wasn't," she wailed, her voice breaking with grief. Ron squeezed her shoulders comfortingly as they hurried along in Hagrid's wake.

"You did nothing wrong, Miss Granger," Dumbledore assured her. "You don't need to blame yourself. Harry was helping out his friend. That's very much like him. What happened was neither your fault nor his. Tell me what happened after he turned into a thestral."

Ron, Ginny and Hermione filled the two men in on the story as they climbed the front steps. "Who saw Harry as a thestral?" Dumbledore asked quietly just before they entered the castle.

"Hagrid, that's all, unless Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle can see them too," Ron replied.

"Miss Granger, how are you feeling?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

"Tired, but I'm OK. I'm worried about Harry."

"We all are. We'll put you to bed once we get to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey will need to check you over, and make certain you're all right," Dumbledore replied, giving Hermione a gentle pat on her shoulder.

"What happened to him this time?" Madam Pomfrey was saying sternly as she settled Harry in a bed and took Hagrid's coat and blankets off the boy, then cautiously cut away his ruined cloak, sweater and shirt. "It seems I just get him patched up and he's back here again with some exotic injury." The rest of the group had just arrived. Nobody said a word as she bent to examine Harry's wounds, removing the bandages carefully. "Who dressed his wounds?"

"Me," Hagrid answered gruffly, looking worried.

"You did a nice job," she commended. "As torn up as he is, you did very well indeed."

Hagrid blushed at the compliment, but his face was still concerned. "He's lost a lot of blood. I put some moss in there – that's good for animals, to stop the bleedin' an' all, but I wasn't sure about it for a human."

"The moss you chose has medicinal properties for humans, as well, Hagrid," she commented as she gingerly picked the moss out of the wound. "It seems to have stopped the bleeding for now. But when I remove the last of it, he will start bleeding again. I have to clean the wounds and bind him up with some herbs on the wounds. Some of this moss can stay in place," she murmured, now talking to herself. She straightened up and seemed to notice the solemn group surrounding the bed for the first time. "Miss Weasley," she snapped authoritatively.

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey?" Ginny replied, startled out of her tears.

"Go and make me several large herbal bags to staunch blood – you remember how, we did them after that nasty Quidditch match where the Slytherins beat up the Hufflepuffs after the game." She sniffed in disgust at the memory. "Such poor sportsmanship! I never. . .tsk, tsk. And wash your face and hands first, mind." The nurse stopped and looked hard at Ginny, then Ron and Hermione. "All three of you are covered in blood. Are you injured?"

"No. It's Harry's blood," Ginny said miserably, stifling a sob.

"Well, at least you lot are in one piece. Go wash up and bring me what I asked for," the nurse instructed. "Oh, and bring a basin with warm soapy water and some flannels. We'll need to clean Potter up. I suppose you three can take care of cleaning yourselves? Get going, girl."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," Ginny answered, hurrying to her task.

"Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes?"

"Go to my office and look on the shelves along the back wall. There's a flagon labelled 'Blood Restorer.' Bring that to me, would you? And a goblet from the cabinet above the sink. And two, no, three rolls of bandages from the cabinet with the blue door. Wash your hands before handling anything."

"OK," Ron replied, moving toward her office with long strides.

"Poppy, Hermione was attacked by a Dementor today," Lupin said quietly.

"Miss Granger, is this true?" she asked over her shoulder as she continued her examination of Harry.

"Yes."

"It was starting to Kiss her when Harry's Patronus drove it away," Ron called from the office.

"Obviously Potter's Patronus got to you in time," Madam Pomfrey said, glancing at Hermione. "Have you had chocolate?"

"Yes, Harry made me eat a large chunk of it right away," Hermione replied, her voice catching and tears filling her eyes when she remembered Harry's cheeky grin as he insistently waved the chocolate under her nose.

"No other injuries?"

"I got a bump on the head from the fall, and Ron has a cut on his forehead." She stopped herself before she said "from Harry's hoof." Saying that would bring up questions she didn't want to answer.

Madam Pomfrey glanced toward Ron. "Well, it looks like the bleeding's stopped for now. I'll tend to him later. Mr. Weasley, let me know if it starts to bleed again." She paused a moment.

"OK," he replied absently as he sorted out the things he had to carry to her.

"Now, Miss Granger, get in that bed over there, no arguments. Stay there until I check you over." When Madam Pomfrey heard Hermione squeak miserably, she looked up. Seeing the distress on the girl's face, she added kindly, "I'll let you know how Mr. Potter is as soon as possible."

Madam Pomfrey turned to the men around her. "Now that we're alone for a moment, can someone please explain this boy's injuries to me?"

"Eh," Hagrid began, "I, uh, found 'em in the forest behind me hut. They told me Harry was hit with some spells from Malfoy and his gang. Dunno what kind."

"That's only a partial explanation. His shoulder is nearly dislocated and the shoulder blade has some very odd injuries. What happened?"

"Poppy," Dumbledore said calmly, "we must keep this information in the strictest confidence. These students, Professor Lupin, Professor McGonagall, Hagrid and I are aware of the

circumstances that caused Harry this odd injury. We are the only ones who know this. I will share the information with you only because you need it to treat him properly. I cannot stress this enough: it is of the utmost importance that we keep Harry's secret."

"All right. What is it?" she demanded.

"He's an Animagus. He was a thestral when he was hit with those spells. The injuries you're seeing are evidence of the damage to his wing," Dumbledore explained.

"'Tweren't just injured, mind you," Hagrid rumbled, his eyes flashing with anger. "The skin of his wing was completely shredded, especially close to his body. The bone was showing, what skin was left was hanging in tatters." He shook his massive head, pulled out a polka-dotted handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and blew his nose noisily. "He flew like that, brought them other kids home safely. Bless him. That's probably why his shoulder blade is so badly injured and his shoulder dislocated, him trying to fly with only tatters of one wing, and stay balanced with three riders. Bless his heart. What a good lad he is." He sniffled hard, blew his nose again and looked at the nurse. "Can you see thestrals?"

"Yes," the nurse replied, her eyes wide at hearing that the injured boy on the bed could turn himself into a magical animal, much less fly with three riders, and while seriously injured. She forced her mind to be rational, so she could help her patient. Her amazement at what he could do could be dealt with later.

"Then when Harry wakes up, if we can seal this room so nobody can see wha' happens, maybe he'll be strong enough ter change inta a thestral again so you can see the damage. I know how ter treat a thestral with that kind o' injury, but I was afraid animal medicine might not suit a human. I haven't treated any Animagi fer injuries, y'see," Hagrid explained quietly.

"Yes, if he can turn back into a thestral, the treatments you use for them will probably be good for him. I can't treat his wing right now because he simply doesn't have one in this state, but he is still suffering from the injury. Where do wings go on Animagi when they're human again?" she asked Dumbledore.

"I don't know if anyone's ever studied that," he replied. "Maybe at some point, you can write a medical paper about it, if you work it out," he added generously. "In the meantime. . .is Harry's life in danger?"

"He's lost a lot of blood. That's why he's so pale. But Hagrid did the right things to help him," Hagrid beamed when he heard this, "and he was brought here quickly. I'll get that Blood Restoring potion in him – ah, here's Mr. Weasley, I see you found it – right away, and he should be his old self in a few days. Healing the wing depends on Hagrid. That's beyond my abilities."

Lupin turned to Dumbledore. "What are we going to do about Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle? They've seen Harry as a thestral."

"Not unless they've seen someone die since they took my classes las' year," Hagrid said gruffly. "I suppose that's possible, since they seem ter be following in their fathers' footsteps. But when we did the lesson on thestrals, they couldn' see 'em. So they probably just saw Ron, Hermione and Ginny flying with no brooms and wondered what was up."

"Yeah," Ron said, "I think that's what happened. Maybe we could convince them we were on a flying carpet or something?"

"I think it's time for some Veritaserum and a few Memory Charms," Dumbledore said grimly, "as much as I hate to do those things to students. They have tried to hurt other students too many times to be allowed to get away with it anymore. They could be sent to Azkaban for several of these attacks, but I don't want to give up on them completely yet."

"Not give up on them?" Ron demanded harshly. "They've tried to kill us, and Harry in particular, loads of times now!"

"But they're still underage, Mr. Weasley, and still in my charge. I have to hope there's some chance of them escaping the fates of their fathers."

"Not bloody likely," Ron said hotly, red blotches on his cheeks from his sudden flash of temper. "When I'm an Auror, I'll just go find Draco Malfoy and take him in – that will probably solve half the crimes in the country right there."

Dumbledore put his hand on Ron's shoulder, trying to calm him. "Mr. Weasley, if you give in to hate, you will become like them. That's not what you want, is it? Harry's greatest power is his capacity to love. That's one of your great powers, as well. Don't lose that in your anger at Mr. Malfoy and his friends."

Ron's anger still simmered, but he respected the old wizard enough to listen to what he said. Later, while he sat holding Hermione's hand as she rested in bed, he thought about Dumbledore's statement and began to understand what he meant. He'd have to think about this some more.

"Headmaster, can you change Potter into a thestral? Save the boy the effort?" the nurse asked.

"No. It needs to be his own transformation for you to see how he's hurt," Dumbledore said sadly. "If I could change him into the same thestral, I would have already done so."

"That's what I thought," the nurse replied quietly, "but I had to ask."

"I understand. I wish I could do that for him, save him that much effort and pain. But I can't." Dumbledore sighed, and then turned to go. "I'm going to see Mr. Malfoy and get to the bottom of this situation."

"I'll be happy ter rip their heads off for ya to save ya the trouble o' dealin' with 'em," Hagrid growled, looking more frightening than anyone had ever seen him.

"Now, now, Hagrid, we have to treat them fairly. They are still students here," the old wizard said, glancing at the grieving Gryffindors across the room, "although they may not be much longer. We have to find out what happened." He left to deal with the Slytherins, his face grim.

"Is there anything I can do to help here?" Hagrid asked Madam Pomfrey, who was busily fussing over Harry.

"We'll need to put his shoulder back in place, but I'm afraid you may be too strong for that," Madam Pomfrey said, casting him a worried glance.

The half-giant hung his head. "I'd never do nuthin' to hurt Harry, but you're right. I'm that upset. I might not be gentle enough with him."

"Hagrid, you've been wonderful with him," Hermione assured him. "No one could have treated him better than you did."

Hagrid wiped his beetle-black eyes with his polka-dotted handkerchief. "Thanks for tha'." He took a deep breath and straightened up, glancing at Harry's wounded body, then looking quickly away. "I'll be in me hut looking for thestral medicine, in case you need it. If you think of something else I might have that would be helpful, let me know. I'll be back as quick as I can."

"Thank you, Hagrid," Madam Pomfrey replied, looking up at him briefly. "You did a marvellous job with him, honestly. And the thestral medicine will probably be a good idea."

Hagrid sighed, looking at Harry sadly a moment before going out of the room. "You lot take care of yourselves, hear?" he shot over his shoulder at Ron, Hermione and Ginny, who were huddled together in a sad little group on Hermione's bed.

Madame Pomfrey glanced up at the students across the room. "We could use some help, Mr. Weasley. Hold on to him around his chest, very tightly. Try not to touch his injured shoulder or side if you can help it," she said seriously.

"What are we going to do?" Ron asked warily.

"Put his shoulder back in place. It will be quite painful for him for a few moments. Hold on tightly," she advised. "Remus, would you help me, please?" She and Remus took Harry's left hand in and arm in their hands and pulled, setting the shoulder back in the socket. Harry screamed and tried to pull away. It was all Ron could do to hold on to him.

"I thought he was unconscious," Ron said, his ears still ringing with the horrible sounds of his best friend in agony.

"Not unconscious enough to withstand that much pain quietly," Madam Pomfrey said tersely, "but he has passed out completely now. Hold his head up and I'll give him a potion for the pain, and some Blood Restorer. It's only a few drops each for now, so he won't choke on it. Scar on bum's the password," she added, seeing Ginny about to ask. The nurse gave him the medicine and glanced up at Ron's haggard face. "We'll set him right before you know it," she said confidently, privately hoping she was right. How in the world was she going to repair a tattered, bat-like wing on a human?

Time seemed to stand still for a while. Hermione smiled a bit as Ron proudly cast his bear Patronus over and over to entertain her. Finally, she fell into an exhausted sleep. Ginny sat tensely by Harry's bedside, across from Remus. She spent her time smoothing his hair and stroking his cheek, comforting him the only way she knew how at the moment. Madam Pomfrey fussed over Harry's wounds. She'd managed to get more Blood Restorer potion into

him, and his colour was better. At long last, Harry stirred, rocking his head back and forth and moaning before his eyes finally opened.

"Harry? It's good to see you awake again," Remus said, leaning forward so the boy could see him more easily.

"Here, sweetie," Ginny said, putting his glasses on his face.

"Thanks," he whispered. "What happened? Is everyone OK? I remember. . . crashing through tree branches. . .trying not to hit the ground too hard."

"Everyone's fine. You were the only one seriously injured. You took very good care of your friends, lad," Remus replied, rubbing Harry's uninjured shoulder gently.

"How do you feel, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked kindly.

"I'm fine," he said, as usual.

"No, you're not," Remus countered with a smile. "Tell us where you hurt, so we can help you."

Harry looked at his godfather and nodded. "My back hurts – and my side. Can I be on my right side? Lying on my back. . .hurts. . ." He winced as he moved uncomfortably in the bed.

"Certainly," Madam Pomfrey said, as she and Remus worked together to turn the boy over as gently as possible.

Despite the pain medication he'd been given, Harry cried out when they moved him.

"I'm sorry," Madam Pomfrey said. "There's no easy way to move you."

He lay there gasping, trying to get his breath back, and just nodded.

"I need to find out where your wings go when you're in human form," Madam Pomfrey told him. "Your wing is seriously injured, and I can't treat it because it's not . . . well, it's not there."

"That's probably why my back hurts," he muttered, shifting uncomfortably in the bed.

"Where is the pain? Tell me when I find it," she said, gently moving her hand from spot to spot on his back. When he screamed, she said, "Ah, that must be it."

"Uh-huh," he groaned.

"I can't find anything that feels abnormal. Your shoulder was dislocated but we've put it back in place. Good thing you were nearly unconscious for that one," she commented dryly.

"Yeah, good thing," Harry grumbled, stifling a moan of pain.

Madam Pomfrey continued to move her hand around on his shoulder blade, touching him as softly as she could, pulling back whenever she felt him start to flinch. "I can't find any sign of a wing there anywhere, Mr. Potter. I have no way to treat it right now. Would it be possible for you to bring them out, but stay human so I can talk to you?"

"A partial Transfiguration? Yeah, I think I can do that," he said, frowning in concentration. He rolled over onto his stomach, groaning as he did so.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Remus asked, concerned. "Why are you moving around? Can I help?

"Gotta make room for the wings," he mumbled into his pillow. "They're huge, and I don't know if I can only bring one out." A shimmer appeared above his bare shoulder blades, and suddenly, black bat-like wings emerged from the smooth pale skin of his back. Harry screamed as the injured wing emerged, then cried, "Ginny, move!" as the wrist of his injured wing burst into place right where she had been leaning over him. He lay there covered in sweat and panting with the effort he'd just made. Blood was starting to ooze from the tatters of his wing. The only evidence of this that Ginny, Ron and Hermione could see was the steady drip, drip, drip of blood on the floor beside his bed, coming from nowhere, so it seemed. The wings arched high above Harry's body, the wing tips touching the floor. His wingspan was well over thirty feet, and took up a lot of room.

"How are they?" Ginny asked, instinctively reaching a hand out in front of her, trying to avoid his wing as she tried to get back to Harry's side.

"Be careful, that's bare bone," Remus warned. Ginny quickly withdrew her hand, then moved over to Hermione's bed and sat nervously on the edge of it, watching from a safe distance, her brown eyes huge in her frightened face. Remus and Madam Pomfrey seemed to be studying something about twelve feet from Harry's body.

"Let's try resting the wing tips on these other beds instead of the floor," Madam Pomfrey suggested as she *accioed* several other beds into place on either side of Harry's leaving a gap between his bed and the others so she could work on him. Harry groaned as he tried to lift his wings himself, and then bit back a shriek as Remus and the nurse took his wing in their hands and tried to stretch it out and rest it on the beds nearby. "I'm so sorry, Harry, but we have to have it open so we can see all the damage and treat it. Hagrid did a good job, but we need to do more to mend it and help it heal properly." She turned to Ginny. "Miss Weasley, would you please use the fireplace to call Hagrid and ask him if he's gotten those medications together? I need his help here."

"Yes," Ginny agreed, and ran to the fireplace to call Hagrid.

Hagrid arrived a few minutes later, a large bag slung over his shoulder. "I brought plenty o' supplies. Didn't know fer sure which ter bring, not until I see how it looks. And o' course, you need ter approve their use on 'im," he said humbly to Madam Pomfrey.

"Show me what you brought," she said. The two went to her worktable and spread out Hagrid's remedies, conferring quietly together.

"Harry?" Remus said quietly, gently smoothing his godson's sweaty hair off his forehead. "How are you doing?"

"I'm. . .fine," Harry insisted, a shadow of his cocky grin appearing for a moment on his face.

Remus laughed softly at the boy's show of bravado. "I'm so sorry you have to go through this," he said, still stroking Harry's forehead and hair. He didn't know what else to do.

"That feels good," Harry said softly, as if reading Remus's mind. "Don't stop."

"OK," Remus agreed. "Let me know if you want something. Maybe a shot of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey before they start working on your wing?" he joked.

"Sounds like. . . a good idea," the boy muttered weakly. "Maybe I'll. . . get lucky. . . and pass out again."

"Maybe," Remus murmured, wishing there was something else he could do to comfort his godson.

"When I see Malfoy. . ." Harry went on, then stopped.

"What?"

"What's happening. . . to Malfoy. . . for this?"

"Dumbledore just checked in a few minutes ago to see how you were doing. He said Malfoy has had Veritaserum and his memory has been altered. Same with Crabbe and Goyle. They weren't working for Voldemort. They were just getting revenge for their fathers being arrested last term," Remus explained quietly. "They had just arrived back at school when Minerva found them. They didn't tell anyone about your being a thestral."

"Not fair."

"No, lad, you're right, it isn't fair at all," Remus replied, "but there was no way to prosecute them without revealing your secret, so this seemed to be the best solution."

"I s'pose," he grumbled, but then he screamed in pain again. Hagrid and Madam Pomfrey were just beginning to work on his wing.

"Isn't there some pain killer you can give him?" Remus asked desperately.

"I already gave him some, Remus." Madam Pomfrey turned to Hagrid. "I thought he'd need to be awake to help us with this. Can he be unconscious?"

"Better if he don' flinch while we're workin'. Kinder, too," Hagrid said gruffly, wiping a tear away with the back of his hand as he gazed fondly at the wounded boy. Harry lay there gasping with pain, blood and sweat mingling as they streamed in rivulets down his back and side.

Madam Pomfrey brought over a flagon of potion. "Take this, Potter. Scar on bum's the password."

Harry smiled wanly and drank his potion. "Thank you," he told her sincerely, then lifted his head a bit to see his godfather and Hagrid better. "Thank you. . . ."

Chapter 19 – Recovery

Harry awoke in the darkened room to find the pain in his wing a dull throb rather than the sharp, stabbing pain it had been. He lifted his head and squinted, seeing a blurry image of Remus asleep in the chair beside the head of his bed, out of the way of his wing, and Ginny's long red hair splashed across the back of a chair beside Remus's. He lay his head back down and thought a while. He really needed to get up. The loo was calling. Stifling his groans, he managed to get his glasses off the bedside table, lift his wings free from the beds they were lying across, and then get his legs over the side of the bed. He'd started tottering toward the loo, both wings and arms outstretched for balance, when Remus, Ginny and Ron all converged on him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ginny demanded, her hands outstretched to avoid running into his invisible wings.

"Erm. . .loo?" Harry replied, a slight blush colouring his wan face.

"Mate, I don't think that's going to work for you in your present condition," Ron said with a rueful shake of his head, looking at the bathroom door. He came toward Harry carefully from the front, since he couldn't see the wings in order to avoid them, and then put his arm around his friend to help support him, careful to keep his arm below the wing joints. Remus held Harry's other arm to help him balance.

"Why not?" Harry said, blushing more as he crossed his legs uncomfortably. He was suddenly grateful for his friends' support. He wasn't as strong as he thought he was.

"Your wings, mate. Remus says your wingspan is over thirty feet and you're not allowed to fold them until they heal. They won't go through the door, even sideways."

Harry looked from Ron's serious but amused face to the bathroom door to the huge wingspan that was following him closely. "I guess you're right," he admitted with a wry grin.

"Madam Pomfrey set up screens and a chamber pot for you over there, Harry," Ginny offered.

Harry's eyes widened in horror as he looked at his girlfriend. "Wait a second. I'm not going to. . .with you and everyone. . .no way!"

"Apparently that Blood Restorer works," Ron teased. "Look at him blush!" He chuckled as he looked at his sister and said, "Go over there with Hermione and the two of you talk loudly or something. A man needs some privacy once in a while! You do have six brothers. You should know that."

Ginny "harrumphed" and walked back to Hermione's bed. "Boys!" she grumbled, then laughed. "He looks loads better, doesn't he?" she told Hermione.

"Yes, and I'm sure he'll feel even better in a few minutes," Hermione said, laughing with Ginny. "He did blush rather nicely, didn't he? I couldn't see his face since he was turned away, but even his back blushed!" The girls enjoyed their giggles over Harry's situation, relieved that he was so much improved already.

Madam Pomfrey came out of her office when she saw Harry on his way back to his bed. "How are you feeling, Mr. Potter?" she asked, checking the dressings on his wounds as she spoke.

"Fine, except that the wings pull on my shoulder blades a lot, and they make me feel off-balanced. They're much easier to carry as a thestral. Can I put them away now, or change into a thestral?" he said hopefully.

"I think it will be all right for you to change into a thestral if you'll be more comfortable that way. Your wing needs to stay stretched so it will heal properly," she replied. "Hmm. A thestral is too big for that bed. Let me make up a bed for you over here in the corner," she said, waving to Hagrid as he came in.

Panicking when he saw the door open, Harry pulled away from Ron's and Remus's supporting hands, grabbed the blanket off of his bed and threw it over himself, not realizing his wings not only lifted the blanket oddly, but also protruded well beyond it, which was quite a comical sight. "I thought you were keeping me hidden!" he cried before he saw the intruder was Hagrid. He moaned as the weight of the blanket made his injured wing throb painfully.

"We are keeping you hidden," Remus assured him, calmly helping him remove the blanket from his wings. "The door is password protected for now. Nobody but those who already know about you can get in here."

"Oh," Harry replied, relieved and a bit embarrassed about how silly he'd looked with the blanket over his wings. "All right then. Hi, Hagrid." He smiled at his half-giant friend, and then straddled a chair, with the chair back at the front, so his wings had plenty of room. He rested his arms on the chair back, his chin on his arms, watching Hagrid, Remus and Madam Pomfrey create a thestral-sized bed for him, four mattresses wide, two mattresses long.

"I think tha'll do it," Hagrid said with satisfaction. "Harry, transform and let's see how you fit."

Harry stood up, turned himself into a thestral again and walked to the bedding. He pawed at it for a little while, and then flopped down with a satisfied grunt, his wings splayed out across the mattresses.

"All right there, Harry?" Hagrid said. He was still amazed about his friend being an Animagus who could become a thestral.

A silvery shimmer appeared around the thestral's head, and suddenly, there was Harry's head on the thestral. The girls gasped in shock at seeing Harry's head appear, apparently out of nowhere. "Yeah, thanks," he said with a grin. "This is much better!" His head changed back into a thestral's and he lay down contentedly. A quiet rumbling soon came from the invisible winged horse, which Hagrid said was the way they snored.

The next day, Harry and Hermione were both let out of the hospital wing. As they, Ron and Ginny neared the Great Hall for breakfast, they saw Draco Malfoy and his friends entering the Hall ahead of them. Harry's friends could feel him tensing up with anger.

"Harry," Ginny warned, "he doesn't remember what happened."

"But I do," Harry snapped. He didn't want to control his anger. He wanted to unleash it all in Malfoy's direction. "He nearly killed all of us. And you three don't want to know what it feels like to have a wing shredded, believe me."

"We know that, Harry," Hermione assured him nervously. "None of us feels right about him getting off so easily, but he has been Memory Charmed."

"Hey, Harry, did you eat something in Hogsmeade that made you sick? Or was it really a virus?" Dean asked as he came up behind them. The school had been told that Harry was in hospital because of a stomach ailment which might be a contagious virus. The virus story explained the quarantine imposed on the hospital wing to everyone's satisfaction. The other students all knew Hermione was there as a result of her encounter with the Dementor.

"Dunno. Maybe it was just a short-term virus," Harry offered with a shrug. "I hope nobody else gets it," he added sincerely.

The Yule Ball was being held just before the students left for their Christmas holidays. The castle was decorated beautifully, as usual, with real fairies holding shimmering lights in the twelve huge Christmas trees in the Great Hall, the suits of armour doing clanking jigs to Christmas tunes whenever someone passed them, the ghosts singing carols at meals, and sparkling globes of soft lights in various colours dancing below the ceiling in the corridors. Mistletoe was hung in many odd places, causing a lot of laughter and kissing among the older students, a lot of cringing among the younger ones.

The evening of the ball, Ginny came down to the Common Room dressed in beautiful dress robes of a deep shimmering gold material that set off her red hair beautifully. The new dress robes were the present she'd asked her parents for when they wanted to reward her for being named a Prefect.

Harry's eyes lit up at the sight of her. "Wow!" he said, gingerly touching her bare shoulders. She'd used some kind of potion that put glittery highlights on her skin. Her hair was up in an elegant knot, with golden beads inserted here and there making her look even more glamorous. She was wearing makeup with golden highlights that sparkled similarly to her robes. She looked far more like a mature young woman than a fifteen-year-old girl.

Harry was handsome in his new dress robes of a rich deep emerald that made his eyes seem an even more brilliant green. His hair was actually behaving fairly well for once, much to his amazement.

"Wow, yourself, gorgeous," Ginny said, grinning up at him.

"I. . .uh. . ." Harry seemed speechless for a moment. "Erm. . .if you wouldn't mind getting your Christmas present a bit early. . ." he began.

"Why?" she teased as he stumbled around searching for words.

"What I got you would look brilliant on you tonight," he finished in a rush. "At least, I think so, anyway. I can always rewrap it to give it to you for Christmas," he added hastily.

"You don't have to rewrap it – and yes, I'd love to have my present early," Ginny said, her brown eyes dancing with delight.

"*Accio present*!" Harry said with a small wave of his wand. He held out his hand waiting for it, not even looking toward the stairs to the boy's dormitories. He couldn't take his eyes off of Ginny.

"Ouch!" Ron said as the flying gift hit him on the head. "Watch it!"

Harry glanced up toward the stairs, blushing as he mumbled "Sorry!" to his friend while catching the present. "Erm. . .here," he said awkwardly, putting it in her hand. "Happy Christmas."

"Thank you, sweetie!" Ginny replied excitedly, then opened her gift. The golden Gryffindor lion and ruby pendant lay against the ivory silk lining the box. Ginny's mouth dropped open. She'd never had anything so elegant in her life, or so expensive. "Oh, Harry!" she breathed. "It's beautiful!"

"I'm so glad you like it!" he said, sounding greatly relieved. "I wasn't sure if. . ." He was interrupted by Ginny pulling him into a warm hug that evolved into a serious kiss.

When she was able to let Harry go, Ginny said "Thank you, sweetheart! It's just wonderful! Can you fasten it for me?" She removed it from the box and unlocked the clasp, handed the open chain to Harry and turned around nearly shivering with anticipation. Ron watched them warily from a distance.

As he put the necklace around her neck and fastened the catch, Harry ran his hands over her shoulders, down her arms and then around her waist, hugging her from behind, kissing her softly behind her ear, then on her neck just under her pulled-up hair.

"Oy! Get a room!" Seamus called cheekily as he escorted Lavender toward the portrait hole.

Harry and Ginny wore matching blushes as he pulled her arm through his and they walked toward the portrait hole. Ginny kept touching her pendant, as if making sure it was real. "It looks fantastic on you," Harry told her. "I thought it would look nice with your dress robes."

Ron and Hermione came up behind them. "What would look nice with her robes?" Hermione asked. "Ginny, your new dress robes are beautiful!"

Ginny turned around, swirling her skirts. "Thanks! This is what we were talking about," she said, indicating her pendant. "This is Harry's Christmas present to me. Isn't it gorgeous?"

Hermione made all the appropriate admiring sounds and the two girls ran to a mirror so Ginny could see how it looked. Meanwhile, Ron gave Harry a disgusted look and got out his wand. "*Accio present*!" he said

"Going to give Hermione hers early too?" Harry asked with a cheeky grin.

"Yeah, since you jumped the gun," Ron replied grumpily.

"When I saw her in those robes, with her hair up like that, with sparkly gold things in it and all – I knew that pendant would look perfect. It just seemed to be the thing to do," Harry said, a besotted look on his face as he watched the girls preening in front of the mirror. "I offered to rewrap it for her for Christmas, but she said no."

When Hermione's gift arrived in Ron's hand, he moved behind her and put one arm around her waist. He leaned down and murmured in her ear, "D'you want your present now too?"

"Only if you want to give it to me now," she replied with a pleased smile.

"It will look very pretty with what you have on," Ron added. "That blue with what's in this box. . .should be really nice together."

Hermione whirled in his arms and said, "OK, gimme!" amid peals of laughter. Ron passed her the box, saying "Happy Christmas – and I'll rewrap it if you want."

When she opened the box, Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. "A charm bracelet . . . with a book charm! How. . .cute!"

Ron looked crushed. "Cute" wasn't his goal.

Harry stared at Ginny desperately and tilted his head toward the boxed bracelet.

"Erm, Hermione?" Ginny said, "May I see it?"

"Yes. Isn't it nice?" Hermione said, clearly pleased, but not as bowled over as Ginny had been with her pendant.

"Oh, look!" Ginny said with obvious delight. "There are pictures inside!"

"Really? Let me see!" Hermione said, opening the book, then going slowly through the four pictures inside. By the time she was done, she had tears in her eyes. "Oh, Ron! This is the sweetest thing ever! I do love it!" She grabbed him in a warm hug.

Harry and Ginny cast relieved looks at each other when they saw the happiness on Ron's face. When Hermione released Ron, she held out her wrist. "Can you put it on me?"

Ron fumbled around a while trying to get it on, then finally succeeded. "This thing is so tiny!" he complained as he tried for the sixth or seventh time to get it to catch. Once he had it done, Hermione shook her wrist to see the pretty charm catch the light, then took Ron's arm and headed out to the Ball, Harry and Ginny following close behind.

"Hermione, that glittery potion looks beautiful with the colour of your dress," Ginny complimented.

"Thanks for letting me borrow it," Hermione said. "It looks great on you too!"

"What is that stuff?" Ron asked, gingerly touching the sparkles on his girlfriend's bare shoulder.

"Some kind of potion. There's a new lady's shop in town that carries all kinds of potions, lotions, bath salts, and other things to help us 'beautify' ourselves," Hermione said with a giggle. "Ginny's been in there loads of times."

"What for?" Harry asked Ginny innocently. "You don't need that kind of stuff."

Ginny squeezed his arm tightly and beamed up at him. "You are so sweet. That was the perfect thing to say."

"I meant it. What do you need that kind of stuff for?" he asked, perplexed.

"One of those potions made my hair shinier, one put the glitter on our shoulders," Ginny replied. "That's what Hermione used tonight too. There are others, like blushers to help pink up our cheeks. . ."

"As if a redhead needs help with that!" Ron snorted.

"Well, at least with this stuff, the pink is where we want it!" she said, giggling.

During the dance, Harry and Ron finally figured out that, if they just held their girlfriends closely and rocked in rhythm with the music, it was close enough to dancing to keep the girls happy. For the fast dances, just bouncing around on the spot was good enough. Once these ideas occurred to them, they started having a lot more fun, and their dancing actually improved.

Over at one of the Slytherin tables, Pansy Parkinson wasn't having a good time at all. Draco Malfoy, her date, was not interested in dancing or talking. She sat by him and watched the couples moving around the dance floor, envy piercing her heart.

"Why can't we dance?" she asked peevishly.

"I don't want to," Malfoy growled grumpily, glaring around at the other people who were evidently enjoying themselves.

"But I do!" she complained.

"Crabbe, Goyle, one of you dance with Parkinson," Malfoy ordered with a snap of his fingers.

"No! I don't want to dance with them. You're my date, Draco. Why can't we dance?"

"I told you," he said angrily, emphasizing each word carefully, "I do not want to."

She sighed and rested her chin on her fist, watching Harry and Ginny hungrily. Harry was busy disentangling a strand of Ginny's hair from the catch on her necklace. He was being very careful, very gentle, and the two of them were laughing. He finally unhooked the necklace in order to get the tendril of hair loose from it. As he re-latched the necklace and smoothed Ginny's hair away from it, he leaned down and kissed the back of her neck. She turned around and slid her arms around his neck, giving him a warm kiss in return, and then rested her head contentedly on his shoulder as they danced close together, arms tight around each other.

"Why can't you be like that?" Pansy mused, mostly to herself.

"What?" Malfoy snapped. He, too, had been staring at Harry and Ginny, but with an envy that bordered on rage. How could Potter get away with everything? Why did he have a beautiful girlfriend who obviously cared about him? Why had the Dark Lord not succeeded in killing the rotten half-blood, with all the chances he'd had? Malfoy's own father and the Dark Lord spent a lot more time thinking about Harry Potter and paying attention to what was going on in his life, than either did about Draco. His anger grew as he pondered these things. He'd show them. He'd earn his Dark Mark in some spectacular way. They'd pay attention to him, respect him, treat him as he deserved to be treated. He just had to get Potter to make all those things happen.

Pansy turned to Malfoy, unshed tears in her eyes. "Why can't you be nice to me? Why can't you care about me, like Potter does Ginny Weasley? He. . .," she hesitated, searching for the right word. "He. . .he *cherishes* her. And she feels the same way about him. She's such a. . .she's an absolute cow! He could do so much better. But they're so sweet to each other. Why can't you treat me the way he treats her?" She took a ragged breath and tried to find some way to change her mood, determined to not give Malfoy any more weapons to use against her.

"You're comparing me with Saint Potter now, are you?" Malfoy sneered, a dangerous glint in his eye. "You want to be 'cherished'? Try earning it!"

Pansy burst into tears. Malfoy grabbed her hand and dragged her from the Great Hall, grumbling, "You're making me look bad. Dry up!" When they got to a quiet place in the corridor, he said, "What is wrong with you?"

"I just want to be appreciated, to be cared about, like any other girl," she began, trying not to whimper in the face of his rage.

Malfoy slapped her hard with his open hand. "You're a fine one to call Ginny Weasley a cow. She may be a Mudblood lover and a Gryffindor, but at least she's pretty. You're the cow." He stormed off, leaving her standing there with the bright red imprint of his hand on her face. She pulled out her wand to hex him, but he was too fast for her. With a flash of yellow light, Malfoy hexed Pansy so she sprouted a cow's horns and tail. Wailing in anguish, she ran off. Malfoy didn't care where she went, as long as it wasn't where he was going. He headed down to the Slytherin dungeon. Dances just weren't his idea of fun anyway.

"What a beautiful night," Ginny murmured, leaning back against Harry as they stood in the open front door of the castle, cooling off from the dance. He had his arms around her waist and his chin resting on top of her head, doing his best not to mess up her hairdo.

"Yeah," he replied, enjoying the quiet moment with her. He turned her around to face him and gazed into her eyes. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are tonight?"

She blushed and smiled at him. "Nope," she said impertinently. "How beautiful am I?"

"Every bloke at the dance was staring at you," Harry said, pretending to be exasperated. "I thought I was going to have to jinx the lot of them!" He chuckled, then leaned down to kiss

her. Suddenly, they heard a scream for help. "That's Hermione!" he cried, taking Ginny's hand and racing toward the sound.

In an empty classroom not far from the Great Hall, Hermione kneeled by a thrashing Ron, who seemed to be choking.

"What happened to him?" Harry asked as he and Ginny raced to her side.

"We. . .we. . ." she began, but her tears were making it hard for her to speak.

Harry grabbed her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Tell me, Hermione," he insisted.

"We were kissing, and he kissed my neck, and then licked it, and then this started happening," she moaned. "I don't know what's wrong with him."

"Did he lick where you have that glittery stuff?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"What's in that stuff?" Harry asked Ginny.

"I. . .I don't know," she replied, looking horror-struck at her brother, who was turning blue. "He doesn't seem to be able to breathe."

"Give me your necklace," Harry ordered.

"What?"

"Just do it. Hurry!"

She fumbled with the clasp and then handed it to Harry, who fastened it around Ron's neck. The girls looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"Why are you doing that?" Ginny asked, dumbfounded.

"It has special charms on it, protective charms. They're supposed to be good for poisons and most stealthy attacks, just not for direct attacks with spells," Harry explained quickly. He watched as Ron's colour improved and his breathing eased.

"Thanks, mate," Ron croaked out when he could speak.

"We'd better get you to the hospital wing so Madam Pomfrey can fix you up," Harry said, getting to his feet.

Ron struggled as if to get up, but Harry held him down. "No, if it's poison, your movements may push it further into your system. Just relax. I've got you," he said as he lifted his friend in his arms with only the smallest of grunts at the effort. "Ginny, run to the Great Hall and get Madam Pomfrey. Tell her we're on the way to the hospital wing."

"OK," she replied, and raced to the Great Hall as fast as she could.

As Harry carried Ron toward the stairs, Hermione shook her head as if just coming out of a trance. "Wait, Harry!" she cried as she pulled out her wand. "*Wingardium Leviosa,"* she said with a swish and flick of her wand.

As Ron lifted out of Harry's arms, borne by Hermione's Levitation Charm, he grabbed at Harry and groaned. "'Mione! No!"

"Why not?" she asked, amazed. "You're too big for Harry to carry."

"Just. . .be careful, OK? I feel sick enough already," he whispered miserably.

"I can carry him, Hermione," Harry assured her. After she lifted the spell, Harry continued up the stairs with Ron securely in his arms.

"Harry. . . are you sure? I feel. . . a bit silly," Ron protested feebly.

"No worries, mate," Harry assured him. "You could lighten up on the chocolate frogs a bit if I'm going to have to do this very often," he teased, adding some dramatic grunts at the same time, hoping to get a grin out of Ron. He was rewarded with a small chuckle.

"I'll try not to need . . .this kind of help. . . too often, then. I just can't . . .give up the frogs," Ron said with an attempt at a grin.

Hermione was a bit huffy about not being allowed to help. "Why don't you want to be levitated?" she asked Ron.

"Have you ever. . . been levitated. . . when you're awake and not. . . feeling well? It's like. . .being on a boat. I was getting sea sick," he explained in a weak voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know that!" she replied, distraught. She hurried along by Harry's side, trying to keep up with his long strides, and then said, "You're so pale, and you're all sweaty. How do you feel?" Her brow was furrowed in concern.

"My mouth and throat are on fire," he whispered, his voice growing hoarser every time he spoke. "I feel awful." He was twisting in Harry's arms, in obvious pain.

"Maybe you're having an allergic reaction or something," said Hermione, wiping the sweat from his brow with her hand. "I'm so sorry!" She sniffled, trying to hold back the tears in her eyes.

"Not your fault," he said, trying to smile.

As they reached the hospital doors, Ginny and Madam Pomfrey ran out to meet them. "Tell me what happened," Madam Pomfrey said to Hermione and Ron as Harry gently laid Ron on a bed.

They told her what had happened and Harry explained about the powers of Ginny's necklace. Madam Pomfrey checked Ron over, and then gave him a potion that immediately relieved his symptoms. When he felt better, she removed the necklace and handed it to Ginny.

"That's quite a nice gift," she commented, nodding at the necklace in Ginny's hand. "It probably saved your brother's life."

Ginny nodded and tried to put her pendant back on. Her hands were shaking so, she just couldn't manage it. Harry took the delicate chain from her and fastened it around her neck, rubbing her shoulders gently after he was finished.

"Oh, Harry, don't do that!" Ginny cried, tearing herself away from him.

Harry was astonished. "Why? Did I hurt you?"

"No, but I still have the glittery stuff on. What if it makes you sick too?" she said, her face twisted in worry. "I'm going to the loo and wash it off. You'd better go wash your hands too."

"Miss Granger, you should do the same," advised Madam Pomfrey. "And Miss Weasley, can you bring me the flagon this potion was in so I can test it?"

"I'll bring it, but it's empty. It was a sample and only had a little bit in it, just barely enough for Hermione and me to use it for the dance. Lavender and Parvati were quite put out that I didn't have more to share," Ginny replied. "I guess when they hear about this, they'll be glad they didn't get any!"

"I was wondering why Parvati, in particular, didn't have any of this potion," Hermione commented thoughtfully. "It seems like something she'd love to have."

"The woman in the shop had only made a small batch of it, and she gave it to me. She said she wanted to see how I liked it," Ginny explained.

"Were you in the shop alone?" Hermione asked, a frown of concentration on her face.

"Lavender, Parvati and some other girls were in there at the same time."

"But you weren't with them. You were by yourself, right?" Hermione insisted.

"Yes, that's when you were shopping in the stationers," Ginny replied with a shrug. "I can't afford what she has, so I just go in there to look and for the free samples. She's given me samples before. Sometimes she gives samples to the other girls as well. It's just a way to try to drum up business, isn't it?" Ginny looked confused.

"Not if she knows you're Harry's girlfriend," Hermione said ominously.

"This lady's new in the village. It's a new shop," Ginny protested. "I don't think she knows Harry."

"Everybody knows Harry," Hermione snapped. "You know that. And how many girls our age have long red hair like yours? You Weasleys are the only ones at Hogwarts with hair that bright. Once anyone sees you and Harry together, they'll easily recognize you as his girlfriend when you're apart."

Ginny gulped and looked as if she were ready to cry. "You mean I. . . endangered him? And Ron?"

Harry put his arm around her. "You didn't do anything wrong, Gin. Don't worry about it. We're at war now. We all have to be careful about things. I don't think I would've worried about a sample like that myself, honestly," he comforted her, "although I can't see me putting glitter on my shoulders," he added with a chuckle, wrapping both arms around her and squeezing her gently. Ginny leaned her head against his chest, grateful he wasn't blaming her as Hermione seemed to be doing.

"Miss Granger may be right," Madam Pomfrey said. "I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore about having that shop checked out. Maybe the whole thing was innocent. Maybe Mr. Weasley had an honest allergic reaction to a chemical in the lotion. Redheads and blonds are often much more sensitive to allergens than those with dark hair. Or perhaps there was something in the potion intended to harm Mr. Potter. I'll test the flagon to see if I can find traces of poisons. I'll also take samples from you girls, but since the potion was in the form of a lotion, some of the chemicals may have leeched into your skin. The flagon will give me the truest sample. In the meantime, Mr. Weasley, if you feel well again, you may go."

"Really?" Ron was shocked. Madam Pomfrey rarely let anyone go so quickly.

"Yes, really. I, for one, was enjoying the dance. It's far from over, so I expect you four will enjoy the rest of it too, once you return to it," she said kind-heartedly.

After Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione used the hospital wing loos to wash off every trace of the sparkly potion, they were going to the Gryffindor Common Room so Ginny could retrieve the flagon the potion came in. She would give it to Madam Pomfrey in the Great Hall, to which the nurse had already returned.

When Harry opened the hospital wing door so they could leave, they all stood still, staring in shock at Pansy Parkinson, whose face was blotchy from a long spell of crying. She had a bright red handprint on her face and an eye rapidly getting black, and she had sprouted a cow's horns and tail.

"What are you looking at?" she wailed at the four friends.

The Gryffindors were all speechless for a few moments. Finally, Hermione spoke. "What happened, Pansy," she asked kindly. "Did Malfoy hit you?"

"Yes! And then he did THIS to me!" she cried, pointing to the horns coming out of her temples.

"How do you feel?" Ginny asked, trying hard not to laugh.

"How would you feel? You'll never know. He'll never hit you," Pansy said, gesturing with jealous rage at Harry. "He'll never hex you. And these bloody horns HURT!"

Ginny took a step back uncertainly. She and Harry looked at each other, unsure what to say or do next. Ron was goggling at Pansy's horns so much that Hermione poked him in the ribs to make him stop.

"Where's Madam Pomfrey?" Pansy demanded.

"She's already gone back down to the dance," Hermione replied. "If you want to come in and wait, we'll tell her you're here."

"Oh, that's just what I need, four Gryffindors telling everyone that Draco turned me into a cow!" Pansy cried, getting more and more upset.

Harry stepped forward and put his hand on her arm. "Calm down. We won't say anything like that. We don't want to hurt you."

"Yeah, right, I'm supposed to believe that?" she retorted. "After all the years we've been sniping at each other?"

"Come on in, let's get you settled," Ginny said as she led the girl into the room and helped her to a bed. "We'll go tell Madam Pomfrey you're here, all right?"

"No, I'll just wait until she returns," Pansy said in a more subdued voice.

"Um. . ." Hermione began.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Didn't you tell me you read about a cow curse last week?" she asked Harry carefully. He, Dumbledore and Lupin had started working with the books he'd got from Ben Dervish, and the Cow Curse was one of the first spells in the book. The pages on the spell conveniently included the counter-spell, which Harry had also studied.

"Oh, yeah! I did," he replied, his face brightening. He turned back to Pansy. "I think I know how to reverse the spell Malfoy did," he offered. "Do you want me to try?"

"Why should I trust you?" she snapped.

"OK, then, if you want to stay like that, it's not my problem," Harry replied calmly, shrugging as he turned to go.

"No, wait!" Pansy cried. The Gryffindors turned to look at her, waiting quietly. "If. . .if you think you can. . ." she began.

"I haven't tried it yet, but I remember what to do," Harry said. "I'll only try it if you want me to, and there's no guarantee it will work. Malfoy may have used a different curse than the one I studied."

Pansy looked at him seriously for a few moments, and then said, "Yes, please. Go ahead and try it. It can't get much worse, can it?"

Harry shrugged again. "We'll see." He pulled out his wand and gave it a small wave, muttering something under his breath. Instantly, Pansy's horns and tail disappeared.

"Oh, it worked! Thank you, thank you!" she cried, jumping up and acting as if she were about to hug him. At the last instant, she realized what she was doing and backed quickly away from him.

"We don't have to be enemies," Harry said gently. "Just because Malfoy chooses to be an enemy rather than a friend doesn't mean you have to do the same thing."

"You just don't understand," she said miserably. "But thank you. I mean that."

"You're welcome." Harry thought about removing the bruise from her face, but he wasn't supposed to let anyone know he had that kind of power. "Madam Pomfrey will be able to heal your bruises quickly," he offered. "I'm sorry I can't do that for you."

"That's all right. At least I don't have those horns anymore," she said with an attempt at a laugh. "Or the tail."

The four friends looked at each other uncomfortably. Now what should they do? Harry put his hand gently in the small of Ginny's back and guided her toward the door. Hermione and Ron followed.

"Good night, Pansy," Hermione called back to the girl, who was staring after them.

"Good night," she replied with a small wave of her hand.

When they arrived at the Gryffindor Common Room, the girls ran off to their dormitories to get the flagon and to make sure they'd removed all of the sparkly potion from their skin. They checked each other's necks, shoulders and backs carefully to make certain they hadn't missed any spots. The boys waited patiently in the Common Room for the girls to reappear. When the girls came down, bright-cheeked from the hard scrubbing they'd given themselves, they looked just as pretty as they had with all the glitter and makeup they'd had on before.

"You look beautiful," Ron told Hermione. "You didn't need all that other stuff."

"Did you hear what he said?" Harry murmured to Ginny, bending low over her to keep their conversation private. "It goes double for you," he whispered in her ear, making her giggle as his breath tickled her neck. He straightened up and took her arm as if the evening were just beginning. "Come on. I hear dancing can be fun if you have the right partner!" he said, leading the way out of the portrait hole.

Chapter 20 – Christmas at the Burrow

"Harry! Harry, wake up!" Ron called. "Presents!" Ron, who overslept on a regular basis, never *ever* slept in at Christmas. He was always the first one up, always the one to let Harry know that he, too, had a stack of presents from his friends.

Harry sat up, rubbed his eyes, scratched at the small beard he'd grown to please Ginny, and stretched, then reached for his glasses. At the foot of his bed was a lovely pile of presents. Christmas in the wizarding world was so much better than Christmas with his awful aunt and uncle. He bounced down to the foot of his bed and grabbed the first present on the pile. "This one's from Hagrid," he said with a grin. He pulled off the untidy wrappings and revealed a thin book with elegant binding: "Medical and Emergency Treatments for Injuries and Illnesses of Magical Creatures." Harry laughed. "He's making sure I know how to take care of myself, I expect."

"He sent me one too," Ron said as he opened his gift from Hagrid. "D'you reckon it's a new textbook?"

"I don't think he'd send a textbook at Christmas," Harry said with a shrug. "And the book we have for class covers the whole term. I think he's making sure we know how to look after me if I get hurt again – or should I say 'when' I get hurt again, since I seem to be spending an awful lot of time in hospital this year." He sighed spectacularly, faking a faint back onto his bed.

Ron laughed at Harry's dramatics. "Yeah, you're probably right," Ron agreed. "I'll bet he sent one to each of the girls, as well. Oh, there are rock cakes in here too," he said with a grimace after digging further into the wrappings.

"Here too," Harry said with a smile. Hagrid had no idea that his idea of a home made treat was completely un-chewable by normal human teeth. He set the rock cakes aside and opened the book. "This is a fantastic book," he said after flipping through several pages. "Illustrated and everything. Oh, look!" he said, turning the book so Ron could see the pages, "this shows how he bound up my wing! That's good to know."

Harry had a great heap of presents this year. From Hermione, he received a warm cloak that could be magically expanded to fit someone Hagrid's size, or shrunk to fit in a pocket. "If I can figure out how to get it out of my pocket when I'm a thestral, it will cover me!" he chuckled, "but first I have to work out where my pockets are on the thestral." From Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, a sweater with a Gryffindor lion knitted into it, and several mince pies and sweets. From Fred and George, trial versions of a variety of new items from their joke shop. Harry laughed as the telescope they sent made a sound on its own like a loud raspberry and turned into a chamber pot full of fake, but very smelly, pooh.

"Eauw," Ron said. "What is that?"

"One ub Fwed an' Geo'ge's new pwoducts, I t'ink," Harry replied, holding his nose. "Id was funny when id changed, but the *smell*!"

Just then, two loud cracks broke the quiet of the room, and Fred and George themselves appeared, sitting on the foot of Ron's bed. "Sorry about that changing by itself," Fred said, indicating the chamber pot. "You're supposed to hold it to your eye and *then* it changes,"

"But sometimes it just changes on its own," George concluded, turning the chamber pot back into a telescope with a flick of his wand. "I don't know if that one will be a great success or not."

"It will be with some of our clientele," Fred said with a wry grin. "Try the fish," he suggested, pointing to a rubber tuna in the box of items they'd given Harry.

"Try it. . .how?" Harry asked, looking at it dubiously.

"Give it a wave!" Fred said, his and his twin's faces expectant.

Harry held the fish by its tail and waved it and jumped back as fireworks erupted from its mouth, sending a large Catherine Wheel and several rockets zooming around the room. Harry's glasses reflected the brilliant colours, which coalesced into a glittering "sign" that read "Thank You for Choosing Weasley's Wizard Whizbangs!"

"Brilliant!" Harry said, laughing.

"These are just samples," George said modestly.

"The really big stuff is in the shop," Fred said. "You simply have to visit us so we can show you what we've developed."

"I can't wait!" Harry said, grinning at the still-sparkling fireworks. The letters had rearranged themselves into various silly profanities, ranging from "Poo" to "Uranus" and many things in between.

"All down to you, my dear man," George said with a slight bow. "You are welcome to whatever samples your little heart desires when you come and visit!"

"Uh-oh, Mum's coming," Fred said, and the twins Disapparated with two loud "cracks." The fireworks still floated around the room. Harry and Ron looked at each other in panic. How were they going to explain this to Molly, and keep the twins out of trouble at the same time? Fortunately, they heard her enter Ginny's room, so they breathed a sigh of relief and went on with their present opening as the fireworks finally disappeared.

"Harry! Thanks! This is fantastic!" Ron said as he opened Harry's present, the new book on Quidditch Harry had ordered in Dervish and Banges.

"That's so new, they didn't even have it in the shop yet," Harry said. "I hope someone else didn't get it for you too."

"Nah, I've been through almost everything now. There's nothing else this size or shape, so this must be the only one. It's brilliant! Thanks!" Ron reached behind him and came up with a handful of chocolate frogs, chucking some at Harry. "These are from Hermione."

"Thanks!" Harry said, opening a frog and popping it into his mouth as he reached for another present to open. He looked up and saw Ron had his nose buried in his new Quidditch book. Harry smiled, glad to see his present was a success. His next present was from Remus. "Whoa! Look at this!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Ron asked, coming over to sit next to Harry on the bed.

"It's like a Foe Glass, but small enough to keep in your pocket. It has other powers as well. At least, that's what Remus's note says. He says he'll tell me about it later. Oh, look, it shows your mum is about to open our door!" The boys laughed and Harry stowed the mirror in his pocket before Molly could ask questions about it.

"Happy Christmas, boys! I see you've found your presents," Molly greeted them cheerfully, then her face fell. "What is that awful smell?"

The boys looked guiltily at each other, trying to decide if she was smelling the fireworks or the after-effects of the fake pooh.

"Erm. . .my socks, maybe?" Harry offered. He glanced at Ron, happy to see his friend looking relieved. They both knew she'd never punish or yell at Harry the way she would at Ron or the twins.

Molly stood staring at Harry a moment, as if trying to decide how to react. "Well. . .I suppose I should expect that kind of thing. The twins were bad about washing their socks when they were at school as well. Bring them and the rest of your laundry down later and I'll do it for you, Harry."

"Thanks!" he said with a grin.

"Right, then. Breakfast will be in twelve minutes. Get dressed!"

"OK, Mum," Ron agreed as she left the room and closed the door behind her. He and Harry hurriedly pulled on their clothes. "Thanks for that," he said sincerely.

"You didn't do anything wrong, so why should you be blamed?" Harry said reasonably as he tied his shoes. "And my socks are a bit smelly."

Ron laughed and threw a pillow at Harry.

"Hey!" Harry protested half-heartedly, then gleefully tossed the pillow back at Ron. "We don't have time for a pillow fight now. Breakfast is in . . .let's see. . .six minutes!"

"What did Ginny get you?" Ron asked.

"Dunno, haven't found it yet." Harry went back to his pile of presents. "Here it is."

"It's small," Ron commented.

"That's OK. Ginny's proof that good things come in small packages," Harry said with a grin. "Oh, she's put a note on it that she wants to watch me open it. I guess I'll just take it downstairs with me."

The boys thundered down the stairs as only growing boys with oversized feet can do. There were many calls back and forth of "Merry Christmas!" "Happy Christmas!" "Thanks for the presents!" "Did you like what I got you?" among the family members assembled there, which included Remus, who was staying with the Weasleys along with Harry for the holiday.

"Does your sweater fit all right, Harry dear?" Molly asked.

"It feels fine, thanks!" Harry replied, looking down at his new sweater.

"Oh dear, you've grown much more in the shoulders than I allowed for," Molly fussed, running her hands over his shoulders and trying to adjust the sweater to fit over Harry's bulging muscles. "What in the world are you doing to get such big muscles?"

"Exercising," Harry replied off-handedly.

"I'd say so!" Molly replied, still astonished that his shoulders, chest and back muscles were so much larger than those on any of her sons.

"Harry does lots of chin-ups, too, Mum," Ron offered, trying to help. "He thinks it helps his flying."

"Chin-ups? What do you mean?" she asked as she set the table.

Harry gave Ron a glance. Ron shrugged, then inclined his head slightly toward the doorway, where a sturdy beam crossed above the top of the door. Harry nodded and moved to the doorway, grasped the beam above his head with his fingertips and did ten one-armed chin-ups rapidly and with obvious ease.

Molly clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, Harry, dear, that's just wonderful! Ron, maybe you should try to do those too."

"You know I used to do them on that very door frame when I was little, Mum," Ron complained. "I'm just not as strong as Harry. He can do loads more than I can."

"I have more time for such things than Ron does, since he's a Prefect," Harry said, trying to rescue Ron. He succeeded. Molly turned a proud eye on her youngest son.

"And how are you enjoying being a Prefect for the second year?" she asked him.

"The Prefect bathroom is still the best part of the job," Ron said enthusiastically. "That bath is brilliant!"

"Aw, did I miss seeing Harry doing chin-ups?" Ginny said as she came downstairs. "I heard you talking about them."

"I'll do some more just for you, Ginny," Harry said gallantly, and proceeded to do ten more in quick succession.

"Yay!" she cheered when he was done.

"Show-off," Ron teased.

Harry sat down next to Remus. "Thank you for the mirror, Remus," he said lightly. "Are you hinting that I should do something about my hair?"

Remus laughed at Harry's joke. "As my note told you, it's a kind of Foe Glass," he said, holding out his hand for the mirror. "But it does a lot more than just showing enemies approaching."

"Oh good," Harry whispered with a grin. "I was worried when it showed Mrs. Weasley outside the door!"

"Were you and Ron doing something you shouldn't?" Remus asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, but the twins. . ."

"Ah, I understand. Say no more." Remus chuckled, and then turned back to the mirror. "This, Harry, is a communication glass as well as a foe glass. It shows you who's outside the door, or who's approaching you, yes, but you can also use it to communicate with other people who have similar glasses. You call their names, as if you were using the Floo Network. I have one of these glasses. Whenever you want to talk to me, you can use the mirror."

"Sirius. . ." Harry began, then stopped to control his voice before it broke and betrayed his emotion. "He gave me a mirror to communicate with him. He said he and my dad used them when they were in separate detentions."

"Yes, I remember those mirrors," Remus said with a fond chuckle. "They made good use of them, as they were in detention a lot."

"They were?" Harry was amazed. "Both of them?"

"I've told you your father had as much of a talent for breaking rules as you do. Sirius, as you can well imagine, was even worse, and often instigated their pranks." Remus smiled at the memory. "This mirror has quite a few more powers than those did, but those mirrors were quite useful. Do you still have the one he gave you?"

The boy hung his head. "No. I broke it. I tried to contact him after. . .um. . ." He stopped and sighed. "I got angry and threw it into my trunk. It broke to pieces. I didn't even try to repair it since Sirius was. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Remus said, patting his godson on the knee sympathetically. "I know it's still painful."

"Not so much anymore, but it's still there," Harry conceded. He glanced up and saw Ginny hovering a few feet away, trying not to interrupt them. He forced a smile on his face to cover the sudden Sirius-sized ache in his heart. "Happy Christmas," he told her.

"Happy Christmas to you, too," she said, coming over and sitting next to him. "Have you opened my present yet?"

"Your note said to wait until you were with me, so I did," he replied. "Here it is."

"OK, then, you can open it," she said with an expectant grin.

Harry smiled at her, and then carefully took the wrappings off of the small package. Inside the wrappings was a black leatherette case. He opened it, and found a knife like the one Sirius had given him lying on the red silk inside the case.

"Do you like it? It unlocks doors, like the one you broke before," Ginny said eagerly. "I thought you might like another. . . ." Her face fell. The look she was seeing on Harry's face wasn't the happy one she'd anticipated for weeks, but a stricken one, as if he'd been kicked in the gut.

"Um. . .thank you, Ginny. I. . .thanks," Harry said uncomfortably, his mind repeating *two knives, two deaths* as he stood up and left the house, going out in the snow with no cloak or jacket.

The entire family had witnessed the scene. All of them knew what Ginny had purchased for him, and how long it had taken her to save up for it. An uneasy and unnatural silence cloaked the Weasley family.

Remus looked around and then slapped his hands on his knees. "Right. I'll just go see how he's doing, shall I?" As he started toward the door, he turned back and patted Ginny on the shoulder. Tears were streaming down her face. "He isn't angry with you," Remus said kindly.

"No, but I hurt him terribly. I don't know what I was thinking," Ginny sobbed.

"You were thinking about how much he liked the one he had before, and that he might enjoy a new one," Remus reminded her. "That's a very kind thought. The problem is, he and I had just mentioned Sirius, and I expect his feelings were a bit too close to the surface at that moment. I'll go and talk to him." With that, he turned, grabbed his cloak and Harry's off the hooks by the door, and went out in the snow to find his godson.

Harry was standing by the hedge at the back of the garden, his tears freezing on his cheeks. Right on this spot, he had shown Casey how to toss gnomes over the hedge. Just over there, he'd taken her for her first broom ride. Back there, he'd sat beside her at the table, enjoying the wonderful picnic Molly had prepared. Casey had given him a pocket knife for his birthday, and that gift had reminded him painfully of the one from Sirius. Now another girlfriend had given him a pocket knife, but with magical powers like the one Sirius had given him, and that looked nearly exactly like it. Harry felt as if he were in an endless circle of grief. He felt a warm presence near him, a cloak thrown over his shoulders and tugged closed around him. He looked up to see Remus's sad eyes in front of him.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Remus said quietly. "Ginny didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know. And now I've hurt her, embarrassed her in front of her family. . .how can I show my face in there again?" the boy replied miserably.

"You can, and you will. Everyone in there loves you, lad, as if you were one of them. Don't you understand that by now?"

Harry looked up at his godfather again, desperate for something, but he wasn't sure what would ease his desperation. His eyes searched Remus's face hungrily. "What. . .how can I. . . . I don't know what to do," he moaned.

"Wipe your face. Blow your nose," Remus said practically, handing him a clean handkerchief. "Take some deep breaths. Think about how happy Ginny makes you. Holidays are always hard when you've lost someone you care about. You will feel better as time goes by. You just have to deal with it day by day. We all do. Time will make it easier to bear."

Harry nodded, and did as he was told. He took some shuddering breaths, then laughed shakily. "Cold out here, isn't it? The air hurts my lungs."

"Yes, it's cold out here," Remus agreed.

"Thanks for bringing out my cloak," Harry said, glancing shyly at his godfather.

"You're welcome." Remus opened his arms and the boy embraced him, holding on as if for dear life. "And any time you need a hug, Harry, you just come to me. Sometimes even we adults just need someone to hold us. I understand this. It was one of your mother's greatest charms, that she was always ready with a hug for anyone who needed it. She was such a kind woman, your mother. You take after her tremendously."

Harry relaxed into Remus's embrace, enjoying the feeling of his godfather's strong hands gently rubbing his back, soothing away his misery. "I do?"

"Yes. I heard what you did for Pansy Parkinson. As badly as she and the other Slytherins have always treated you, you were kind to her when she needed it. She'll remember that."

"It just seemed like the right thing to do," Harry said quietly.

"It was," Remus agreed. "And when you're ready, the right thing to do here is to give your girlfriend as nice a hug as you just gave me."

Harry straightened up and smiled at his godfather. "That I can do," he said with a semblance of his normal cheekiness. The two of them walked back into the house, Harry scrubbing at his face to try to remove any traces of tears.

"You look fine. Keep doing that and you won't have any skin left," Remus teased.

Harry grinned and lengthened his stride. "It's bloody cold out here! I wonder what's for breakfast?"

As they entered the house, the unnatural quiet hit Harry like a hammer. His grin faded. "I'm. . .I'm very sorry for my behaviour, everyone," he said quietly. He walked over to Ginny and took both of her hands in his, pulling her to her feet. He wiped the tears from her eyes with gentle fingers, his heart breaking that he'd hurt her so badly, and in front of her family. He swallowed hard, willing himself to say exactly the right thing. "It's a beautiful knife and I am so glad you gave it to me. I was looking for one myself, honestly. Thank you." He pulled her into a warm hug, and then kissed her, gently at first, then, forgetting her family was surrounding him, more and more deeply until they were both breathless. When they broke the kiss and he realized he was surrounded by a happily grinning family of redheads, he blushed as red as their hair. "Erm. . .sorry," he said to the room in general. Then he looked at Ginny. "I'm not apologizing for that to you, though!" he said with a crooked grin.

She laughed. "Good!" she said with a smile, then laced her fingers in his hair and pulled him down for another kiss as her brothers cheered them on.

The moment was broken when Molly cleared her throat dramatically. "A-hem! Breakfast is on the table!" The family broke into laughter as they began to move to their places around the table.

"Were you really looking for a knife like that yourself?" Ginny asked quietly as they sat at the table.

"Yeah. Ask Ron," Harry said as he held the platter of eggs out for her to help herself first.

"He was, actually," Ron agreed as he shovelled bacon onto his plate. "The man in the shop said he'd just sold the last one. He doesn't get them in often."

"The shop in Hogsmeade?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," both boys said.

"Then it was the same knife! The man said he rarely had them in, and I was lucky to ask for it when I did!"

Harry grinned at her and gave her a one-armed hug as he passed the platter on to Ron. "Thank you. I mean that."

"That's OK. I'm sorry my timing was bad in giving it to you," she said.

"Don't worry about it. Things get to me from time to time. That's just the way it is. Time will make it better – Remus promised me, so it must be true," Harry said with a wink at his godfather.

"I do try to keep my promises," Remus concurred mildly.

As they were eating, Molly said, "Harry, dear, thank you so much for the beautiful mosaic! Everyone in the family for generations has been in Gryffindor. What a lovely thing for you to make for us! I can't wait to hang it on the wall."

"I'm glad you like it," he said shyly. "You can also use it under hot saucepans on the table if you want. It will stand up to heat quite well."

"Oh, no, it's a work of art!" Molly insisted. "It must be on the wall. I'd never put a pot on it!"

Harry just grinned. He'd gone back to eating his eggs when Arthur Weasley spoke up.

"And Harry – those ear muffs are wonderful! What's the little container they're attached to?" Arthur said.

"Oh, that's a radio and CD player," Harry answered, "and the earmuffs are actually a headset so you can listen to the radio or CD."

"What's a CD?"

"Kind of a musical recording – and radio is like the Wizarding Wireless Network," Harry replied.

"Muggles have wireless too?" Arthur asked in amazement. "How marvellous! Can you show me how it works?"

"I got you a battery-operated one, so it may work here. I knew an electric one wouldn't work in a wizarding house," Harry said as he took the small radio in his hands. He put the headset on, flipped a switch and turned the dial until he found a radio station. "Here, put these on. You turn this knob to make it louder or softer," he explained as he handed over the headset and radio.

Arthur's face lit up with joy. "Brilliant! And it has a battery! You know how I love batteries! Thank you, Harry, thank you very much!" he said in delight. He put the headset on and was soon tapping his fingers to the music he was hearing.

Harry laughed, happy to see his presents were a success. "I'm glad you like it."

Ginny leaned over and whispered, "I love my necklace. I never, ever take it off."

Harry turned to her, his eyebrows raised, planning on teasing her a bit. "Never?"

Her eyes danced merrily as she slowly answered, "Ne-ver. E-ver. Not once since you put it back on me. It goes where I go. I *sleep* in it. I *bathe* in it. I wear it all the time." She grinned at him wickedly, seeing her words had set his mind going off in interesting directions. She chuckled to see his ears redden as he tried to stifle his blush.

"Erm. . .well, I guess that's good, then!" he said, trying to get some of the images she'd conjured out of his mind – but not really wanting to get those images out of his mind. He saw the impish gleam in her eye and grinned at her. "Well, that knife will go everywhere I go, as long as I have pockets, anyway." He chuckled at her expression. "I can't exactly sleep or bathe with it, but if I don't have pockets on me, it will still be close by. How's that?"

"Perfect!" she said, grinning at him. She'd got some interesting images of him during his reply as well, and she had no intention of getting them out of her mind.

When the holiday was over, Harry and his friends were finishing dinner in the Great Hall after their long ride on the Hogwarts' Express when Professor Dumbledore stopped at their table.

"Good evening, everyone! I hope you had a wonderful holiday. Harry, I wonder if you, Ron, Hermione and Ginny could come to my office after dinner?" the old wizard said. He leaned closer to Harry and added, "Thank you for the wonderful socks!" He straightened and sauntered off, humming to himself, leaving a grinning Harry behind him.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked, bewildered.

"I give him socks every Christmas," Harry replied with a smile. "He told me once he always gets books for Christmas, but he'd love some warm, woolly socks. So I look for warm woolly socks for him, especially with interesting patterns or spells on them. Dobby gets the same kind of present from me, and they're both always quite happy with them."

"No, I meant about his wanting to see us," Ron answered impatiently.

"No idea. Haven't a clue," Harry said with a shrug, finishing off his last bite of pudding. "When you've quite finished, Ron, we can go and find out," he added, grinning as his ever-hungry friend stuffed another huge wad of apple pie into his mouth.

"Ib lmo dun," Ron mumbled through his mouthful.

"Eauw, Ron, could you please swallow first?" Ginny teased her brother. "THEN tell us what you're trying to say!"

Ron swallowed with all the dignity he could muster. "I said, in plain English anyone could understand, that I was almost done." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and shoved his bench back. "Ready?" he asked the rest of them.

"We were ready ages ago," Ginny said with a laugh. "Honestly, nobody eats as much as you do. How do you stay so skinny?"

"I'm just a growing boy," Ron replied solemnly.

"If you're still growing, you'll soon be as tall as Hagrid!" Ginny replied, laughing.

Ron looked wounded. "What is this, pick on Ron day?"

"Isn't every day pick on my brother day?" Ginny teased. "You're the only brother around for me to pick on, so you get all the benefit of my wit!"

"Half-wit, more like," he teased back.

"Hermione, I think we need to separate these two," Harry said with a chuckle, pulling Ginny to his other side so he walked along the corridor next to Ron.

"Ah, my plan worked!" Ginny cried with delight.

"What plan?" Harry asked, smiling down at her.

"I wanted to get a hug from you, and here you are, walking with your arm around me. Worked like a charm!" She giggled and snuggled up against his side.

"You could've just asked instead of tormenting your poor brother," Harry chided her, giving her a squeeze as he did so.

"But it's more fun my way!" she insisted.

"If you say so," grumped Ron, but not very seriously.

By this time, they'd reached the headmaster's door. "Milky Way" Harry said.

"Why's he using a galaxy for a password? His passwords are usually sweets," Ron asked.

"Milky Way is a Muggle chocolate bar," Harry answered as he stepped onto the spiral staircase with Ginny. "It's good. You'd like it, Ron. Chocolate and caramel."

"Yum!" Ron replied with a grin.

Dumbledore opened his door as soon as they knocked. "Come in, come in," he invited. "Please sit down. Did you enjoy your dinner?"

"Yes, Professor," they answered as they sat down.

"What's up?" Harry asked.

"I wanted to talk to you three," he said, indicating Ron, Hermione and Ginny, "about the Adfero charm. It's high time you learned it. I know Harry's been too busy to teach you, with all the extra work he's been doing with me." The three nodded. "I'd like you to take an extra class with Professor Flitwick for the next few weeks, in the evenings, to learn the charm. It's an important communication tool. You might consider teaching it to the Squad Leaders in D.A. as well, so you can pass along information more quickly and quietly."

"That would be great!" Ron enthused.

"Fine, then. I'll let you work out your schedule with Professor Flitwick at your convenience. He's expecting you to talk to him about this after class tomorrow. Since you three aren't in the same year, you'll need to agree on which evenings work for you before you have your Charms class tomorrow." He turned to Ron. "I've found some books on battle strategies that might be useful to you in your planning. I think Harry was right in making you the general of Dumbledore's Army. Your chess skills will stand you in good stead." He smiled as he passed a blushing Ron a stack of books. "Some of these are histories, which I know is not your favourite subject. Feel free to skip the chapters that aren't related to actual battle plans. You'll soon sort out which chapters will be helpful to you. If you have questions, Professor Lupin and I have been studying these same books since Harry came up with the idea of using battle strategies. Please ask either Professor Lupin or me whatever questions occur to you. If we don't know the answer, we will do our best to find it." He smiled at Ron, and then turned to Harry. "As for you. . . I know you've been looking through the books Mr. Dervish gave you already. Remus and I have come up with a sort of class schedule for you, so you can work through the books in a logical and reasonable fashion, especially given all the other work you

have to do for your regular classes, your Quidditch practices and D.A. meetings. We'll be working on those spells as intensely as you can handle. It's your responsibility to tell us when we've overloaded you. You do need time to yourself, time to relax, time to enjoy your friends, time to eat, sleep and exercise. You simply can't work all the time. So be reasonable to yourself when you decide on how much time you can devote to this study."

Harry nodded.

"All right, then. Off you go!" Dumbledore said cheerily. "Lemon drop before you leave, anyone?" They smiled and accepted the offered sweets, then headed to their dormitory.

Chapter 21 – Fans and Foes

The *Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler*, *Witch Weekly*, *Teen Witch Weekly* and other periodicals had jumped all over the story of Harry fighting off the Dementors in Hogsmeade. Since he'd spent the holidays with the Weasleys, he was unaware of how much press coverage that incident had generated. Once again, the magazines in particular had taken that one incident, which was impressive enough by itself, and embroidered on it floridly, going on and on about the "dashing hero of Hogsmeade," his "brilliant green eyes," his "charmingly tousled black hair," the "adorable little dimple" in his chin, his "gorgeous cheekbones," his "massive, masculine shoulders," and his "chivalrous attention to the victims." They even re-ran the hidden camera photos taken of him during the summer, with Casey cropped out of the pictures. The furore these articles created hit Harry during his first morning of classes. The group of fans was following him again, calling out to him, touching him when and where they could. Some of the D.A. members were among the group. He rounded on them angrily.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" he snarled, his face stony, his eyes filled with frustration and suppressed rage. He glared at the D.A. members in particular. "If you want to stay in D.A., you'll stop doing this right now, and you'll get the rest of these girls to stop following me."

"Ooooo, look how his eyes flash!" "Hasn't he developed lovely big muscles this term?" "D'you suppose he and that Weasley girl have broken up yet?" "Harry, if I faint, will you catch me?" "Isn't he dreamy?" The annoying comments floated to him even as he distanced himself from the group. He was growling by the time he got to class.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked as he sat down next to her and Ron in Transfiguration.

"I have 'fans' following me around again," Harry snarled. "Some are D.A. members. I threatened to throw them out if they keep following me, and told them they'd better stop those other girls from following me, as well."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Hermione said sympathetically. "Articles about the Dementor attack in Hogsmeade came out during the holidays. They were very. . .um. . .flattering toward you. That's probably what caused this latest fan problem. I didn't want to mention the articles to you while you were at the Weasleys."

"Yeah, and Mum told us not to say a word," Ron added. "She was so angry, she cancelled all her subscriptions and burned the paper and magazines before you and Remus arrived."

"I wish they'd leave me alone," Harry sighed, running his fingers roughly through his already-messy hair. He sighed again as he took out his book, parchment, quill and wand to get ready for class.

"They're just excited because you've been written up in the magazines, Harry," Hermione assured him. "They'll move on to something else soon."

"I hope you're right," he grumbled, "but I won't hold my breath waiting for it to happen."

Professor McGonagall called the class to order. "Today we're going to see how you're doing on your Animagus transformations. Did you all practice over the holidays?" She waited while

the class responded, nearly every one with a "Yes, Professor." The only one who didn't answer at all was Harry, who no longer needed to 'practice' his transformations. "Good. Who wants to show me what you can do? Anyone?"

After a few moments of stillness in the room in which nobody responded, Hermione raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I don't usually have a lot of trouble with these spells, but I can't manage more than a paw no matter how hard I try," she said in frustration. "Is there anything else we can do to help with the transformation?"

"That's an excellent question. Unfortunately, the answer is no. You have to follow the procedure. The vast majority of wizards never learn this transformation at all. I want to give you as good a chance as possible, so we'll keep touching on it from time to time, and I do want you to keep practicing. Don't become frustrated and angry about it. Such emotions block your magic." She took a breath and glanced around the class brightly. "Now then. How many of you can do a paw?" A few hands went up, Hermione's and Harry's included. Ron hung his head. He still hadn't managed to even change the colour of the hair on his hand, much less make it a paw. "How many have managed to do more than a paw?" Only Harry raised his hand. "Mr. Potter. What have you managed to do?" She and Harry had discussed this before class. He was going to reveal one of his forms and tell the class about it.

"I've, erm, managed to turn into a cat," Harry said hesitantly.

"Have you really?" McGonagall said, feigning surprise, a small smile on her face. "Can you show us? Come up here where we can all see you."

Harry walked to the front of the class and turned to face them. He took a deep, calming breath and blew it out, willing himself to transform s-l-o-w-l-y, rather than instantaneously as he was actually capable of doing now. He looked at his left hand, a frown of concentration on his face as he forced the transformation to happen as gradually as possible, and it became a cat's paw. Slowly but surely, black fur grew up his arm, the other hand turned into a paw and black fur grew up that arm, and he dropped to all fours as fur covered his rapidly shrinking body. Within a few moments' time, a black cat with green eyes stood where Harry Potter had been standing. The class gasped as the transformation occurred.

Parvati's hand shot up.

"Yes, Miss Patil?"

"Is it easier for Harry to do this because his father was an Animagus?"

"Possibly. I expected it to be easier for him, partly because of his father's ability, and partly because of how rapidly he learned how to transform his hand into a paw. If you can grasp the concept and apply it even a little at first, the entire transformation will go easier for you in the long run."

"It's not fair, you know," Parvati grumbled.

"Yeah," Lavender agreed crossly.

"It's not our fault our parents aren't Animagi," Parvati continued.

"Miss Patil, Miss Brown, that is quite enough. You both know that wizards and witches all learn at different speeds. Harry just has a talent for this particular transformation. If you work hard at it, you may work it out, too. I can tell you this – James Potter's parents were not Animagi, nor were Sirius Black's. Yet both of them became Animagi, simply through hard work and determined study. You can do it too if you apply yourself as seriously as they did."

"But I am," complained Hermione. "I'm trying as hard as I know how, but I'm not getting anywhere."

"It took James and Sirius two years to learn how. Don't be impatient, Miss Granger." She smiled down at Harry, who sat quietly by her feet. "Now, let's have a look at Mr. Potter, shall we? Harry, may I pick you up so the class can see you better?"

The cat looked up at her then stood on its back legs, reaching up with its front legs, finally putting its front feet against the professor's robes. She lifted him gently and held him in her arms, then turned him around carefully so the class could see all sides of him.

"Now if you'll look at him, can anyone tell me what his distinguishing mark will be? You're required to register your distinguishing mark when you register as an Animagus."

Hermione and Ron kept their hands down. They knew too much about Harry's transfigurations, and were worried they'd let something slip if they spoke in class.

Neville raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom?"

"He has green eyes, like Harry's."

"That's right, he does. But eye colour is rarely a distinguishing mark. In some species, all the members of that species have eyes of one colour, such as horses who have either brown or blue eyes, or one brown and one blue in some cases. If you saw a green-eyed horse, you'd be shocked, wouldn't you? So when an Animagus transforms, his eye colour usually becomes that of the species he is changing into. In rare cases, the Animagus form will have something different about it than real beings of that species, but it is, as I said, rare. Cats often have green eyes, so that's probably why Harry has green eyes as a cat. Someone else?"

"He's long and muscular like Harry," Parvati offered, making Lavender giggle.

McGonagall stroked the suddenly tense cat. "There now, it's all right," she crooned soothingly, then remembered he was a student, not really a cat. She cleared her throat and answered Parvati's comment. "Yes, his physical form is similar to Harry's, although that is not always the case. Is there anything else you notice about this cat?"

Seamus raised his hand. "It looks like he has a little lighter hair over his right eye. Is that a marking of some kind?"

"Well spotted, Mr. Finnegan. Mr. Potter, as you're all aware, has a lightning bolt shaped scar just above his right eye. This marking is similar to that scar, and will be used when Harry is registered as an Animagus. As you can see, the marking is subtle, just a slightly lighter colour of hair. If it were a bold marking, such as white hair against the black of the cat, it would be obvious from a distance that this cat must be Harry Potter in Animagus form. Keeping your markings subtle like this is a very good idea, if you can manage it. Mr. Potter must have made a conscious decision to keep his marking subtle, and sorted out how to control it at some point in mastering this transformation." She walked around the class so everyone could see the marking on Harry's face. "Can anyone tell me why Mr. Potter might have chosen to be a cat?"

"Because it was what we were starting with," Neville offered. "He could make his hand a cat's paw, so I guess he just. . .kept going?"

"That may very well be true," she replied as she set the cat back on the floor, stroking its back gently as she did so. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. You may change back now."

Harry changed back as slowly as he could manage. Soon he was standing before the class, ears red at having been the subject of such close scrutiny.

"Mr. Potter, can you tell us why you chose to become a cat?"

"Neville had it right. Since I could do a paw, I thought it would be simplest to stick with a cat. And cats can go nearly anywhere and not be noticed. I thought that could be useful."

"Well done, Mr. Potter. Thirty points for achieving the transformation. And Mr. Longbottom – ten points each for your excellent questions and your understanding of Harry's reasoning. Do any of you have questions for Mr. Potter?" Several hands went up. "Yes, Mr. Thomas?"

"How long did it take you to do it?" Dean asked.

"Erm. . .a while. I didn't keep track," Harry said evasively. Several hands were still lifted.

"Yes, Miss Brown?"

"How does it feel to change size so much?" she asked.

"Excellent question, Miss Brown. Five points. Harry?"

"It. . .well, it's hard to explain," he began lamely. "Erm. . .well, at first it feels like I'm being stretched, which is odd because I'm getting smaller. It doesn't hurt, it just. . .pulls? I guess that's as good a term as any. The oddest thing is to be looking up from so close to the floor. But I can jump really well, just like a cat," he added with a grin. "That's brilliant, really, quite fun."

"Show us!" somebody called.

Harry glanced at his professor and saw an approving nod. He forced himself to change slowly again, then jumped from the floor beside Professor McGonagall to the top of Ron's desk, where he proceeded to paw the parchments there and circle around to lie down. The class was laughing by this time at his very cat-like behaviour. He leapt suddenly in the air and raced

across Ron's desk, Hermione's desk, and jumped across the aisle to Seamus's desk, then leaped on top of Seamus's head, balancing there with his tail waving in the air. He lashed his tail about a bit, hitting Seamus in the face, then tickling his ear before leaping a huge distance to the window sill, where he curled up in a sunbeam and started purring. The class applauded, whistled and cheered for him, amidst much laughter.

"All right, Mr. Potter, you can change back," Professor McGonagall said with a smile. "Well done. You make a very convincing cat." Soon Harry himself sat grinning mischievously on the windowsill. Hands were raised all around the room. "More questions? Yes, Miss Brown?"

"When you're a cat, do you think like a cat or a person?" Lavender said.

"Excellent question. Five points," McGonagall said. "Harry?"

"It's a little of both, really. The cat wanted to play with the parchment and lie in the sunshine. I'm the one who wanted to tickle Seamus and mess up his hair," Harry said with a chuckle. "Both the cat and I enjoy the jumping around bits."

"Can the cat take you over? I mean, can it make you do something it wants but you don't want to?" Neville asked when he was called on.

"So far, I'm the one in charge," Harry said with a laugh and a shrug. "When the cat comes up with something it wants to do, it usually seems like a fun idea to me. We seem to get along well."

The class laughed.

"Can you tell us the process you used to do the transformation?" Hermione asked. She'd asked Harry this in private many times, and still wasn't satisfied with his answers.

Harry thought a while, trying to come up with something different to what he'd told her before. Finally, he hit on an idea. "Hermione, remember when you taught me how to transform a cat into a monkey when I was in hospital? I had a lot of trouble with that until you told me to start small, with only a paw. So when I started trying to do the Animagus transformation, I did as you and Professor McGonagall both said, and just started with a paw. When I had one paw done, I did a foot, then the other foot, then the legs, saving my wand hand as the last thing that I changed. When we did the kitten to monkey transformation, I had a lot of trouble with it, as I said, but I think it was because I liked the kitten a lot and didn't want to see it hurt. Maybe that's why the rest of you are having trouble. You're afraid you're going to hurt yourself, or get stuck somehow. I can honestly tell you, it does not hurt. It doesn't tickle either," he said ruefully, "but it's more a stretching feeling than anything else. If you can stop worrying about getting hurt, you may progress faster." As Harry was talking, Ron's face lit up with understanding. He grinned at Harry. Hermione still looked a little puzzled, but thoughtful as well. Harry glanced around the room. Everyone seemed to be thinking hard about what he'd said.

"Excellent question, Miss Granger. Five points. Harry, that answer was outstanding. Fifteen points." McGonagall smiled warmly at him. "Are there any more questions? Mr. Potter, thank you very much. You may sit down. Open your books. . .yes, Mr. Thomas?"

"When does Harry get registered?" Dean asked as Harry returned to his seat.

"I will be sending in the paperwork within the next week or so," she responded. "All right, today we begin the study of Apparition." That got a cheer from the class. "I want you to read the chapters on Apparition and write me two feet of parchment on how its done, how it can go wrong, and how Apparating incorrectly – also known as 'splinching yourself' – can be repaired. The essay is due in one week. For now, open your books and we'll start going through the steps of Apparition." Seeing Hermione's hand shoot up, the professor anticipated her question. "And yes, I know you cannot Apparate within the grounds of Hogwarts. Once you have the concepts firmly in place, we'll go to Hogsmeade and practice." Hermione dropped her hand, joining in the cheers of her classmates at this announcement.

On their next Hogsmeade visit, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione stopped by The Ladies Shop where Ginny had bought the sparkly potion that made Ron ill. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape had needed to work together to sort out what the dangerous ingredient in the potion was. They had found a subtle poison in it that had to be taken internally to be activated. That property of the poison was why Harry's soft kisses on Ginny's neck didn't poison him. He never got the potion inside him, but Ron had, by licking Hermione's neck.

"Good morning, good morning," Madam Desiree said warmly as the four friends entered the shop. "I must apologize most sincerely for your potion being contaminated. I have changed suppliers and thrown out every potion I got from the old one. I cannot imagine how such an awful thing happened. Professors Dumbledore and Snape came to see me about it. Professor Snape and I both tested every potion I had, and none of them were contaminated. It must have been a terrible accident at the manufacturer's. How fortunate that you survived, young man. My sincere apologies!"

The girls smiled and accepted the woman's fluttery request for forgiveness easily. Ron stood grim-faced. He hadn't wanted to enter the shop at all. He never wanted Hermione or Ginny to use these products again, but nearly every girl third year and above at Hogwarts used them with no ill effects. Only Ginny's bottle of potion had caused any problem at all. Maybe it was just a fluke. But Ron was still nervous. He remembered vividly how it felt to be dying of poison, to not be able to breathe properly, and not have any way of fighting the effects of the poison himself.

Harry was uneasy too. Something about the woman rang false. Maybe it was just that her fluttery, overly-feminine mannerisms reminded him uncomfortably of Professor Trelawney and Rita Skeeter. He concentrated on his glasses to see if they'd reveal anything about the woman, but nothing looked unusual, whether he looked at her without his glasses while cleaning them on his shirt tail, or through them normally or through them with their powers invoked. She must be as she appeared, not someone hidden behind a 'glamour,' but still, something about her bothered him greatly.

The boys followed their girlfriends as they wandered through the shop escorted by Madam Desiree. She had offered to give them various products as an apology. "What's this one do?" Ginny asked, picking up a bottle of potion labelled "Hair Glo."

"Oh, your hair is so lovely, but this product, it makes your hair shine like a mirror, sparkle like jewels. It's a beautiful effect," Madam Desiree enthused.

"I have your Hair Shine product on my hair now," Ginny said. "How does this one differ?"

"It has a much stronger effect. You will see your hair glisten in ways it never has before. Here, let me put some on your hair. It won't take a moment." The woman got a hairbrush out of a case and started brushing Ginny's long red hair. "First we brush your hair well."

"I brush it a thousand strokes a night. My mum said that would make it shiny," Ginny offered.

"And it does, it does. Your hair shines beautifully. This potion will make it shine *magically*. You'll see." She brushed Ginny's hair a few more moments, then set the brush aside and reached for the potion. "For hair as long as yours, you put a drop of potion in your hands the size of a Sickle, just so," she said, showing Ginny the potion in her hand, "then rub your hands together and simply stroke it gently through your hair, thus." She rubbed the potion into Ginny's hair, and exactly as promised, it soon sparkled like jewels and reflected light like a mirror, just as Madam Desiree had promised. It was a remarkable effect.

"Oh, I like that! I'll take it," Ginny said with a grin.

"This one says it controls curls," Hermione said, holding out a bottle of potion whose label she'd been reading. "Does it work well?"

"Oh, certainly. Let me show you how it's done." She got out a new hairbrush and brushed Hermione's hair, then applied the potion. Hermione's normally unruly hair suddenly formed itself into beautiful loose spirals of curls.

"That's gorgeous! Thanks! I'll take the large flagon of that one, please," Hermione said. "Do you like it, Ron?" she said, turning to him and bouncing her curls with her hand, her eyes dancing in delight.

Ron gazed at her, his love for her in his eyes. "I don't care what your hair looks like," he said simply. "You're beautiful. And yes, your hair looks pretty like that."

Ginny looked at Harry expectantly. "Yes, Gin, I think your hair looks very pretty too," he said with a smile, knowing that's what she wanted to hear. He honestly preferred the look of her hair without the potion, but it seemed to make her happy to have something new to do with it, so he went along. He glanced up at the shopkeeper warily. "You're certain these have not been contaminated? They won't make the girls or us sick in any way?"

"I had them all tested before I put them out, after the scare we had with that other potion," she assured him. She looked at the girls. "Is there anything else I can get for you today?"

"No, thanks," they both said. The woman put the hairbrushes in a basket under the counter, then wrapped the potions for the girls and handed them their packages. "With my compliments, and again, my apologies for that awful incident."

"Thank you," the girls said, then took their boyfriends' hands and walked toward the door.

"Do come again!" she called as they left the shop. "Have a lovely day!"

As the four friends walked away, the two girls chattering happily about their purchases, Harry caught Ron's eye over their heads.

"That woman gives me the creeps," he murmured.

"Too right," Ron agreed wholeheartedly.

A few nights later, Harry was awakened from a sound sleep by the feeling of cold air hitting his body. The curtains around his bed must have come open, or he'd kicked off his covers. He opened his eyes a crack, just long enough to see that the curtains around the bed were closed. It was still nice and dark inside his bed's heavy curtains. He closed his eyes quickly, trying not to wake up too much, and felt around groggily for his covers. He nearly leaped out of bed when his hand encountered bare skin very close to him. Not just bare skin – soft, lovely girl skin. He was asleep, he had to be. This was a dream, a much nicer dream than he normally had. He kept his eyes closed, not wanting the dream to end. He let his hand linger, gently, slowly exploring this fascinating territory. His hand sent his brain some very interesting signals. This was a breast. A breast? In his bed? What a perfect dream! He smiled, enjoying the vivid dream his brain had so kindly sent him. He'd worry about having dirty thoughts about Ginny later. Right now, he was having as happy a dream as a sixteen year old boy could manage. He hoped his dream would last. He wondered where it would end and immediately squashed that thought so as not to jinx the dream. A soft giggle came from somewhere behind that breast and his hand drew back quickly, as if it were burned. His eyes flew open and every cell of his body was instantly, wholly, tremblingly awake.

"What's the matter," Ginny said with a seductive, throaty chuckle. "Too hot for you in here?" She rolled over on her side and snuggled up against him. Harry scrambled away as fast as he could, his hands in front of him, trying to keep a decent distance between them. She moved closer and his hands wound up on her narrow waist and the softness of her nearly flat tummy. He had to fight the urge to rub his hands all over that deliciously silky skin.

"Ginny, are you crazy? Your brother is in the next bed!" he whispered urgently.

"Yeah, that makes it all the more exciting, doesn't it?" she said, unbuttoning his pyjama top and running her hands over the muscles of his chest and shoulders, then trailing her hand down his torso and getting dangerously close to an area he didn't want her to reach right at the moment, especially with her volatile brother sleeping just a few feet away.

He backed out of bed, his curtains parting as he moved away. "What are you doing?" he whispered, gazing at her in horrified fascination. The moonlight spilled through the gap in his curtains and gave the planes of her beautiful body an opalescent glow as she rolled around languidly on his bed. He couldn't stop looking at her, his eyes wandering in hungry captivation from her smiling face with her teasing eyes, to her dainty feet with their delicately curled toes and tiny toenails, taking in every absolutely enchanting detail in between. He shook his head, willing himself to disciplined thought. This wasn't the way his Ginny acted, but it certainly looked like every square inch of the Ginny he'd imagined, from her glorious long red hair to – oh my, he'd never thought she'd have freckles there! And look there – an exquisite little heart-shaped birthmark in another spot that he was just dying to kiss. He swallowed hard, reminding himself to breathe, trying again to control himself, to assess the situation. Something just wasn't right. He had no idea what might make her behave this way. Well, he did have an idea, actually, but the Ginny he knew wouldn't do this with Ron and the

other boys so close by. He shook his head, trying to regain command of his brain. "Erm. . .what's the password?"

"Huh?" she said in surprise, suddenly distracted from running her hands up and down her body, displaying herself in every way possible, driving him completely, deliciously mad.

"The," Harry gulped, his mouth dry as a desert, his voice cracking, while he tried desperately to look at her eyes, not to look at all the riches she was flaunting, "password."

"What password?" she replied, looking puzzled for a moment before stretching, arching her back, and running her hands over her breasts suggestively. "Come on, Harry, come to me. It's *lonely* in here."

"The password. Something only you and I know," he prompted. He still wasn't certain if he wanted this person to be an impostor or his Ginny. Either way, he knew he was in big trouble.

She gave up on her seductive actions for a moment as she pondered his question. "Oh. OK. Um. . .let's see. She has six brothers?"

Frantic fear coursed through his body as Harry leaped onto his bed and shoved the girl out onto the cold stone floor unceremoniously. She hit with a thud and lay there crying, holding her elbow as if it were hurt. "Ron! Ron, wake up!" he hollered, waking all his room mates. He was suddenly so angry, the world seemed tinged with red. "And you, whoever you are, cover up Ginny's body! Where is she? Have you hurt her?" His swift rage was replaced by terror, pouring through Harry's veins in uncontrollable torrents. What if Ginny was dead? No, he'd know if she was dead. He'd feel it. He was certain of that. Where was she? He picked up his dressing gown and tossed it over the trembling girl.

Ron woke up, rubbing his eyes sleepily, his hair standing on end as he peered through his curtains. "Whassup?" He looked blearily around and saw the crying girl on the floor, now mostly covered by Harry's dressing gown. Ron was immediately fully awake. "Ginny? What the bloody hell are you. . .?" He looked at his best friend in appalled disbelief. "*Harry?*"

"This is NOT Ginny!" Harry cried, angry again. He pointed his wand at the girl on the floor. "*Incarcerous*," he cried, and ropes flew out of the end of his wand and bound the girl tightly, the dressing gown slipping off of her breasts as the ropes pulled taut. Harry threw his blanket over his captive. No way was anyone going to see his Ginny's body without her permission. "This girl tried to seduce me. I don't know who she is, but she is not Ginny Weasley!"

"How do you know, Harry?" asked a bemused-looking Neville, tilting his head to study the girl's face. "She looks just like Ginny."

"She didn't know the password," Harry snapped, feeling an urgent need to leave, but knowing he had to explain what was going on so his friends didn't release this girl before they found out what she knew and why she had tried to seduce him.

"What password?" Neville replied, puzzled.

"The one that lets me know it really is Ginny I'm talking to. When I asked this girl for the password, she said, 'She has six brothers.' 'She' – not 'I' – and EVERYONE knows there are

six Weasley brothers!" Harry looked at his friends frantically, willing them to understand and help him. "I'm going to the girls' dormitory to find Ginny. Ron, you guard this girl. Neville, run and get McGonagall. Seamus, stop that!" he snapped as Seamus reached out to lift the blanket a wee bit for a little peek at the goods beneath it.

Seamus grumbled, "Harry gets all the fun," quietly as he backed away. Harry shot him a filthy look.

"Harry, you can't get into the girls' dormitory," Ron protested. "The stairs turn into a slide, and an alarm goes off – you remember when I tried that last year."

"That's why I'm flying," he replied. "*Accio Firebolt*!" His broom leapt to his hand.

"Nobody can fly in a spiral staircase," Dean protested, "not even you, Harry."

"I'm bloody well going to try. I have to see if Ginny's all right. MOVE, Neville! Ron, don't let anyone untie her – and keep her covered!" Harry cried as he kicked off and flew out the door, his open shirt flapping around him. Dean was right, nobody had ever heard of someone even trying to fly a broom up or down one of the Gryffindor tower spiral staircases, but Harry was going to manage it or die trying. He had to fly with the broom in a steep dive to make the turns, but dives were his speciality, so he managed it, getting through the boys' staircase with no real problem, zooming across the Common Room and making his way up the girls' staircase. The alarm sounded, but the stairs stayed solid. Apparently the alarm was set to go off when a male crossed the threshold whether on foot or on a broom, so the planners must have thought someone might try flying in on a broom someday. He reached the door marked "Fifth Year Girls" and pounded on it, calling "Ginny! Ginny!" Finally, a girl opened the door a tiny bit. He shoved it open further and demanded, "Where's Ginny? Is she here?"

The girl gaped openly at Harry's bare chest before coming to her senses and saying, "Hang on, let me look." She gulped as she tore her eyes away from him, then disappeared and returned a few moments later, looking puzzled. "She's not here, Harry. What's wrong?"

"Someone's Polyjuiced herself to look like Ginny. I need to find her. She could be hurt. Did you check the wardrobes?" he asked anxiously. "I can't stand this. I'll help you look," he added, throwing the door open and flying into the room. "Sorry," he said to the squealing girls who were rushing to cover their pyjamas with anything close at hand. "I promise not to look, but I have to find Ginny."

The girl who'd answered the door explained the situation to the others as they all went through their wardrobes and trunks, and even looked under their beds, stealing peeks at Harry as often as they could. He was searching so frantically, he didn't notice their attention. They also searched Ginny's wardrobe and trunk and under her bed. No Ginny, but her bed did look slept in, and felt warm. She hadn't been gone long.

"Where could she be?" Harry muttered anxiously.

"Maybe the loo?" one of the girls suggested. "When the alarm goes off, we're supposed to stay in whatever room we're in until it's shut off. Enchantments make us stay on the floor we're on when the alarm sounds, so she might be stuck there."

"Thanks!" he cried, turning his broom to the door. Then he stopped. "Oh wait – where is it?"

"Down two flights and turn left, you can't miss it," one of the girls answered.

"Thanks again!" Harry said, and then zoomed out of the door, down the stairs and down the left corridor to the loo. He banged on the door so hard, his fist throbbed from the concussions. "Ginny? Ginny! Are you in there?"

Ginny came to the door, her hair dishevelled from sleep, her eyes groggy, her dressing gown tied loosely over her nightgown, fluffy old slippers on her feet. She looked very young and not at all seductive, and amazingly beautiful and wonderfully seductive at the same time. He gasped at the sight of her. "Ginny! Thank goodness! I was so worried!"

"What's going on? I heard the alarm, and just stayed here. . ." she said, waving one arm sleepily in the general direction of the bathroom behind her. "How did you get up here?"

"On my broom," he answered, nodding at the broom he was hovering on. He reached out to her. "Come on, get up here. We have to go to my room."

"What? Why?" Ginny answered warily, taking a step back from him. "Who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?"

"I'm Harry, honest. Would anyone else be barmy enough to try flying up here?"

She thought for the briefest moment, then a wry grin crossed her face. "If you *flew* up here, you're definitely the real Harry Potter."

Harry's cheeky grin appeared briefly before he went on. "Someone has Polyjuiced herself. . ." he smacked himself in the forehead as realization hit, "oh no, it could be *him*self! *Gross!*"

"What?"

"Someone got in my bed that looked exactly like you – erm, well, I suppose she looks exactly like you," he said with a sudden flush of embarrassment as he remembered ogling the beautiful girl in his bed while trying *very* hard not to look at her. "Just come with me, you'll understand as soon as you see. And McGonagall should be there by now.'

"McGonagall?"

"Please wake up, Ginny, it will be loads easier for you to understand," Harry said with a fond chuckle. "What's the password?"

"Cat in jumper. Why?"

"Just making sure," he said as he pulled her onto the broom in front of him and kissed her soundly.

"Why is your shirt open?" she asked as they broke the kiss.

"Long story. Tell you later," he said grimly. She looked at him in surprise. He rarely sounded that serious unless there was imminent danger or he was flamingly angry.

"What did she do to you?" she asked anxiously, pushing the pyjama top aside, trying to look him over for wounds.

"She didn't hurt me, don't worry," he assured her. "She unbuttoned my shirt. I came to my senses sometime around then, I guess."

"Huh?"

"May I please explain it later?" he said patiently.

"Oh. OK," she agreed. "Wait a minute. How did you know where to look for me?"

"I flew up to your dorm and we searched for you. The girls told me you might be in the loo."

"You went into my room looking like that?" She looked from his face, which looked gaunt and handsome with the vestiges of his rage and fear making his jaw tense and his eyes flame, to his muscular chest. "Oh, my. I'll bet you made quite an impression," she said with a smile.

"Huh?"

"I'll explain it later, Harry," she said, giving him a peck on the nose and settling back into his arms for the flight to his room.

Ginny squealed as they flew down her spiral staircase and up his. "I didn't think anyone could fly these staircases," she said, giggling.

"I didn't see any other way to deal with the situation," he replied, holding her tightly.

The alarm turned off as soon as Harry left the girls' staircase. Hermione had heard his voice but was forced by the tower's enchantments to stay on her own floor until the alarm was turned off. As soon as it quieted, she came pelting down the girls' dorm stairs, across the Common Room and up the stairs to the boys' dormitories. "What's going on?" she called up the stairs to the broom tail she could see moving above her. *Nobody but Harry would try such a feat of flying*, she thought.

"Come and see," Harry called down to her.

When they arrived in Harry's room, four boys, a girl who looked exactly like Ginny and a very upset Professor all stared at Harry. "I trust there's an explanation for all this, Potter?" Professor McGonagall said tersely, pulling her tartan dressing gown more tightly around her. "And do button your shirt. There's already been enough excitement around here this evening."

Harry blushed, helped Ginny off of his broom and stood his broom in the corner, then buttoned his pyjama top as he explained what had happened. He told the professor that he'd feared Ginny was hurt, captive or even dead, since someone was impersonating her, so he'd gone to rescue her. He was shaking now as his adrenalin ebbed away after the long panic of discovering the girl in his bed and then trying to find Ginny. When he finished his story, he

sat on the edge of his bed, pulled Ginny next to him and held on to her as if he'd never let her go, with his face buried in her neck. He breathed in the scent of her, trembling at the thought that he might have lost her forever. She held him quietly, stroking his hair and back to calm him, waiting for him to relax.

When Harry was past the worst of the adrenalin letdown, Ginny looked at the girl on the floor. "What I want to know is," she said quietly, "who is this, and how did she get my hair to do the Polyjuice?"

"I'd like to know that as well," McGonagall said. "She won't speak. We'll just have to wait until the Polyjuice wears off to see who she is."

Harry straightened up as an idea hit him. "I know one way she could've got the hair."

Everyone looked at him, puzzled.

"That woman in The Ladies' Shop – she brushed your hair, Ginny, then put the brush in a basket. It had a few of your hairs in it. I saw them. They caught the light as she put the brush away."

"You think Madam Desiree is trying to hurt you somehow?" Ginny said in disbelief.

"I don't know, but her having your hair in the brush just sticks in my mind. She had Hermione's hair in another brush too," Harry reminded her.

"Whoever this is, it must be a Gryffindor or she couldn't get in," McGonagall said. Then she turned slowly to Neville. "Unless, of course," she said carefully, "someone left a list of passwords lying about where it could be stolen. . .again?"

"I haven't written them down, Professor, honest!" Neville protested.

"Well, we'll see what this girl has to say when she's herself then," McGonagall said, still eyeing Neville suspiciously.

"I'll go search the girls' dormitory, see if any of the girls are missing," Hermione offered. "What do you want me to tell the girls when they ask? They were worried about the alarm, except for those who found out from Harry what was going on."

"Tell them the truth," McGonagall replied tartly. "Someone has taken Polyjuice potion to impersonate Ginny Weasley in order to harm Harry Potter. Harry was smart enough to see through the charade. Maybe knowing he's not so easily fooled will keep others from trying it."

"All right," Hermione said, and left to search the girls' dormitories.

"Mr. Longbottom, would you please go through the boys' dormitories and answer any questions that the other students may have? I imagine there are a lot of confused and nervous students after hearing that alarm and Harry's shouts," McGonagall said.

"Yes, Professor," Neville said, and left to do her bidding.

The sixth year boys' dormitory was quiet for a few moments, and then Dean spoke up. "What I don't understand – well, one of many things I don't understand about this, actually – is how Harry could be hurt by shagging his girlfriend," he said logically. "I mean, I understand that they could get in trouble if they got caught like that, and Ron might not appreciate Harry doing that with his sister, with Ron right here in the next bed. . .but neither of those things would really *hurt* Harry. Maybe this is just one of those fan girls who figured out a way to get to him."

"You could be right, Mr. Thomas," McGonagall said thoughtfully.

Ginny stood up and circled the girl warily. It was eerie to see two identical girls with such different expressions – Ginny absolutely furious, but concentrating seriously, the other girl looking defiant and fearful at the same time. "I've got it," Ginny said triumphantly.

"Got what?" Harry said, flummoxed.

"I never wear lipstick. My lips are too red as they are, so I've never seen any reason for me to wear lipstick. She has a ton of lipstick on. Look at her! I'll bet it has poison or something in it," she said wisely. "Madam Pomfrey or Professor Snape should analyse it."

"I think that's a good idea," McGonagall said.

"Wipe it off her mouth before she takes it herself," Harry warned. "She may be under Imperius. If Voldemort – get over it!" he snapped to his roommates who gasped at the name, "if he set this up, he probably gave her an order to kill herself if she was caught. That would be his way. He would just consider her to be another tool to be discarded when it isn't useful anymore."

McGonagall nodded, and bent to wipe the girl's lipstick off on a handkerchief. The girl fought her action like a wildcat, despite being tied up. Ron pushed the others aside and sat on the girl. "That's my sister's body. If anyone's going to hold her down, it's going to be me," he said grimly as he suited action to words. He seemed to be taking it personally that his sister had been impersonated in order to harm Harry. With his assistance, McGonagall was able to remove all of the girl's lipstick.

"Mr. Thomas, would you please go to Professor Snape's office and ask him to analyse this lipstick, looking for something that could be harmful? Feel free to tell him the entire story."

"Yes, Professor," Dean said, and ran off to do his errand.

Ginny went back to sit next to Harry on the edge of his bed. He held her close, resting his cheek against the top of her head. Ginny leaned her head against his shoulder, her hand idly tracing the muscles of his chest through his pyjama top. "That feels nice," he murmured, thinking about how it felt so good when Ginny did it, but felt so creepy when that other girl had touched him in a similar way.

"To me, too," she agreed. She snuggled against him, enjoying the feeling of his arm around her back, his hand resting on her shoulder, his thumb gently stroking her cheek.

"I was so scared," Harry murmured, a shiver running through him.

"It's OK now," she assured him. "I'm here, I'm not hurt. Thanks for coming to look for me."

"How could I not?" he said simply.

Hermione returned just then. "The only girl missing from any of the dorms is Parvati Patil. Nobody knows where she is.

In a few more minutes, the girl started to change back into herself. Harry breathed a sigh of relief to see it was a girl, then asked, "Parvati? Why did you do this?"

"Do what? Why am I tied up like this? Where am I?" she said, obviously bewildered.

"Hmm," McGonagall said. "Probably Imperius and a Memory Charm on top of the Polyjuice. I'll take her to Professor Dumbledore and we'll try to find out what we can. Has anyone looked around for her clothes? Surely she didn't come from her room without a stitch on."

Everyone searched the room, and Ginny found Parvati's pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers kicked under Harry's bed. "Here they are," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley," Professor McGonagall said. "Boys, if you will give us a few moments of privacy, we'll get Miss Patil dressed and leave you to finish your night's sleep."

"Get me dressed?" Parvati said in shock. "What do you mean?" She finally realized she was wearing only a blanket and someone's dressing gown. "What happened?"

"That's what I'd like to know," McGonagall said imperiously. "Boys. Shoo." The boys left the room reluctantly, glancing over their shoulders at the tableau of the old witch and the two young ones standing over the bound one.

Just as the boys closed the door to wait in the stairway, Dean ran up the stairs. "Why are you lot out here?" he asked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. "You explain," Harry said morosely to Ron, sliding down with his back against the wall to sit with his arms around his legs and his head on his knees. Ron filled Dean in on what had happened since he'd left.

"Did you find out anything?" Neville asked Dean.

"Yeah! Professor Snape said one kiss would've killed Harry in a matter of seconds!" Dean said, excited to be carrying such important news.

"Good thing you didn't kiss her, mate," Ron said, grinning and shoving Harry in the shoulder in a companionable way.

"I came so close," Harry said in a subdued voice. "If she'd acted more like Ginny, I probably would have."

Ron's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "You'd shag my sister with me right there in the next bed?"

Harry gave Ron his disgusted squint. "No, of course not. But I would've kissed her before making her leave if she'd acted like Ginny at all. I wouldn't have pushed her away like I kept doing with this one." He shuddered at the memory.

"What did she do that was different from Ginny?" Seamus asked, openly curious.

"Oh, let's see now. . .everything?" Harry snapped, obviously closing the subject.

When Professor McGonagall, Parvati, Hermione and Ginny emerged from the boys' room, Dean stood up and gave the professor his report. "Poison again? Hmm. Thank you, Mr. Thomas. Potter, I'll send up a house elf with clean sheets and pillowcases and new blankets for you. Don't get back into that bed until it's changed. There may be traces of the poison in the bedding."

"Yes, Professor," Harry agreed.

The professor looked up the boys' staircase and across at the girls'. Curious faces peeped around the bend in the stairs in both cases. "Miss Granger, would you please go make certain the girls settle down and get back to sleep? Mr. Weasley, would you do the same for the boys?" They nodded and ran off to send the other students back to bed.

Harry watched McGonagall and Parvati walk through the portrait hole as the other students went into their rooms and back to bed. Ginny hesitated, then came back up to talk to him.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't go back to bed until you have fresh bedding."

"Oh. I'll just sit in the Common Room until then, I guess," he said with a shrug.

"Then I'll sit up with you," she offered.

"You don't have to do that," he said, smiling down at her.

"I want to."

"OK. Let me get my dressing gown and slippers. It'll be cold down there now that the fire's gone out."

A few moments later, they were snuggling together on the couch. Ginny had magically rekindled the fire to take the chill off the room. Harry wrapped his arms around her, enjoying the way her small body fit into his side just so. "Did you know you're perfect?" he said, smiling tenderly at her.

"Well, what else would I be?" she teased. "But of course, I like to hear my perfections explained. Do go on."

"You fit so perfectly under my arm when we're sitting together, as if you were made to fit there. And when we're walking together, your shoulders are at the perfect arm-rest height for me. You're just the right size."

"Oh, is that the only way I'm perfect?" she asked tartly, a saucy grin on her face.

"Well, now that you mention it, you do have one imperfection, but it's a perfect imperfection," he teased, tickling her neck.

The tickling made her giggle. "I have an imperfection? Where?" she demanded, looking up and down her woollen dressing gown as if she could find it there.

"You have this absolutely delicious heart-shaped mark . . ." Harry began.

"I do?"

"Either you or Parvati does – one of you had it. It showed on her."

"That witch!" Ginny snapped indignantly.

"It's in a place you might not have noticed," he said, his eyes dancing. "One of these days, I just may have to see if you're the one who has it. It's in serious need of at least one kiss. I could tell just by looking at it."

"You big tease," she said, laughing.

"It will be a dangerous expedition, not one to be taken lightly, but in the name of science, it should be determined if that mark is yours or hers."

Ginny's eyes were wide. Despite his silly words, Harry was acting very serious for some reason. "Where is it?"

"Someplace you won't let me look for a long, long time, I suspect," he teased, grinning that he'd fooled her for a moment.

"Where?" she asked again.

"On the back of your absolutely gorgeous bum, my sweet girl," he said with a delighted smile. "I will cherish the memory until I'm able to find out for myself if it's yours or not."

"I'm going to find out which of us has it. I don't want you cherishing any memories of Parvati!" Ginny said, pretending to be incensed. She grabbed a small pillow and tried to hit Harry with it, a move he ducked expertly, having dodged much more dangerous objects in Quidditch for several years now. He grabbed her hands and pulled them above her head, adequately stopping any potential carnage with pillows, and then pushed her back on the couch, leaning over her.

"Do you know how absolutely beautiful you are?" he said quietly, and then kissed her softly, the kiss quickly growing more serious. He released her hands and gently cupped her head with one hand, his long fingers laced through her hair, leaning on his other arm to keep his

weight off of her. She wrapped her arms around him and moaned, pulling him closer to her. Harry gave up on propriety and lay on top of her, holding her as closely as he could but bracing himself on his elbows to avoid putting his full weight on her, tracing the line of her jaw and the cords of her neck with kisses and soft nibbles. His hand strayed, apparently of its own accord, leaving her hair and running gently down her neck, then her shoulder, then tracing her collarbone briefly. It was heading for her chest with flawless accuracy when, with a sudden groan, he pulled away.

"What?" Ginny said, her face confused.

"Nothing." He sat shaking, his breath coming in gasps.

"What's wrong? Is it your scar?" she asked anxiously.

"No. It's you."

"Me?" she said, aghast. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Nope."

"Then what?"

Harry sat with his elbows on his knees, his head bowed, demanding his body to stop fighting his will. When he thought he'd mastered himself sufficiently, he turned back to Ginny, his gentle touch soothing the worried expression off her face. "We're not ready for where that was going," he said finally.

"Is that what happened? Oh, Harry," she said, moving next to him and wriggling inside his arms, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Don't you know that I've been ready for ages?"

"You have?" He was genuinely shocked.

"Yes," she said, looking up at him with eyes full of love. "Whenever you're ready, I'm ready."

"You are ?" he asked in disbelief.

"Completely. I've been waiting for you forever."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her closely. "I'll remember that," he murmured tenderly as he kissed the top of her head. They watched the embers of the fire until Dobby arrived with fresh bedding for Harry.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said excitedly. "Dobby is so sorry to hear someone tried to poison you again! Dobby will burn that bedding, sir, every stitch, so there's no chance someone will get sick from it. Dobby will go change your bed right now, don't you worry, Harry Potter, sir!" With that, he hurried up the stairs.

Harry and Ginny smiled at each other, touched and somewhat amused by Dobby's earnest efforts to take good care of Harry. "I guess our late date is nearly over," Harry murmured.

"Yeah. I've enjoyed it in spite of everything," Ginny agreed, snuggling against him again. They sat quietly for a while, only moving when Dobby announced Harry's bed was ready. Harry thanked Dobby sincerely and stood up, pulling Ginny up with him. They shared a chaste but reluctant kiss goodnight and went to their separate rooms.

Chapter 22 – Surprises and Shocks

Harry was leaving Charms class with Ron and Hermione when the pain hit, its severity making him fall to his knees. He groaned and leaned his scar against the stone wall.

"Harry! Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione cried.

"Do you need the nurse?" Ron asked.

Harry merely gasped, the waves of pain making him unable to speak. Finally he whispered, "No."

"No nurse?" Ron said quietly. He looked at his friend a moment longer, then stood and sent an *Adfero* to Dumbledore and Lupin. "Help will be here soon, mate," he assured Harry, helping him sit back against the wall.

The milling students stared as Harry rolled on his side and bent double, holding his head and groaning in pain. "What's wrong with him?" "Is he all right?" "Should we get someone for him?" they asked, worried frowns on their faces.

A band of Slytherins stalked by, Malfoy in their midst. "I see old Scarhead is having another headache," Malfoy sneered. "Good. He deserves it."

Ron looked at the blond boy, anger reddening his face. "Get stuffed, Malfoy," he snapped, then turned his attention back to Harry.

The crowd parted as Dumbledore came striding down the hall, followed soon thereafter by Lupin. "What happened?" Dumbledore asked.

"He groaned and then just collapsed," Hermione said, her face creased in worry.

"Let's get him somewhere we can make him comfortable," Dumbledore said calmly.

Remus bent down next to Harry and murmured in his ear. "Is it your scar?" Harry nodded weakly. "Would you like me to carry you, or can you walk?"

Harry raised his head just enough to see his godfather. "Help. . . me up," he murmured, lifting one arm. Remus put his hand under Harry's arm and helped him as the boy got unsteadily to his feet. Then Remus and Ron supported Harry as they walked to an empty classroom nearby. When they sat him at a desk, he folded his arms on the desk top, and rested his head on his crossed wrists. Hermione ran off to bring back some water and a cloth to wash the sweat off his face.

"Can you tell me about it, Harry?" Dumbledore said, his voice warm and kind.

"Scar. Worst it's been in ages," Harry mumbled.

"Did you have a vision as well?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry lifted his head and smiled wanly at Hermione, who was trying to put a cool, damp cloth on his forehead. "Thanks. Feels good," he muttered, taking the cloth and holding it against his scar. After a moment, he glanced at Dumbledore. "Yes. I saw Voldemort. He was torturing someone. The screams. . . ." He shuddered at the memory. "It was a woman. He was yelling at her, and then he cursed her, and while she was still going through the curse, he started beating her with something – I don't know a walking stick, a broom or something, not a wand or his hand. He was in a horrible rage."

"Could you see who it was, or hear what he said?"

Harry sat quietly for a while, his eyes closed, both hands pressing the cloth against his scar, still in obvious pain. Finally, he answered. "He said, 'Not one of your schemes has worked. Tell me why I shouldn't just kill you now.'"

"What did the woman say?"

"She said she had other plans, and they could be set into motion immediately. She has something as a backup in case the others don't work. She didn't say what they were."

"Did you recognize anyone, other than Voldemort?" said Dumbledore.

Harry sat up straighter, a look of concentration on his face. Then his face became angry.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said in concern. "Are you all right? What is it?"

Harry looked at the gathering of loving, worried faces around him. "It was Bellatrix Lestrange, I'm pretty certain of it. The one who was being tortured," he said, his face stony.

Remus joined the conversation. "Did you hear anything else about the plan? Who's involved, where it's happening, anything?"

"No. He did Cruciatus after Cruciatus on her between sessions of talking to her – I managed to break the connection while he was torturing her. That's the first time I haven't witnessed an entire scene, I think."

"How did you break the connection?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Better to ask why," Harry replied, a shadow of his cocky grin passing across his face. "Voldemort seemed to become aware he was being watched, just for a moment. He looked around the room, but that's when I pulled back out of the vision. I haven't been able to do that before. Dunno how I managed it this time."

"Have you been doing your Occlumency?" said Dumbledore.

"Yes. But as we were walking down the hall, my mind was wandering kind of aimlessly, the way it does when you get ready to go to sleep, I suppose. We'd just finished a big exam and I thought I did pretty well in it, so I was just. . .relaxed, I suppose. I guess he tortured her when I was too relaxed, so I caught the edges of his anger and saw what he was doing."

"How do you feel now, lad?" Remus asked, his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"I still feel sick." He held the cloth out to Hermione mutely, and she dipped it in the bowl of cool water and wrung it out, then handed it back to him. He held it against his scar and closed his eyes again.

"You do look a bit green around the edges, mate," Ron said in concern. "Shall I take you to the hospital wing?"

"NO!" Harry snapped, his eyes instantly open, his posture rigid. "I do not want to spend one more second in hospital."

"OK, OK, calm down!" Ron said, his hands held in front of him in surrender. "I was just trying to help."

Harry's posture softened again. "I know. Sorry."

"'S'OK," Ron said with a crooked grin. "I'm used to you by now." Everyone was quiet for a while, unable to do more than just watch Harry fight his way through the pain. After several more minutes passed, he finally seemed to relax a little.

"Feeling better?" Remus asked, bending down to look the boy in the eye. "You're looking more Gryffindor than Slytherin now," he teased, "at least you're not as green."

Harry smiled. "That's a huge improvement then," he said. He straightened up and moved his body around experimentally. "I do feel a bit better."

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "you should probably go to bed and rest a while."

"I hate to miss any more classes," Harry said. "I'll be fine."

"We'll look after him," Hermione offered. "If he looks ill, we'll take him to Madam Pomfrey."

"All right then. If you feel up to it, go on to class, Harry. But do take care of yourself, all right? And if you remember anything else. . ."

"I'll tell you straight away," Harry replied.

"Good lad. Off you go, then," Dumbledore said, patting Harry on the shoulder as the boy stood up.

Harry wobbled a bit when he first started walking, but with Ron's strong hand under his arm, his balance improved. By the time they left the classroom and got to the corridor, Harry was moving under his own power again, if a bit slowly.

"You don't often have those during the day, do you?" Hermione asked quietly as they neared their next class.

"No. He was being particularly vicious this time. He was in an absolute rage. He seemed to think whatever she was doing should have worked, and it didn't, and it's not the first time she's failed him."

"That's more than you told Dumbledore."

"It just now came to me. The headache is fading, finally, and I can remember more bits of the vision. There's nothing else of great importance, though," he said with a shrug and followed Ron into the classroom and up to their seats. "I'll tell Dumbledore about it later."

"Harry, can you help me with this?" Ron asked plaintively. "I still can't change anything on my hand and it's been ages!"

"What are you trying to do?" Harry asked, sitting down in the squashy chair next to Ron's in the deserted Common Room late one evening.

"I'm still trying to turn my hand into a paw."

"What kind of paw?"

"A dog's paw."

"What kind of dog?" Harry asked reasonably.

"Oh. Um. . .I dunno."

"You have to have it completely worked out first, Ron. Breed, colour, all that," Harry explained patiently. "I thought you'd done all that research already."

"I did, but I keep changing my mind about what to do," Ron said miserably. "I just get so frustrated."

"What kind of dogs are you familiar with? Pick something you've seen and understand well."

Ron thought a moment. "Well. . .our neighbour used to have a big sable collie. You know, the ones with the long hair, the big thick ruff around their necks, long pointed noses? I think it's really called a 'rough collie' because of its long hair."

"Did you like the dog?"

"Yeah, he was brilliant. He herded the man's sheep sometimes, but mostly he was a babysitter kind of dog, protecting the children and so on. He never strayed from his master's side unless he was sent to do something. He was amazing."

"That sounds like a good dog, Ron. Why don't you try to be a collie?"

"OK." Ron stared hard at his left hand. Nothing happened. He tapped it with his wand. Still nothing.

"Suppose I give you a head start?" Harry suggested. "Maybe that will help."

"What do you mean?"

"Hold still," Harry said, pulling out his wand. "There. How's that feel?" Ron now had a beautiful, pristine white collie's paw where his left hand had been.

"AHHHH!" Ron shrieked.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked in concern. "Does it hurt?"

"Erm. . . no," Ron said, beet red with embarrassment. "It just scared me." He examined his paw in every direction. "Wow, it doesn't hurt a bit! It just feels like my fingers are short, that's all." He looked at it a while longer, tried stretching his toes, then curling them and making the claws stick out. He gingerly stroked the silky fur on the back of his paw. A big grin split his face. "Wicked," he said in delight.

"OK, now that you know how it feels, turn it back into your own hand," Harry suggested.

Ron winced at the idea. "By myself?"

"Yes, Ron, by yourself. You can do it!" Harry encouraged.

Ron tried several times, but his heart wasn't in it. "I can't."

"Fine. Enjoy living with a dog's paw then," Harry said with a chuckle and went up the stairs to their room, leaving a protesting Ron behind him.

In the middle of the night, Harry was rudely awakened when the curtains around his bed whipped open and a heavy weight thumped down on his bed. "I did it! I did it, Harry, look!" Ron cried in delight. "Look!" He held up his own long-fingered, freckled hand with its familiar sprinkling of ginger hairs on the knuckles. "I did it!"

"I knew you could," Harry said with a smile, then rolled over to go back to sleep.

"No, wait! How do I make it a dog's paw again?" Ron asked eagerly, grabbing Harry by the shoulder and flipping him onto his back again.

"Do just what you did to make it your hand, only think about it being a paw," Harry mumbled, trying to get back to the nice dream he'd been having.

Ron didn't move, but sat there concentrating. "Nothing. It's not working. What am I doing wrong?"

"Keeping me awake," Harry grumbled.

"Harry, please! I almost had it!"

Reluctantly, Harry sat up, plumped his pillows behind him, and reached for his glasses. "Pull the curtains closed," he told Ron with a sigh. Harry picked up his wand and said "*Lumos*." The wand light brightened the area inside his bed curtains so the boys could see what they were doing. "All right. Start very *very* small. Try to turn your fingernails into collie's claws. Just that."

Ron twisted his face into knots, he was concentrating so hard, but nothing happened.

"You're trying too hard. Relax," Harry advised.

"How can I concentrate and relax at the same time?"

"The same way you fly – you fly without thinking about *how* you fly, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, but flying's natural."

"No, it isn't," Harry replied. "At some point, maybe when you were little, you had to learn how."

"You were a natural," Ron protested.

"I still had to learn how to manage the broom, even though flying came easily to me. The Animagus transformation seems to come easily to me, too, but I still had to learn how to focus clearly, to let the magic flow like. . .," Harry paused, searching for the right imagery, "like water. If you try as hard as you are right now, you'll block the magic."

"Really? I never heard that."

"That's because I just made it up. That flowing feeling works for me, anyway. Try relaxing. Take a deep breath and hold it." He watched while Ron took a huge breath and held it, his eyes bugging out in question at Harry. "Now blow it out hard." Ron blew out. "Do you feel more relaxed?"

"Yeah, a bit," Ron replied, his face amazed.

"Do it again," Harry advised.

Ron complied.

"Now try to turn your hand into a paw, or your fingernails into claws – whatever feels like it might be easiest."

Ron started to screw up his face in concentration again.

Harry reached out and touched him on the arm. "No, no, no. You're trying too hard again. Tell you what. Try turning some other part of yourself into part of a collie. How about your hair? It's almost the colour of a sable collie. Or try giving yourself a collie's ruff. That's just like growing a beard, in a way. You can do that, can't you?"

"Not on command, the way you can," Ron said with a grin. His red-gold beard was still so light, he rarely had to shave, and even when he let it grow, it barely showed on his face. It was a source of many jokes between them that Harry could look like a Greek sailor in minutes if he didn't control his beard's growth, while Ron could have a full beard and nobody would notice the difference.

"Give it a go, then," Harry encouraged. "Deep breath, blow it out, that's it. Do it again. Now think of the collie's ruff." He watched as Ron tried to do the transformation. Nothing happened.

"Anything?" Ron asked hopefully, leaning his head forward and moving his shaggy red hair so Harry could inspect his neck.

"I think maybe a little back there," Harry lied encouragingly.

"Really?" Ron felt around on his neck hopefully.

"Maybe. Have another go."

After eleven tries, Ron was getting frustrated again, but with the next try, suddenly there was a collie's ruff around his neck. "Look, I did it! I did it!" he shouted with glee, bouncing on Harry's bed.

"Yes, you did!" Harry laughed, applauding his friend's achievement.

"Whassup?" Seamus asked sleepily.

"Ron's managed a collie's ruff," Harry announced to the other boys whom Ron's shout had also awakened. Harry threw his bed curtains open wide so they could see. "Go on, then. Show them!" He laughed as Ron strutted proudly around the room, blowing heartily at the long white hair that kept trying to get in his mouth or tickle his nose.

"Wow!" "Brilliant, Ron!" "How'd you do that?" the other boys asked.

"Harry coached me a bit," Ron conceded.

"Don't let him fool you. He did that himself," Harry said proudly. "I just told him to relax and stop concentrating so hard on changing his hand. Maybe you lot should do the same. Try to change some other part and don't try so hard. Focusing the magic comes from pure concentration. Concentrating the way we normally do brings out our fears and worries and makes us wonder if we can do it, and blocks the magic."

"How do you know that?" Dean asked.

"I dunno. It's something I made up, but it's based on my experience. If I try too hard, I can't do what I'm trying to do. If I relax properly and then focus, the magic comes together better," he said with a shrug. "It's like having a soft focus on your eyes when you're flying rather than flying with tunnel vision."

"You've talked about that in Quidditch practice," Seamus piped up.

"Yeah. With soft focus, you have wider peripheral vision than you do if you concentrate on what's in front of you too hard. With soft focus, you ride your broom by feel, by instinct, rather than thinking about it. It's the same with magic, I think. You can concentrate on what's in front of you so hard that you can't get it done, but if you use soft focus, you can concentrate more. . .purely, maybe, and the magic becomes instinctive. I dunno. Works for me, anyway."

He looked up at Ron, who was preening in front of the mirror. "Are you going to sleep in that, or get rid of it before you go to bed?"

"I dunno. I'd like to run over and show Hermione. . ."

"It's the middle of the night, Ron. She's asleep," Harry reminded him.

"Oh. Right," Ron answered distractedly. "D'you suppose I can do this again?" he said nervously.

"Get rid of it and see," Harry suggested.

Ron sighed. "I suppose you're right," he said, then stared at his ruff and focused his eyes a moment. The ruff disappeared. "I did it! I did it!"

"Yay! Now put it back!" Harry encouraged.

"You're a slave driver, you are," Ron said, laughing.

"If you don't do it now, you'll worry all night about being able to do it again. Go on, then," Harry said, stifling a yawn.

Ron got that look of focus again and the ruff reappeared. "Look! There it is!"

"That's great, Ron, really! Now get rid of it and go to sleep. You can challenge Nearly Headless Nick to a ruff comparison tomorrow if you want," Harry laughed, taking off his glasses, laying his pillows flat and getting ready to pull his curtains round his bed.

"Oh, all right," Ron agreed reluctantly. After a moment, the ruff disappeared, and Ron moved to his bed, bouncing on the bed for a while before he could settle down to sleep. "Harry?" he said quietly after the other boys had relaxed again.

"Mmm?" Harry replied sleepily.

"Thanks, mate. I mean it."

"That's OK. Promise me your collie won't chase my cat, OK?" Harry yawned hugely.

"You've got it!" Ron said, chuckling as he lay down to sleep.

"You did WHAT!" Hermione said in amazed disbelief over breakfast the next morning.

"Yup. Watch!" Ron said proudly, and then produced his collie's ruff.

"Oy, Weasley!" Seamus called teasingly. "You're getting dog hair in the porridge!" Everyone laughed.

"Ron, that's amazing!" Hermione said, her face awestruck. "However did you manage it?"

"Harry coached me a bit," he said modestly, "and then I finally got the hang of it."

"Harry," Hermione said, turning an earnest face to him, "you've coached us on this loads of times. What did you do differently this time?"

"I dunno. I talked about soft focus, as I do with the Quidditch team in practice, and suggested he stopped trying to do his paw and try some other part. I think that was about it," Harry said with a shrug. "I guess Ron was just ready to do it."

"I've BEEN ready to do it and still can't!" she cried in frustration. "Oh, Harry, please, please will you work with me on this some more? Please?"

Harry laughed, leaning away from her intent face. "OK, OK, of course I'll help you! Finish your breakfast and we can talk about it."

"Tell me now!" she insisted, taking another dainty bite of her eggs.

"Tell me too," Ginny said, leaning across Harry to grab the platter of bacon.

"I'd be happy to pass that to you, you know," he said, laughing as he lifted the platter high above her head, out of her reach. "Would you like some bacon, m'lady?"

She sat back and glared at him, then dissolved into laughter, then put her hands together as if she were begging. "Oh, please, Mr. Potter sir, would you be ever so kind as to pass me the platter of bacon, good sir?" she asked, fluttering her eyelashes and flirting outrageously.

"Here you go, dear lady," he said, sketching a small bow and briskly laying the platter across his forearm as if he were a waiter serving her.

"You two," Hermione giggled. "You're so silly."

"We live for silliness, don't we, Gin?" Harry said, smiling down at her.

"Yes. And since Fred and George aren't here to supply it, we have to make do ourselves." Ginny preened elegantly, doing her best to act like a posh lady, then rested her head on Harry's shoulder and made silly faces at him. He tweaked her nose gently, giving her a warm smile as he did so, and then pushed his plate away.

"All right, Hermione, you want to talk about this transformation," Harry began. Suddenly he was surrounded by Gryffindors, all listening raptly. "Whoa, what's up?"

"We heard about Ron's breakthrough," Katie Bell said. "We want to learn how, too."

"I don't know if it will work for everyone," Harry protested. "I'll tell you what I told him, but no guarantees, OK?"

There was general agreement in the group.

"Right. I'll explain it to Hermione, and you lot just follow along as best you can then, OK?" He glanced around, seeing nods everywhere. "Hermione, what kind of animal did you choose?"

"A cat."

"Any particular kind or colour of cat?"

"A ginger cat like Crookshanks," she answered promptly.

"I hope yours will have a prettier face," Ron muttered darkly.

"I heard that!" she snapped. "Crookshanks is gorgeous!"

"If you say so," Ron replied with a dramatic sigh.

"Pay attention, OK? We all have to get to class soon, so we don't have much time," Harry reminded them. "Right. It's good that you've picked a particular kind and colour of animal to change into. I think that kind of detail helps a lot. What have you been doing to try to transform?"

"I've followed the steps we got from Professor McGonagall and the book. I've been working on my left hand. I can make a paw just fine, I just can't get beyond it."

"All right, then. Think of some other part of the cat, and reproduce that. Try a back foot, perhaps, or the tail," Harry suggested. "Have a go, then."

"With everyone watching?" she said nervously.

"You can do it. Focus on my voice, and on the transformation you have in mind," Harry replied. He explained his idea about "soft focus" and about relaxed concentration, talking her through it step by step as he had done with Ron. Hermione tried her best, but nothing happened. "Maybe the crowd is putting you off," Harry said reassuringly. "You'll get it. Ron didn't get it his first try either, nor did I."

"Oh, I can't believe I can't do this!" she fussed.

"Maybe your worrying about it is blocking your magic. Try to feel your magic flowing like water. It should. . .I dunno. . .sing in your veins when it's truly focused and at its most powerful. At least, that's how it feels for me."

Hermione looked at Harry, crushed. She knew about his power being magnified by The Refiner's Fire, even if most of the rest of the world did not. She had never felt her magic "flowing like water" or "singing" in her veins. She didn't think she ever would. Tears filled her eyes at the thought.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, surprised to see her eyes full of tears.

"I. . .I've never felt that, not like you said," Hermione replied uncertainly. "Could it be because I'm Muggle-born?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. He looked around at the rest of the gathered Gryffindors. "Do any of you know what I'm talking about? Do you feel magic that way?" They all shook their heads.

"I've never thought about it that way, Harry," Neville said earnestly. "I'll pay attention to how it feels when I'm doing spells and see what it feels like. Now you have me interested. Maybe I could improve my spell work if I felt the magic that way." Many heads around them nodded in agreement.

"Well, it works for me. Maybe magic feels different for each wizard or witch, I don't know. Once you've all had some time to think about it and see how it feels to you, let me know, all right? Now I'm interested too," he said with a smile. He looked at his watch. "We'd better go or we'll all be late for class." The other Gryffindors called cheery "thank yous" to him and left, grabbing books, bags and cloaks as they headed for the doors.

Harry turned back to Hermione. "Don't let it get you down. Try a different animal, perhaps. Maybe that will be easier for you."

"But I can already do a cat's paw," she protested.

"That doesn't mean some other kind of animal might not be easier for you," Harry said reasonably. "Viktor Krum turned his head into a shark's head for the Second Task, but I doubt his Animagus form is a shark, if he can do the Animagus transformation."

"He can't. I asked him," Hermione said.

"Are you still writing to him?" Ron asked, shocked.

"Yes," she replied snippily, gathering her things to leave for class.

"Why?" Ron asked, obviously hurt.

"He's a friend, Ron. Why can't you understand that?" she snapped. Suddenly, it seemed as if a dam burst. "If you can't grow up, then just leave me alone!" she cried, and then stormed off to class ahead of the boys.

"What's up with her?" Ron asked Harry, his face hurt and bewildered.

"I don't think she's used to being frustrated about school work," Harry said with a shrug. "And you're still jealous of Viktor. You know that annoys her."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Dunno. Ginny's still friends with all the boys she went out with before, but I don't feel jealous of them when she talks to them," Harry said mildly.

"It doesn't bother you at all that she probably snogged them? That she may still have feelings for them?" Ron was aghast.

A warm smile suffused Harry's face. "It doesn't bother me. I know how she feels about me." Just then, Ginny came back from the doors where she'd been talking to her classmates and wriggled under Harry's arm. Harry acted as if he weren't going to let her in his arms, but she, of course, was having none of that. It was a regular game for them.

"Did I just hear my name mentioned?" she asked brightly.

"Yeah. I was just saying how pretty you look this morning," Harry said, leaning down to kiss her on the nose.

"That's not what you were saying. That I would've heard!" she said with a giggle.

"He was saying he's not jealous when you talk to your old boyfriends," Ron said glumly, "because he knows how you feel about him."

Ginny hugged Harry tightly, a delighted smile on her face. "Do you, now?" she teased.

"Yeah, I think I've got the gist of it," he said with his crooked grin.

"Ron, why does that bother you?" Ginny asked her brother. "You look terrible. And why were you two talking about that anyway?"

"Hermione said she's still writing to Viktor," Ron grumbled.

"Oh. And that upsets you?" Ginny asked, still a bit confused.

"Yeah. And I asked Harry if it would concern him, and he said no, and the rest of the conversation you heard, I think," Ron snapped.

"C'mon, we need to go to class," Harry said, picking up his bag and wrapping his other arm around Ginny. Ginny grabbed Ron's free arm and dragged him along.

"Come on, big brother. You'll be fine. She's just in a snit for some reason. Don't let it worry you," Ginny said comfortingly.

"But Ginny – she told me to grow up or leave her alone," he protested, his hurt feelings plainly showing.

"Oh, Ron, I'm sorry," she said sympathetically. "I don't know what's got into her. Shall I talk to her?"

"No. Thanks anyway. She said to leave her alone, so I'll just do what she wants and leave her alone until she's ready to talk to me again," he said miserably.

Hermione didn't speak to Ron for the rest of that day, or for several days thereafter. Harry finally decided enough was enough and went to talk to her. He found her alone in an unused classroom late one afternoon, thanks to the Marauder's Map.

"Hey," he said with a smile when he entered the room. "What are you doing in here?"

"Trying to be alone," she growled.

"I'm worried about you, Hermione. I came looking for you, to see if there's anything I can do to help."

"Nobody can help," she said, sniffling.

"Are you crying?" he said, aghast.

"Sometimes."

"What's wrong?"

"What isn't wrong? My life is so screwed up." She paced back and forth, back and forth, walking forcefully, muttering under her breath, angrily waving her wand at times, sparks flying here and there as she did so, wiping tears away at other times.

"How is your life screwed up? You're top of the class, you're beautiful, your boyfriend loves you. . ."

"Some boyfriend. I notice *he* didn't come looking for me."

"I'm the one with the map. And you told him to leave you alone, remember? He's doing what you asked, and it's killing him," Harry chided her gently. "What's up with you and Ron, anyway?"

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked haughtily.

"Why are you not speaking to him? He's really hurt," Harry said, trying to suss out her mood.

"He's such a child sometimes," she grumbled.

"Do you mean because he's jealous of your writing Viktor?"

"That and loads of other things," she retorted.

Harry stood looking at his best friend for a while in silence. Then he said, very carefully, "Have your feelings changed toward him?"

Her head snapped up and she stared at him. Her expression was similar to that of a deer caught in headlights, completely startled and frozen in time. She gulped. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't you care about him anymore?"

"Of course I care about him," she snapped.

"You've got a funny way of showing it," Harry commented mildly.

"Fat lot you know."

"Actually, I am learning a lot about relationships," he mused. "One of the things that seem to be pretty important is communication. If you have complaints or some kind of problem involving Ron, it's not fair to make him try to guess what it is and how to fix it."

Hermione burst into tears. Harry wasn't sure what to do. Crying girls always threw him. She was sobbing, her shoulders shaking, sounding as if her heart would break. Finally, he could bear it no longer and pulled her into his arms. "What's wrong, Hermione? Can I help?"

She shook her head, burying her face in his shoulder. "There's nothing anyone can do," she wailed.

"What is it?" He was getting scared now. This was not the Hermione he'd known and been best friends with for the last several years.

"I. . .I . . .I can't."

"Is. . .is there someone else?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded mutely.

"Do you love him?"

"More than he'll ever know," she said, crying harder.

"Does he love you?"

"Yes, but not that way," she sobbed. "H-h-h-he has someone else he cares for."

"I'm sorry," he said, not knowing what else to say. He stroked her back and her hair, hoping that would comfort her. When it didn't seem to be helping, he just held her, knowing she'd have to stop crying sometime. After a while, her tears abated and she just rested in his arms.

"You feel so good, Harry," she murmured, wrapping her arms around him.

"I'll bet you say that to all your best friends," he teased, tucking her head comfortably under his chin.

She pulled back and looked up at him seriously. "Only you." She sniffled, then buried her face in his shoulder again. "Thank you for this," she murmured.

"Any time."

More time passed and they just held each other. Hermione finally spoke. "Harry?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"Would you. . .would you do me a favour?"

"Of course! Anything. You know that," he said, pushing her away enough that he could see her face, gently wiping the tears from her cheeks. "What is it?"

"I. . .I need to know something."

"What?"

"Um. . .would. . .would you. . .kiss me?"

Harry was shocked. "What? Why?"

"I need to know what it feels like – I can't explain it. Oh never mind, it's not fair to ask you to do that," she said, waving her hand dismissively and pulling out of his arms.

"Wait – I did promise," he said. Harry Potter always kept his word, a trait that had landed him in trouble more than once. "This would be just between us, right?"

"Oh, absolutely!" she replied, hope lighting her eyes.

"Just a kiss?"

"Not a peck. A real, serious kiss – like you give Ginny," she said.

"Are you wondering if Ron's a good kisser or not?" Harry was very confused.

"No, not exactly. I . . .I just need to know something, and this is only way I can think of to do it." She seemed very nervous for some reason. "Of course, if you don't find me appealing and don't want to. . ."

"That's not the problem. You know I think you're very pretty, right? I've told you often enough," he said, studying her face to see if she was serious. He'd never seen her more serious about something in his life. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. And I won't tell Ginny or anyone else."

"Promise?"

"Best friends' promise," she assured him.

"And you don't have on any weird lipstick or anything that can make me sick? You're not under Imperius?" He looked at her eyes, but they were Hermione's bright, intelligent eyes, not the glazed look of someone under the Imperius curse. Something was flickering behind those eyes, but he thought it was probably just nervousness and the fragile emotional state she'd been in for days now.

She shook her head. "And I know you want a password, something only you and I know. Let's see. You and I took Norbert to the Astronomy Tower for Charlie Weasley to take to Rumania that time. And we used the Time-Turner to rescue Sirius and Buckbeak. What else?" she said, trying to think.

"The Norbert thing was enough. You, Ron, Hagrid and I are the only ones who know about that, other than Charlie and his friends, and I doubt they'd tell anyone here about that," he replied. He rubbed his thumb across her lips, which came up dry. No lipstick. She seemed to be his own best friend, Hermione, who, for some inexplicable reason wanted him to kiss her. OK, well, he had promised, and he did his best to keep his promises. "All right, then." He cupped her face in his hand and leaned down to kiss her. The kiss was soft and gentle, and he

started to pull back after it, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for more.

"I said a real kiss," she insisted.

"OK," he chuckled, and wrapped his arms more tightly around her. He kissed her softly again, one, two, three times, and then felt her tongue brush his lips. "*She wasn't kidding – she wants some serious snogging*," he thought as he opened his mouth and complied.

After a moment, she pulled back and waved her wand at the door, saying "*Colloportus.*" She'd locked them in, so nobody could interrupt them.

Harry raised his eyebrows at her in question. She just looked at him oddly. Her eyes were strangely focused, something almost. . .wavering. . .concentrated. . .something. . . behind them. He couldn't work it out. He couldn't understand her today. This was a very peculiar situation, but she really was Hermione, he was certain of it. He just wished he knew what she was trying to sort out by kissing him. Whatever. He, like any other healthy sixteen-year-old boy, was always interested in having a good time, so he thought he could enjoy kissing her as much as she wanted, and no harm could come of it. *She's my best friend, after all, and she asked me to do her this favour*, he thought, telling himself he was doing the right thing. *She knows how I feel about Ginny, and she'll keep this incident a secret, so it's OK – isn't it? What's a little snog among friends, anyway? No harm in that. Is there?* But then she started moulding her body to his, pressing against him, rubbing against him, moaning into his mouth. She ran her fingers through his hair, digging her nails into his scalp before grabbing his hair roughly and pulling him even closer, inspecting every one of his back teeth quite thoroughly with her tongue. Her hands slid down his back as if trying to feel the connections of each and every muscle, then swiftly moved under his sweater and glided up his back.

Harry was enjoying the feeling of her hands on his skin, but he thought she was going too far, so he started gently pulling away from her, not wanting to hurt her feelings. Suddenly, she pressed her nails into him, scratching him to the point of pain as she pushed him off-balance, making him fall onto the teacher's desk. Climbing on top of him, Hermione tore at his sweater, shoving it up, running her hands roughly over the skin of his chest and belly. By this time, Harry was trying to get away from her without hurting her and finally managed to stand up, but she followed him, doing her best to kiss his chest. She was moving very quickly, so much so that Harry was still working through his initial shock at her attack when she suddenly ran her hands over his buttocks and squeezed them hard, then started trying to touch him in places nobody but him had touched since he'd been in nappies. At this point, he pushed her away roughly, staring at her in shock. "Hermione, what are you *doing*?"

She was panting. "I had to see. I had to know," she said. Her eyes were wild, her face lustful. She seemed to be gathering herself up to jump on him again.

"Had to see or know *what*?" He was so upset, his voice cracked. He pushed his sweater back into place, rubbed at the sore spots on his back, scalp and buttocks where she'd dug her nails in, and backed away from her quickly.

"If I really felt the way I thought I did," she replied, still looking at him in that bizarre way.

He hesitated a long moment before asking his next question, standing away from her, his head tilted, studying that face he thought he knew so well. "And. . .and what way is that?" he said, dreading the answer.

Her face softened and she looked like the Hermione he knew again. "I love you, Harry," she said simply, her heart in her eyes.

Chapter 23 – Betrayal

"You *what!*" Harry gasped after a moment. "No. No way. You're my best friend. You're my best mate's girlfriend. You can't love me, not like that."

Hermione nodded, her eyes sparkling with tears again. "Yes. Exactly like that."

"But . . .Ginny. . .Ron. . . ." He stormed away from her, at a complete loss for words. He ran his fingers anxiously through his hair, undoing the mess she'd created but making one of his own.

"Yes, I know. Everyone we care about will be crushed. I've been fighting this for so long, and then I just couldn't take it anymore." She stepped toward him, reaching her hand timidly toward his back. When she touched his shoulder, he whirled around, knocked her hand away and glared at her.

"You led me on! You just wanted to snog me like those fan girls. Are you really Hermione, or are you someone else Polyjuiced to look like her?" He felt rage building up in him and fought to control it so he wouldn't blow anything up or hurt this girl, whoever she was.

"I'm Hermione, I really am, Harry. Ask me anything. Ask me why my teeth aren't too big anymore. Ask me about all the times we went places we weren't supposed to under the Invisibility Cloak. Ask me about the time in the Shrieking Shack when Sirius and Remus showed us who Scabbers really was. Ask me anything, Harry. Please believe me. It's me." Tears streamed down her face unheeded.

"Hermione wouldn't do this. She cares about Ron," he snarled.

"I used to care about Ron. I've outgrown him, and just couldn't sort out how to break up with him. And when I outgrew him, suddenly I started falling for you," she said miserably.

"Meanwhile, I'm very happy with Ginny. Have you considered that? Have you even noticed it?" he snapped. He paced around the room with long strides, running his fingers through his hair distractedly, glaring at her from time to time.

"Yes, I've noticed, and it breaks my heart. I want you to be happy, Harry, I really do. But I want you to be happy with me." Her eyes flickered with that odd light again. "You know you want me," she said in a low, throaty voice he'd never heard before.

Harry's jaw dropped in shock. A moment later, panic hit him. "You can't be Hermione. Where is she? Is she hurt? What have you done with her?" he cried, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her until her teeth rattled.

"It's me, honest, Harry, it's me! The spell that hurt me in the Department of Mysteries was purple – I don't think anyone but Madam Pomfrey and those of us who went there know that. What else can I tell you?" she said, sobbing now. "I can't help it. I love you, Harry. When I realized it, I realized I've loved you for years, but I didn't know that was what it was. I thought it was friendship or hero-worship or admiration or something like that, but no. It's love. It really is. I love you. I'd do anything for you."

He stood still, staring at her. He didn't know what to do. This couldn't be happening. Finally, he said, "You'll do anything for me?"

"Yes, anything."

"Then you'll act as if nothing has happened between us. You'll stay friendly with Ginny and Ron. If you want to break up with Ron, do it cleanly and don't leave him hanging in the air, but do not – I repeat, do NOT implicate me in any way. I'm *not* in love with you. I loved you as a dear friend. I don't think I know you anymore, though." He was panting with the effort of controlling his temper.

"You . . .loved me? You don't love me anymore?" Her eyes were wide, almost panicked.

"You knew I loved you as a friend. You knew that. Now you've thrown it away. We will have to be careful around each other now. We can't be relaxed and just have fun together or you will think I'm leading you on, or I will wonder if you're flirting with me, or I'll worry that Ron or Ginny may think we're behaving oddly. It can't be like before, not now."

"Harry," she said desperately, "we're young. Most people go through lots of relationships before they find their life partner. You're going to outgrow Ginny soon, I'm sure of it. You and I were meant to be together! We have a future together! Ron and Ginny will forgive us someday."

"'Ron and Ginny will forgive us someday'?" he snarled. "They'd never forgive us, and I wouldn't blame them! Do you have any idea of how betrayed I feel? And you want me to think about the future? As far as I know, my future may stretch to the end of this school year, if I'm *lucky*! If Voldemort has his way, I won't last that long. *Do you understand that?* That's my reality. I have to live each day the best I can, because it may be the last day I have. I can't think about 'someday' the way other people can. I can just hope that I actually *have* a 'someday.'"

"I know! That's partly why. . . . You've had so many close calls this year, and every one has torn my heart out. And then I started feeling differently toward you, and the thought of losing you, of you being gone without my having a chance to love you. . .it was unbearable. I just. . . ." She seemed to have run out of ways to express her feelings. She stood there, her hands held limply at her sides, and wept openly, looking at him with heartbroken eyes.

Harry's face hardened when he looked at her. "I'm sorry you've been upset over my many 'close calls.' I can't do anything about them, or about how you feel about me. Don't you dare interfere with my relationship with Ginny. And be kind to Ron when you break up with him. And do break up with him soon. Don't leave him hanging onto hope the way he has been lately." He tried to slow his breathing and calm his temper, then roughly pushed past her to the classroom door. He turned back and glared at her once more. "We're finished. I can't tell you how sorry I am that you broke up our friendship. You and Ron and I were good together." He said, "*Alohomora*," stalked out of the door and out of Hermione's life.

"Hi, Harry!" Ginny said brightly several minutes later as she saw Harry coming down the corridor. "What are you doing?"

Harry did his best to calm himself and smile for her. "Looking for you. I could stand a good snog, couldn't you?"

"Always!" she said in delight, skipping along next to him. "Where shall we go?"

"There's bound to be an empty room around here somewhere," he said, taking her hand and peering into the unused classrooms they were passing. "This one's not too messy. OK with you?"

"Yeah," she said, her eyes sparkling. Harry performed a Cushioning Charm on the floor near the wall, sealed the door, and they sat down side by side. Ginny snuggled into his arms, nestling her head on his shoulder. "You're so tense. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied.

"Not nothing," she said, sitting up and studying his face. "You've had an argument with someone, haven't you?"

"No. Don't worry about it. Come here," he said, pulling her into his lap and lifting her chin so he could kiss her.

She put her fingers on his lips. "Nope, not until you come clean. You'll feel better if you talk about it," she insisted, leaning away from him a bit.

Harry nibbled her fingers, trying to act playful, as he racked his brain. He needed to come up with a believable cover story, and fast. "Um. . .I just got annoyed with Malfoy, that's all." Yeah, that would do. Malfoy annoyed him on a regular basis.

"What did he do this time?"

"It's more the fact that he exists, you know?" he said with a crooked smile, appreciating Malfoy for perhaps the first time in his life. "He's such a git."

"Yeah, he is."

"Let's not talk about him," Harry said, studying her mouth quite seriously. "I came in here to have a nice snog with you."

"Oh really? Is that all I'm good for?" she teased, kissing him on the chin. "Got your dimple," she said with a grin.

"And you can keep it, or put it back, as you like, m'lady," he said, getting into their silly game. As they kissed, he finally relaxed. Why couldn't everyone be cheerful, funny, bright, warm and affectionate like Ginny? Oh well, as long as he had Ginny, life was good. He'd think about the loss of his best friend later.

Harry didn't see Ron or Hermione at dinner, and that was unusual, especially for Ron, who was always hungry. He looked for his friend for a while, then gave it up, hoping that Hermione had come to her senses and the two of them were making up in an unused classroom somewhere. He stayed late in the Common Room with Ginny, helping her with her

O.W.L. revision. When he went up to his room, he heard odd, muffled noises coming from behind the drawn curtains of Ron's bed.

"Ron? You all right?" he asked quietly, moving toward the bed.

"H-h-harry?" Ron muttered.

"Yeah. What's wrong?" Harry parted the curtains and saw Ron sitting on his bed, his face red and blotchy from crying. He'd been holding his pillow to his face to muffle the sounds.

"Can we take your Invisibility Cloak and go somewhere private? I don't want the others to see me like this. I'm a Prefect," he said miserably.

"Yeah, hang on," Harry said, then grabbed his cloak out of his trunk. "Here we are. Where shall we go?" he whispered as he spread the cloak over the two of them. They were both so tall, they had to hunch over quite a bit to fit under it.

"How about the passage to Honeydukes? We could just sit in the passage. Nobody knows about that, right?"

"Nobody but us and Fred and George," Harry agreed. "All right, come on then," he said as he opened the portrait hole.

A short time later, the boys were sitting in the tunnel to Honeydukes, sharing some chocolate frogs from the stash in Harry's pockets.

"Let me know if you want to talk about it," Harry said quietly.

Ron nodded, biting the head off another chocolate frog viciously. After four or five frogs, he finally looked Harry in the eye. "She broke up with me."

"Hermione?"

Ron's face crumpled. "Y-y-yes."

Harry looked at his friend with concern. "Did she say why?"

"She said she just didn't love me anymore, and it was time for us to move on, whatever that means. She said it isn't Viktor Krum, either, but she's tired of me being jealous. She said I need to grow up."

Harry cursed Hermione fluently in his mind for not being as kind to Ron as he'd hoped she would be. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"Yeah," Ron agreed sadly. "Me, too." He sniffled a bit, then went on. "I always thought it would end up being you and Ginny, me and Hermione, and we'd all get married and our kids would play together and we'd have holidays together. . . ."

"That would be nice, Ron. I'd like that," Harry said quietly, touched by his friend's vision of a peaceful, happy future.

"I guess that won't happen now," Ron said miserably.

"Maybe not," Harry agreed gently. "Did she say anything else?"

"No. That was it."

Harry breathed a quiet sigh of relief. At least she'd kept him out of it.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you turn me into a whole collie? Not just the paw?"

Harry blinked, baffled by this strange request. "Why?"

"Sirius said he enjoyed being a dog. I thought maybe it would be nicer to be a dog than to be me for a while," Ron said with a shrug. "I'd do it myself, but you're better at human transfigurations than I am, and the way I'm feeling right now, I'd probably mess it up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"OK, I'll have a go then. Finish your frog. You shouldn't have your mouth full when you change. And chocolate's not good for dogs, anyway."

Ron nodded and swallowed the rest of his sweet. He sat watching Harry expectantly, looking more like a man facing the gallows than a boy facing what could be an interesting experience.

Harry thought about the collies he'd seen, then pointed his wand at Ron and tapped him. Instantly, a large sable collie sat beside him, with sad eyes in its long-nosed face. "You feel better now?"

The dog whined a bit, then walked round and round in circles before it flopped down next to Harry, then put its head on Harry's leg. Harry scratched it behind the ears and stroked its long silky fur. "You make a handsome dog, Ron," Harry said, smiling. The dog looked up at him and gave him a small "woof" in return. They sat together like that for a long time. Finally, Harry said, "I'm getting cold – I don't have a thick fur coat like you do. Is it OK with you if I change you back so we can go to bed?" The dog looked at him, its eyes still miserable, but sat up and waited patiently for Harry to do whatever he was going to do. "Is that a yes?" The dog prodded Harry's wand hand with its nose. Soon Ron sat there, his shaggy red hair in his eyes, his face gloomy but resolute.

"I decided something," he told Harry.

"What?"

"I really like being a dog. It simplifies things. Makes you focus on what's important."

"And what's that?"

"Helping you kill Voldemort," Ron said seriously, using Voldemort's name without flinching or stammering for the first time in his life. "And going out with as many girls as I can while I'm young. Life's too short to give up on it just because one girl," his voice broke then and he stifled a sob, "decides she can do better."

"That's the spirit," Harry encouraged him. "Come on, it's cold down here."

"Ginny? I need to talk to you," Harry said when he saw her in the Common Room early the next morning.

"OK! How are you this morning?" she said cheerfully.

"Not so good," he replied, his face serious.

What could have happened? He's so tense, and his eyes are so sad, she thought sympathetically. "What's wrong, luv?"

"Come with me," he said, taking her hand and leading her out of the portrait hole. He led her into an unused classroom and sealed the door with a *Colloportus* spell.

"Why are you locking us in?" she asked, confused.

"I have to tell you something. . .bad. . .and I don't want to be interrupted. It will be hard enough to deal with without somebody bursting in here looking for a place to snog," he said grimly.

Her face fell. He couldn't be breaking up with her, could he? They'd been so happy together!

"*Scourgify,*" Harry said, cleaning off a chair for her. "You'd better sit down."

"You're scaring me," she said, sitting down on the clean chair.

"Something awful happened yesterday and I don't know where to begin. . . ." He started pacing, running his hands through his hair, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Start at the beginning," she said nervously. "That's usually best."

He looked at her, not wanting to hurt her, but knowing he needed to tell her. He sighed and said, "I did something really, really stupid. You have every right to be angry with me, but please, let me explain. I hope you'll understand why I did it, and that it didn't mean anything to me except to make me angry. I don't want it to hurt our relationship."

"I'm listening," she said cautiously.

Harry told her about his encounter with Hermione, leaving out nothing. He'd realized, after he'd calmed down enough to be able to think clearly, that Hermione and Ginny were best friends, and that Ginny herself might be in danger. He reasoned that, if Hermione was willing to be violent to him, she might hurt Ginny in order to "free" him so he'd be "available." There

was also the danger of Hermione having a change of heart and confessing to Ginny. If Ginny heard the story from anyone but Harry, he was worried it would destroy the trust between them. He included his reasoning and worries in what he told her now. By the end of his recitation, Ginny's jaw had dropped and her face was white.

"How could you do such a thing?" she murmured, horrified.

"I thought. . .she said she needed help, and I agreed before knowing what she wanted. I will never, ever do that again. I promise," he said, his green eyes solemn, his face miserable as well as worried.

"And that's why she broke up with Ron, too, right?"

"Yes."

Ginny was quiet for a while, trying to absorb all he'd told her. "You said she scratched you?" she said, not quite believing such a thing was possible.

"Yeah, look," he said, turning around and pulling up his sweater. His back was covered in deep scratches that bore heavy scabs.

"Oh, Harry! Those are awful! Do they hurt? Did you go and see Madam Pomfrey?"

"No, I didn't see Madam Pomfrey, and yes, they do hurt. I was trying to keep this whole thing a secret, and then decided I had to tell you. I still don't want to tell Ron," he replied, pulling his sweater back down.

"Did you wash those wounds and treat them?" she asked urgently, her healer instincts taking over from her shock at his story.

"I showered. The soap stung them pretty badly, so I guess it killed the germs," he said off-handedly, trying to calm her worries. "I couldn't reach most of them well enough to put anything on them, and I didn't feel I could ask Ron for help. It was a job getting ready for bed without someone seeing my back – and sleeping isn't much fun either, with my back so torn up. My head and bum hurt, too." He stood thinking a moment. "Maybe the scratches are my punishment for being stupid. I probably deserve them," he said, flopping down into a chair, putting his elbows on his knees, and his head in his hands, the very picture of defeat.

Ginny's heart turned over. He had made a mistake, but nothing worth the injuries he'd suffered. "You should have some ointment on them so they won't get infected," she said, moving behind him and shoving his sweater up to examine the scratches again. "What's this?" she said, gently touching a bump on his back at the end of one of the scratches.

"Ouch! I dunno what it is. What's it look like?"

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to hurt you." She studied the bump a bit longer. "It's scabby like the scratches, but kind of pointed and there's a little swelling around it. I think somebody should look at this, Harry."

"No. If you'll just put some essence of murtlap on the scratches, I'll be fine. That ointment healed my cuts last year when Umbridge was making me use that foul black quill for lines." His heart constricted at the memory – it was Hermione who'd come up with a treatment to ease the pain in his hand. She'd been such a good friend for so long. What happened?

Ginny nodded uncertainly. "OK, I'll do it, but I really think. . ."

"NO! I have spent far too much time in hospital this year as it is!" Harry snapped. Instantly chagrined, he turned around and pulled Ginny into a tight embrace. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to yell at you. I've been going crazy with all this stuff and I guess that was the last straw. Forgive me?"

Ginny pulled back from the embrace to look him in the face and saw his eyes were big and sad, and there was tremendous tension in his jaw. "Of course I forgive you. And I think part of the reason you got cross with me was that you know you should see the nurse."

"Yeah, probably," he admitted reluctantly. "So. . .are we OK? With all this stuff? Can you forgive me?"

"I can't believe you snogged Hermione, but I also can't believe she asked you to, and then attacked you as she obviously did. But knowing the way your mind works, you probably did rationalize it as helping out a friend rather than cheating on your girlfriend."

"I did worry about how you'd take it, but she's my best . . .she *was* my best friend and has done so much for me. I just thought. . .well, I made a mistake. I promise not to promise things before I know what I'm promising ever, *ever* again. I promise! And the only girl I want to snog is you. I'm so sorry I hurt you. I never wanted to do that."

"I'll be OK. Thanks for being honest with me. Let's get your back treated and then we'll see about that snog," she said with a smile, pulling him down to kiss him quite thoroughly before pushing him toward the door so she could put ointment on his back.

Over the next several days, Ron did his best to be cheerful and to flirt with other girls, but it was obvious to everyone his heart wasn't in it. He spent a lot of time hanging around with Harry and Ginny. The boys also had to deal with doing homework without Hermione's help, which was never easy for them. Hermione tried many times to talk to Ron or Harry, but both of them kept their distance from her, leaving her standing sad and alone every time. Ginny didn't know what to do. Hermione was her best girlfriend, but she didn't know that Ginny knew about what had happened between her and Harry, nor was she offering to talk about it. It was a difficult situation in every direction.

Just over a week into the cold spell between the four friends, Harry and Ron were in the library, struggling valiantly to do their homework without Hermione's help. Wads of crumpled up parchment littered the area around their feet, as well as the table on which they were working.

"Where did you put that note about the wolfsbane?" Ron asked, scratching his head in confusion. "I can't find it and can't remember what those properties were in conjunction with foxglove."

"I think that was ragwort, not foxglove," Harry said mildly, rummaging around in the various stacks of parchment on the desk. "It doesn't seem to be in this lot. Maybe we trashed it by mistake." He and Ron started unwadding gnarled bits of parchment on the table.

"I'm not having any luck here. You finish this lot, I'll look on the floor," Harry said, diving under the table. There were so many twists of discarded parchment under there, he finally gave up on bending down from his chair and just sat cross-legged under the table, opening and flattening crumpled parchment after crumpled parchment, looking for their misplaced notes. Ron shifted his feet restlessly, bumping Harry's knee in the process. Harry stared at Ron's big feet – he still hadn't grown up to them – then sat up so fast, he cracked his head on the table. When he stopped seeing stars from the bump on his head, he scrambled out from under the table, his face alight with excitement despite the painful bump on his head.

"You all right, Harry? That was quite a bang. Did you hit your head?" Ron asked in concern.

"I've just remembered my dad," Harry said in awe, still rubbing his bump.

"What?" Ron was baffled.

"I've just remembered my dad! Where's Remus? He was in here a while ago," Harry said distractedly, looking around the library for his godfather. "Be right back," he said, and raced down one stack of books after another, looking for Remus.

"Mr. Potter, please," said Madam Pince, her face drawn into a frown of disapproval. "No running in the library."

"Sorry," he said breathlessly, obviously still in a tearing hurry and not at all repentant. "Have you seen Professor Lupin?"

"He just left," she replied, and Harry took off at a dead run out of the door, leaving a tutting librarian behind him.

"Remus! Remus!" he cried, seeing his godfather far down the corridor ahead of him.

Remus turned around and smiled. His godson seemed to be very happy for some reason. "What's up?"

"Did my dad twist up parchment and throw it on the floor? Did he have a desk or table where he worked at home? Was there a black cat?" the boy asked in a rush.

"Yes, to all of the above," Remus said with a chuckle, enjoying the memories Harry had just evoked. "Why?"

"I've just remembered my dad!" he exulted. "The only memory I've ever had of him was the one I had when the Dementors were around, where I heard him telling Mum to take me and run. I just had a real memory of him!"

Remus grinned in delight. "Tell me about it. What did you remember? What triggered it?"

"Ron and I were chucking parchment everywhere – we're having a hard time doing homework without Hermione," Harry admitted with a shrug. "We lost a note and couldn't find it on top of the table, so I sat under the table untwisting parchment scraps and Ron bumped me with his foot. Something about sitting there under the table, Ron bumping me with his foot, and digging through the bits of parchment made me remember." He took a deep breath, his face alight with joy. "I was so little, my dad's feet must have looked huge to me, like Ron's. I was under Dad's desk or table, playing with the twists of parchment. A black cat came under there with me and I remember it pushing the twists around with its paw. When Dad bumped me with his foot, I guess he realized I was there." He paused, savouring the memory, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "He bent down and picked me up and tossed me in the air, the way people do with babies, you know?" Remus nodded. "And then he hugged me. I remembered all that. Cracked my head a good one trying to get out from under the table to find you, to see if it was true or not." Harry hesitated for a few moments, a joyful smile on his face, his eyes distant as he re-ran the memory through his mind several times. He blinked then, as if just realizing Remus was still there. "It's true then? A real memory?"

Remus grinned and said, "An absolutely true memory, Harry. James was famous for making piles of discarded parchment while he worked out ideas for various things, and he usually twisted them up and threw them down when he was frustrated. I've noticed you doing the same thing, but hadn't thought to comment on it. I'm sorry."

"No, no, don't be sorry! If you'd said something, maybe I wouldn't have remembered an actual memory. Maybe I would've thought you'd suggested the memory when you told me about it." Harry was still so excited, he was bouncing on his toes. "I remembered," he said in an awe-struck voice. "I remembered."

"Yes, you did," Remus said, grinning delightedly.

Harry grabbed his godfather and gave him a huge hug. "Thanks, Remus. Thanks for that. Thanks for being here so I could ask you right away. Thanks for coming to the library this morning so I saw you!" he said, laughing.

"I'm glad I was able to help," he replied, laughing along with his godson for a moment, "and I can't tell you how happy I am to be teaching here again, to be able to see you every day and watch you grow up. I'm so proud of you. Your parents would be proud of you, too." He patted the boy on the back before releasing him, and noticed Harry flinch at the touch. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. I just banged myself under the table," the boy said dismissively. "I'll probably have a good bruise later. Nothing to worry about."

Remus nodded. "Do you and Ron need my help on your homework?"

"Thanks, I really appreciate the offer, but we're nearly there. We're not completely useless without Hermione, but we're nowhere near as organized as she is. Makes it harder to find what we want when we need it," Harry replied, shrugging.

"Have you or Ron made any efforts to make up with her?" Remus asked carefully.

"No," Harry said with finality. "And it won't be coming from me."

"Should I ask why not, or what happened, or just leave it alone?" Remus asked, his head tilted as he studied his godson's suddenly hard face.

"Just leave it alone."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spoil your good mood," Remus said, regretting he'd mentioned the strained relationship with Hermione at all.

"Don't worry about it. We'll have to manage without her once we're out of Hogwarts anyway," Harry said reasonably. "May as well get used to it now."

"Yes, I suppose."

"What was my dad working on? What did he do, other than work for the Order?" Harry asked, suddenly realizing he'd never once asked this question of anyone.

"He came from a wealthy family, as you probably worked out once you saw your bank vault. He had a lot of investments to manage, and he also did a great deal of research in combating the Dark Arts and in Transfiguration. I told you you're more like him than you know. You are. Those are your best subjects, and they fascinated your dad, as well.

"What was he researching?"

"Trying to work out how to change into more than one Animagus form, for one thing," Remus said with a smile. "He'd be delighted at your progress there. He was also looking for ways to fight Voldemort, trying to develop counter-spells for several of the worst hexes and spells, including the Killing Curse. He never told me, but it's possible his research is part of the reason you survived. He put enchantments on you, which I'm certain are still there. But all his research was lost when the Godric's Hollow house was destroyed after Voldemort killed your parents."

"He put enchantments on me? Why? Do you know what they were?"

"No, I'm sorry, lad, I honestly don't know what they were. But he was worried about you long before you were born. He wanted to make sure you were as safe as possible, especially with Voldemort being so active then. I wish I knew more, but he was getting very secretive toward the end. He was trying to protect you and your mother."

"I understand," Harry said with a grimace. "It would be nice to know what enchantments he'd put on me, though. You don't suppose Professor Dumbledore knows, do you?"

"You could ask him, but I think James kept that information entirely to himself. You may never find out what he did to protect you."

"Did he put these enchantments on anyone else? My mother, perhaps?"

"Possibly. But the Killing Curse can't be fought – nobody's ever survived it except you, and nobody is quite sure why you survived."

"Dumbledore says it was my mother's love that saved me," Harry said quietly.

"He's probably right." Remus put an arm around his godson's shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "What a wonderful thing has happened to you today, though, Harry. Do you know most people can't remember anything before they were two or three? You were only fourteen months old when they died. That memory is probably from before your first birthday, since James didn't do a lot of research those last few months, as far as I know. He was busy on Order business then. That memory of yours is a rare treasure."

The boy beamed. "Yeah. I'll remember it forever." He glanced at his watch and said, "Oh, no, I'd better get back to Ron. We only have half an hour left to finish that essay. Thanks, Remus! See you!" With that, he took off running.

"See you later, Harry!" Remus called as his godson raced down the corridor toward the library. He was rewarded with a wave and laughed out loud to see Harry jump up to try to touch the beams above the corridor in a burst of youthful exuberance.

Chapter 24 – Black Widow

Nearly two weeks after Hermione's attack on Harry, she was running down the corridor behind him. "Harry! Harry, wait, please," she called.

Harry stalked off silently, doing his best to control his rising temper.

"Please," she begged, tears in her eyes, her voice breaking. "I've been trying to catch you alone for ages. I've worked it out, I think. I need your help."

He turned on her. "Worked what out?" he snapped. "And it seems to me the last time I helped you," he said in a dangerous whisper, walking so close to her, he loomed over her threateningly, his eyes flashing, his body tense and ready for action, "you nearly raped me."

"Raped you?" she repeated, horror-struck. "Is that what happened?"

"You were there, you know," he snarled.

"That's the thing – I have big blank spots in my memory. Remember when Ginny told us if someone possesses you, you have blank places in your memory?" She reached out to touch his arm, every motion a plea for him to believe her, to listen to her. "Please tell me you remember that."

"I remember that," he growled, snatching his arm out of her reach before she could touch him. He looked at her warily.

Hermione tremblingly reached into her bag and pulled out a long, thin package. She held it out to him. "I found this in my dresser after I. . .woke up, I guess. . .after. . .that day. I don't know how it got there. Don't touch it with your bare hands. I think it's probably got poison on it."

"In that case, just lay it on the floor. I don't want to touch it," he said, stepping away from her as she bent to put it on the floor. "What is it?"

"It's a knife," she said as she pointed her wand at the package and did an unwrapping spell on it. "A nasty one with three edges – a triangular blade, and all these serrations along the blade. It's got runes on the handle, but it scared me so badly, I didn't try to translate them. I was afraid to touch it. And the blade is discoloured. It looks like. . .it looks. . .I think there's blood on it," she said, nearly whimpering in her fear. "Please, Harry, I need your help."

"What do you expect me to do?" he said in exasperation, throwing his hands in the air. "I don't know you anymore! You were. . .you acted like an animal. You attacked me. I have scratches all over my back from your nails!"

She burst into tears. "I'm so sorry, Harry, so sorry. I don't know how to explain it. I think I was possessed, or under an enchantment."

"You weren't under Imperius. I can recognize that."

"Something wasn't right."

"I agree with you. Something was definitely not right."

"You know me. Would the Hermione you know act like that?"

"I don't know, and I've been afraid to ask Ron if you were that. . .forward. . .with him," he replied, looking disgusted. "Or did you learn that stuff from Viktor Krum?"

"I've been missing big chunks of time for days," she went on, desperate to get him to listen to her. "I found out I broke up with Ron and I don't know why! I found out I. . .mistreated you. . .and I don't even remember it! I do remember bits of it, but other bits. . . ." She shook her head as if trying to clear it. "I've found myself in places I hadn't planned to go. I found this horrible thing in my dresser and have no idea how it got there. I've been carrying it around ever since, hoping to find you, to ask you to help me."

Harry stilled his anger with a mighty effort, and thought about what she was saying. It did sound like Ginny's description of possession.

"You've been studying so much extra magic with Dumbledore, I was hoping. . .I thought. . . maybe. . . you might know a way to see if there's an enchantment on me," she said humbly, twisting her fingers together and cringing as if expecting a blow. "I've been researching in the library, trying to find out what's wrong with me, but I can't find anything useful. Please don't be angry with me. I need your help."

He was quiet for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was calm but distant. "Dumbledore knows such spells. We've talked about them, but I haven't studied them yet. You should talk to him."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. She seemed to shrink before his eyes. "All. . .all right. I'll go and talk to him," she said, doing a spell to rewrap the knife, picking up the package gingerly and dropping it back in her bag as she turned away. Her shoulders were slumped and she trudged along as if she were carrying a heavy burden.

The goodness in Harry's soul just couldn't take it, which made him sigh in disgust before calling out, "Hermione, wait." He caught up with her and walked beside her. "I'll go with you. I can tell my side of the story, anyway. I don't know if it will be any help or not, but you were definitely not acting like the Hermione I know, so maybe you were under an enchantment. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt until Dumbledore says if you were enchanted or not."

The unwrapped knife sat on Dumbledore's desk. The headmaster had a grave look on his face as he studied it, and looked from Harry to Hermione. "She actually attacked you?" he asked Harry in disbelief.

"Yes. I didn't want to hurt her, so it went further than I thought it would before I finally stopped her," Harry replied, looking disgusted with himself and Hermione both. "I don't want Ron to find out we did this. I thought I was doing her a favour. I didn't expect . . . ."

"No, I can understand why you wouldn't. Such behaviour is not normal for the Miss Granger we all know and admire," Dumbledore said, giving Hermione a kind look and a wink. She burst into tears.

"What's wrong with me?" she wailed.

"That's what we're going to find out. I'm going to ask Professor Lupin and Professor Snape to join us. I think they will be helpful to us in our research."

"Research?" Harry said.

"Yes. I believe Miss Granger is the victim of some very dark magic. I've heard of such spells before, but this one has some interesting differences. I suspect we'll be able to find more information about it in those books of yours. I need Remus and Professor Snape to lend us their expertise and help us research." Before long, Lupin and Snape arrived in the office and were told the story. Both of them looked at Hermione with surprised expressions. She cowered under their scrutiny.

"Have either of you heard of a spell such as this?" Dumbledore asked.

"Actually, I was reading something in Harry's books recently that sounded similar," Remus replied. "It's called the Black Widow Curse. I think I can find it again," he murmured, going to Dumbledore's bookcase and perusing the Dark Arts volumes Dervish had given Harry. "Ah yes, here it is," he said with satisfaction after a few minutes' search. "This Curse is used most often by witches, not wizards, it says here. It's made with hairs from the one who will have the spell on them, and that person's victim's name is spoken aloud while the potion is being made. When the potion is completed, the witch casting the spell drinks the potion and then possesses the person whose hair is in the potion. This spell is extremely complex. The person who is possessed will retain her own memories and will behave as herself much more than is true with normal possessions. That gives credence to her performance, you see, since what she's doing requires a good bit of trust on the part of the victim. This spell also allows the caster to do a partial possession, so they only possess their intended victim when certain things happen. There's a trigger mechanism, of sorts, involved. So you were possessed, Hermione, by a Dark witch, and the spell probably didn't activate until you were alone in a private place with Harry."

"It must be that woman in The Ladies Shop," Harry reasoned. "Parvati was given Polyjuice Potion to look like Ginny, and put under Imperius to try to poison me. Hermione's been possessed by someone Dark. That Madam Desiree had hairs of both Hermione and Ginny in hairbrushes there, because she brushed their hair before putting potions on them."

"You may be on to something there, Harry. We couldn't prove anything against her with the potion that poisoned Mr. Weasley, or with Miss Patil's incident, but this knife is very rare. We'll send it to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. They may be able to trace it, and they can do tests on the bloodstains on it, as well," Dumbledore said. He looked at Hermione, who had blanched when he'd mentioned the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "You have done nothing wrong, Miss Granger. You have nothing to fear." She nodded, still very pale.

"If nothing else, Albus, we should have that woman brought in for questioning," Remus suggested.

"A dose of Veritaserum would go a long way to getting to the bottom of things," Snape said quietly.

"Am I still under that spell? And what's it for?" Hermione asked.

Remus took a moment to gather his thoughts. "The Black Widow Curse is designed as a way to get away with murder. The witch will choose someone, usually a woman, to possess, then use the Black Widow spell, which is specifically designed to captivate the victim, then murder him when he's at his most vulnerable – during sexual intercourse, while sleeping, that kind of thing. It's called the Black Widow Curse after the black widow spider, which sometimes kills her mate after mating. So this witch's purpose in giving it to you would seem to be to get to Harry and kill him," he explained quietly, doing his best to ignore Harry's and Hermione's flaming faces.

Dumbledore was studying the book, which he then handed to Harry, indicating pages for the boy to study. Dumbledore picked up the knife with a cloth over his hand, turning it so the engraved runes caught the light. "Yes, there are Dark spells on this knife. I'm certain it's been used to kill many people. The writings on here are horrifying. Not only did this person possess Miss Granger to force her to murder Harry, but the knife itself will go from killing the victim to killing the murderer, then return to its master."

"You mean that knife can *think*?" Harry said, startled, looking up from his reading.

"No, Harry, but it has deep enchantments on it. When its job is done, it returns to its master. Until its job is done, it will remain dormant, which is a shame. We could use it as a Portkey to locate its master if it didn't need to kill you and Miss Granger first," he said, with a shadow of a twinkle in his eye.

"So this witch's plan was for Hermione and me to. . .um. . ."

"Have sexual relations, I imagine," Dumbledore said calmly.

"Yeah, that," Harry said, blushing madly, "and then the knife would kill both of us? What's the point in killing Hermione? Why not let her take the blame? I don't understand." His eyes were shadowed with confusion.

"I believe Muggles call such an act a 'crime of passion.' Sometimes a person will fall in love with someone who is committed elsewhere, as you are with Miss Weasley. So the one who loves you – Miss Granger, in this witch's mind – seduces you, kills you so Miss Weasley can't have you, then realizes what she's done and kills herself. It happens from time to time, I'm sorry to say. The people who commit such crimes often have serious mental instabilities, or may be very immature and have poor judgement. Some of them may just act impulsively, without thinking of the consequences. I think in this case, that witch was counting on such a scenario seeming plausible. She didn't count on Miss Granger's tremendous strength of character." Dumbledore turned to Hermione and continued. "I'd like to know how you became aware of the enchantment and fought it. Do you have any idea?"

"I think it was when Harry left and I hadn't finished what I was supposed to do. I kind of 'woke up' in that room where we'd been, and wandered around for a while, not knowing where I was supposed to be, what I was supposed to be doing. I was 'awake,' I suppose you would say, aware of myself and so forth, from time to time during that. . .erm. . .encounter. . .with Harry, too, but I felt like I was being forced to say things, to do things. After he left and I woke up again, I found Ron, and I don't know what happened then – I lost some time again. I

tried to find Harry, but every time I got near him, he took off. Then I learned I'd broken up with Ron and wasn't very nice to him, and Harry was furious with me for that as well as for attacking him, and he wouldn't let me anywhere near him. I didn't know what to do. When I found this knife, I knew I needed help, that something very peculiar was going on, with me right in the middle of it."

"I see," said Dumbledore thoughtfully.

"Why did she make me break up with Ron?" Hermione asked plaintively.

"I suspect passion is what triggers the murderous response she's planted in you, Miss Granger. If you had a boyfriend you cared about, your emotional involvement with him might cause you to injure or kill him and be captured or killed yourself before you had the opportunity to kill Harry. So she got Mr. Weasley out of the picture to avoid that complication. At least, that's how it seems to me," Dumbledore said gravely. He looked over at Harry and asked, "Have you finished reading the section I showed you in that book?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand it?"

"I think so."

"Tell me what you've learned from your reading."

"Hermione will be under this enchantment until she completes her task. She can be repossessed at any point. Also, she has probably been given commands that will force her to do what the spell caster wants, even when that witch is not actually possessing her. She could grab that knife now and try to kill me with it, whether that witch is possessing her at the moment or not. It's kind of like a computer program that's set to do certain things on its own. . .like a virus," he mused.

"Computer program? Virus?" Snape asked. "What are you talking about, Potter?"

"Just thinking out loud. Sorry. Computers are Muggle machines that are designed to do certain things, often on their own once a program is started. A computer virus is something that messes up the programming or makes the computer do something the owner doesn't want it to do, like sending out a lot of emails with viruses attached, that kind of thing."

The older wizards all simply shook their heads, not understanding a word he was saying. They were all quiet for a few moments.

"I think I understand what you mean about programming something," Dumbledore said finally. "I have read about computers somewhat, although I must admit I don't understand them."

"Most Muggles don't, either," Harry said with a wry smile.

"To get back to Miss Granger," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, "there may be a trigger of some kind, as Remus suggested. It could be something like getting close enough to you to

touch you, for instance, that sets the spell in motion again. I don't know if you've noticed, but I've been making certain you and Miss Granger keep your distance from each other this afternoon. In your case, Harry, there was no effort involved. You are simply being self-protective, for which I don't blame you at all. Miss Granger, however, has a strong drive to touch you, and, while she's been controlling herself admirably, I've had to shield you a time or two to keep you apart."

"Oh, is that what I bumped my hand on?" Hermione said, looking at her fingers oddly.

"Yes. You didn't mean Harry any harm at the time – I could tell that – but I didn't want to take any chances in triggering another attack." He turned back to the boy.

"So when she reached out to touch me in the hall earlier, she might have tried to kill me then, if I hadn't flinched away?" Harry said, realization sending a cold chill down his spine.

"Yes, exactly," Dumbledore replied. "You had no idea how wise you were to keep your distance from her. And yet, here you are, sitting next to Miss Granger, still a good enough friend to try to get her the help she needs. And think about this. You were right, just now. She could strike at any moment. You're here, the knife is here. . .then why is she not trying to kill you?" Dumbledore asked, winking and putting his finger next to his nose. "Why indeed?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that, Professor," Harry responded carefully.

"Do you remember what I told you is your strongest weapon against Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"My heart. Love."

"And why do you suppose Miss Granger has been able to overcome this possession, at least in part?"

Harry only had to think a moment about this one. "Because she really loves me?" he said, his heart sinking.

"Yes, that's right." Dumbledore studied the boy's distraught face for a moment longer. "Remember, there are many kinds of love. You and Miss Weasley share one kind. You and Miss Granger share quite another."

"We do?" Harry was thoroughly confused now.

"Miss Granger has put her schooling, which is extremely important to her, even her very life in jeopardy for you more than once, hasn't she?"

"Yes."

"She has the utmost love for you, Harry. She's willing to die to help you, or to protect you. It's the very deepest form of friendship," Dumbledore said, smiling from Harry to Hermione.

"She hasn't followed through with what you'd call her 'programming,' despite being in close proximity to you in your Common Room and classes. Her resistance to the command to kill you shows that the person who possessed her does not understand your relationship, nor does she understand the depth of feeling Miss Granger has for you. Because that person didn't understand these things, Miss Granger has been able to break away from the enchantment far enough to recognize that it exists. Well done, Miss Granger," he said, smiling at her. Hermione smiled slightly for the first time in weeks. "Now," Dumbledore went on, "we need to release her from this spell. Harry, what else did you learn from the pages I had you read just now?"

"That this spell is nearly unbreakable," Harry said with a frown. "How are we going to release her?"

"You and I, Harry, share something that is extremely rare," said Dumbledore. "We've survived The Refiner's Fire. I believe we can do this for her, if we work together. It will take a bit of planning."

While Dumbledore and Harry worked out their plan, Remus, and Snape studied the Dark Arts books to see if they could find any more information that might be helpful. Hermione sat quietly by herself. Dumbledore didn't want her looking at the Dark Arts books in case the witch happened to possess her at that point, resulting in her learning that Harry had those books. Such information was something they all wanted to keep from Voldemort and his followers.

"Professor," Harry said to Dumbledore after they'd gone over their plan numerous times. "Do you think it would help Ron to see this done? So he'd know that she's really been enchanted?" The two of them had been working on the plan for a couple of hours now.

"It might very well be in his best interests, yes," the headmaster agreed. "But he must not interfere in any way with our spell."

"I'll tell him that, and we can put him behind a shield, too, if you want. Could Ginny also come?"

"You make this sound like a social gathering, Harry," Dumbledore said, a slight frown creasing his face.

"No! That's not what I meant at all. It's just that. . .it's been very hard on Ron, and he's been depending on me and Ginny a lot. And Ginny was so great to believe me and forgive me. . .if they could see this happen, maybe it would help all of us heal our friendship," he replied, hoping he was making good sense.

Dumbledore thought a moment. "All right. What you say has merit. I'll send Fawkes for them right away. You can meet them outside my door here and explain to them what's going on. Will that do?"

"Yes. Thanks," Harry said, grateful as ever for his professor's understanding heart.

"She *WHAT?*" Ron's deep voice boomed down the spiral staircase, his face white with shock.

"I didn't believe it at first, either, Ron," Ginny assured him.

"Hermione's under a spell called the Black Widow's Curse," Harry explained. "Yes, I made a mistake in agreeing to do her a favour before knowing what it was. I've already promised Ginny I will *NEVER EVER* do such a thing again! And if you ever hear me starting to make a promise without having *all* the information on what I'm promising, you have permission to belt me!"

"You're saying Hermione, dainty little Hermione who you tower over, attacked you? Hurt you? Tried to kill you somehow?" Ron said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Harry, turn around and take off your robes," Ginny said patiently. Harry complied, shrugged out of his robes, took off his sweater and opened his shirt so Ginny could lift the back and show Ron his scratches.

"Hermione did that?" Ron said, aghast. "While she was kissing you?"

"While she was trying to do a lot more than kiss me, Ron," Harry said grimly. "That's why I'm sure she had to be under a spell. At first, I thought she'd just gone all 'fan girl' on me or something, but then I wondered. I was still pretty angry with her though. These scratches hurt a lot and I haven't slept well since it happened, because of them. But the Hermione I know isn't a. . .a wild woman. Granted, I've never snogged her, but I can't imagine her being that different than she usually is."

"She's not wild or rough, at least not with me," Ron said uncertainly. "She's always been sweet. . .gentle. . . ." He shook his head and rubbed his burning eyes frantically with the back of his hands.

Harry put his hand on his friend's arm. "Ron. It isn't you. It isn't her. It isn't me. It's a spell. That's what's wrong with this entire situation, what caused the whole thing. Somebody out there is trying to kill me, through Hermione, just as they tried through Parvati and Millicent. You remember Snape's saying back before term began that killing me was Voldemort's number one priority in this war? That's what's going on here. He has some people working for him who are convinced they can get the job done, so they keep sending girls to attack me." He stopped talking and watched as Ron processed all the information he'd received in the last few minutes. "Are you OK?"

Ron gulped. "Uh. Yeah. I guess." He stood there silently, a lost look on his face. Finally he looked at his sister. "You knew about this, Gin?"

"Harry told me the next day. He was afraid Hermione would tell me, or would try to hurt me. I promised not to tell you. You were miserable enough at the time without knowing all this stuff."

"And you two have kept this secret for two weeks or more now?" They nodded. "I don't know whether to hit you or thank you," he said, looking at Harry.

"Feel free to hit me if you want," Harry replied, offering a heavily muscled shoulder.

"Nah, I'd probably break my fist," Ron said, trying to smile through his misery.

Harry grinned at him. "Thanks for that, anyway. I'm sore enough without being punched as well."

Ron sighed heavily. "So we're going to watch you try to get this enchantment off her? Will it hurt her?"

Harry sobered instantly. "We honestly don't know, but there's nothing else to do that we can find or think of. If we don't do this, she will be like a bomb waiting to go off – at some point, that witch will do something to trigger a reaction in Hermione and she'll be dangerous again. She could attack either or both of you, trying to get you out of the way so she can go after me. We can't take that chance."

"Will it hurt her, though?" Ron persisted.

"I honestly don't know, Ron. We don't have any choice," Harry conceded.

Ron sighed heavily, then straightened his shoulders and started for the door to Dumbledore's office, his face stoic. "Well, let's get on with it, then."

A short time later, Dumbledore, Lupin, Snape, Hermione and Harry were all gathered once again in Dumbledore's office. A very nervous looking Ron and a serious Ginny sat in chairs against the wall, under strict orders to not move and to stay quiet. Remus and Snape sat with them. Harry had created a shield to protect them from the magic he and Dumbledore would be creating, as well as preventing Ron and Ginny interfering in what they had to do. The knife was in a sealed box with enchantments on it to keep it in the box and inert. The floor had been cleared and a golden circle drawn on it. Hermione stood nervously in the centre of the circle.

"Now, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, "Harry and I are going to stand inside the circle with Miss Granger. We will extend our hands around you, without touching you at all. No wands will be needed. This is a highly refined form of wandless magic."

Hermione nodded her understanding.

"Professor Snape has several potions with him in case that knife activates with you in such close proximity to Harry. We're doing our best to take good care of both of you." He smiled kindly at Hermione. She stood stiff but trembling, as if she were about to face a firing squad. Harry's face was resolute. This spell would either release Hermione from her enchantment or possibly kill both her and Harry. It was a dangerous game they were playing.

"Everyone ready?" Dumbledore said calmly. "All right, Harry. Let's begin." Dumbledore and Harry raised their arms at the same time, encircling but not touching Hermione, with a gap a few feet wide between their hands. Jets of golden light flew between their fingers, pulsing as if they were part of a circular current, with Dumbledore's and Harry's bodies as part of that circle. The two wizards raised their hands and a shimmering shell, like a bell jar of golden light, formed around the three of them, going from far over their heads all the way to the circle on the floor. The sparkling shell vibrated and pulsed as if it had a heartbeat. Harry and Dumbledore began to shake as they held the spell, but they held fast. Hermione trembled harder now until she was shaking quite visibly, her curls bouncing wildly on her back. A

scream ripped from her throat. Harry looked at her for a moment in fear, then saw Dumbledore standing steadfast on the other side of her, and held his part of the golden shell with even stronger resolve. Her scream became a long, undulating wail, and it looked as if she were fighting something. Hermione's eyes rolled up in her head as the wail suddenly cut off, replaced by a sound pure as crystal, musical and yet other-worldly, as if the golden light itself had become audible. She looked unconscious, yet she was still upright. Her limp body floated gently up off the floor, spinning slowly inside the encircling arms of Harry and Dumbledore. She drifted bit by bit back to the floor, landing gently on her feet, held upright as if by invisible strings. The otherworldly music stopped as, with a sudden cry, she collapsed. A shrieking whirlwind came out of her and exploded into a misty rose-grey haze inside the golden shell. The haze floated momentarily above the motionless girl, then vanished. Dumbledore and Harry broke their connection and knelt beside her.

"Hermione? Hermione, are you all right?" Harry cried, his voice breaking. His long-time friendship with her was far stronger than his anger toward her.

"Don't touch her yet, Harry. Let's see if it worked," Dumbledore warned, pushing Harry's hand away before he could touch her pale cheek.

A few moments later, Hermione gasped and opened her eyes. "Harry? What happened?"

"Do you remember us doing the spell?" Harry said.

"Yes."

"What happened? Do you remember anything?"

"Oh, she was so angry! She was screaming!" Hermione said as she sat up, her voice shaking, her eyes wide. "She didn't think you could do it."

"Was it Madam Desiree?" Harry asked.

"It didn't look like her. She had dark hair," Hermione said, pressing her fingers to her eyelids, trying to remember details. She stayed like that a few moments, and then said "I know who it was, but I can't think!" She looked across the room at Snape. "Do you have Veritaserum with you?

"Yes, I do," he replied stiffly. "Why?"

"Maybe if I took some, I could remember who she is. Would it hurt me to take it?"

"No, it won't hurt you," Snape said quietly.

"You don't have to do this, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said kindly.

"No, I want to. Somebody's trying to kill Harry, and used me to get to him. Somebody made me break up with Ron," she said, growing angrier as she spoke. "I want to get to the bottom of this as much as anyone else."

"All right then," Dumbledore agreed, dropping the shield protecting the onlookers, then saying, "Severus, if you would, please?" They seated Hermione in a comfortable armchair and gave her the Veritaserum.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore said gently, "do you remember who gave you the knife? Or who put the enchantment on you?"

"I don't know where the knife came from. I don't remember the enchantment being put on me."

"Did anything unusual happen to you in the day or two before you attacked Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"It was a Hogsmeade weekend. I went alone because I'd had a fight with Ron. Madam Desiree invited me into her shop. She said she was still so sorry about what happened with Ron and that potion. She wanted to make things up to me. All I wanted was another flagon of that potion to tame curly hair. She wanted to give me a manicure and some sample products."

"And did she give you the manicure and some products?"

"Yes. She put several things in my bag, and she did my nails for me. I've never had a manicure before. It was kind of odd."

"In what way was it odd?"

"Having another woman holding my hands, messing with my nails. Some of what she did was uncomfortable, but she said it would make the nails grow in more nicely."

"What did she do to them?"

"She dipped them in some foul-looking green liquid that felt nice on my skin, and then pushed under my nails with a stick. She said that would make the edges all nice and even, and would help keep my nails from getting stained with ink all the time."

Dumbledore turned to the others and said, "I suppose we know how the knife got into her bag now, but I don't understand about the manicure." Turning back to Hermione, he said, "What did she tell you about her plans? Did she reveal anything about the Black Widow Curse to you then, or since she put you under that spell?"

Hermione's head rocked back and forth as if she were fighting a memory, or searching for one. Her forehead was creased in a frown as she struggled with the answer.

"Did she put a spell on you to keep you from telling these things?"

"Yes."

"Ah. *Finite incantatum*," Dumbledore said. Hermione's face relaxed instantly. "Now, then. What did she tell you of her plans or about the Black Widow Curse?"

"She said she was going to help me get the man of my dreams. She said she had three steps to the plan and that those three steps would mean I would be with my true love forever and ever."

Harry and Ron glanced at each other and gulped. Harry said, "And who. . .um. . ." He couldn't bring himself to ask the question.

Dumbledore took over again. "And who was the person she said was your true love? Or did you tell her who you loved?"

"She said Harry was my true love, that we were perfect for each other, we were meant to be together." Ron stifled a moan. Harry just looked sick, trying not to look at any of his friends. "She asked if I loved Harry, and I said yes, of course. I've always loved Harry."

Harry fell into a chair, his head in his hands, the very picture of misery. Ron mirrored his action. Ginny simply stared at Hermione, her eyes stricken.

"And then what happened?" Dumbledore prompted after seeing the reaction of the two boys and Ginny.

"I told her about Ron. She said I love Harry, and it's time to break up with Ron, he's childish and immature. I tried to argue with her, but she overpowered me."

Harry tried again. "So when you told me you loved me, was it her or you talking?"

"It was me. I do love you, Harry."

"I thought you loved Ron."

"I love Ron too."

"You can't have it both ways," Harry said miserably.

"Yes I can," she insisted.

"Did she give you instructions? What did she tell you to do?" Dumbledore prompted, ignoring Harry's interruption.

Hermione was quiet for a while, then said in a voice not her own, "If the first plan fails, the second one will succeed. If the second one fails, the third will do the charm, with no margin for failure."

"What did you say?" Dumbledore asked.

"If the first plan fails. . ."

"I heard that. What does it mean?"

"I don't know. She kept saying that over and over."

"So what was the first plan?"

"Seducing Harry."

"And did it succeed?" Dumbledore asked carefully, motioning to Harry to be quiet when the boy started to protest.

"No," she said, a frown on her face. "She took me over partway through and ruined it."

"What?" Harry said, completely confused and still stuck on a certain point of her revelation. "Hermione, you're under Veritaserum, so you have to tell the truth. Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Do you love Ron?"

"Yes."

"You can't love us both!"

"I do love you both."

Harry threw his hands up in the air and turned away from her in disgust. "I don't know what to ask her," he muttered. "I can't sort out the answers we're getting."

"You're too emotionally involved, Harry," Remus said quietly. "Let Albus handle it."

Harry growled in response.

"When you say she took you over and ruined it, what do you mean? She ruined the seduction?" Dumbledore asked.

"She started plan two without letting me finish plan one."

"What was plan one?"

"Seducing Harry."

"How was that supposed to kill Harry?"

"I had potion on my skin that would kill him, but he never kissed anything but my mouth."

"Ask her why she didn't have on poison lipstick like Parvati did that time," Ginny prompted.

"Miss Granger, did you hear Miss Weasley's question?" Dumbledore said calmly.

"Yes."

"And what's the answer?"

"Madam Desiree knows I don't wear lipstick often, so she didn't make me use it because she thought that would make Harry suspicious."

"Very logical. And what was plan two?"

"Poison."

Dumbledore looked at Harry in sudden concern. "Poison?"

Harry shrugged.

"Miss Granger, what do you mean about the poison?"

"I scratched him repeatedly. He should be dead by now. It's because he isn't that the knife appeared. I think the knife was a flagon of potion that transfigured after some time went by without Harry dying."

"That would explain the manicure," Dumbledore said heavily, casting a worried eye at Harry.

"Harry, do you still have scratches on you?" Remus asked.

"Yes, they haven't healed yet," he agreed. He glanced ruefully at Ginny. "Ginny's tried to get me to go to Madam Pomfrey again and again, but I wouldn't do it. Ginny's been putting essence of murtlap on it since the day after it happened."

"Murtlap? Why that?" Snape snapped.

"It helped when my hand was cut from that foul quill Umbridge made me use to write lines last year," Harry replied.

"Not a bad idea to ease pain and speed healing," Snape said grudgingly. "I was just surprised you would think of that by yourself."

Harry looked at Hermione. "It was Hermione's idea," he said simply, his eyes pain-filled as he looked at his best friend who'd been so cruelly used to get to him.

"Can anyone think of any more questions we should ask Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked. "The Veritaserum will wear off soon."

"Have you seen this Madam Desiree any time since that visit to Hogsmeade?" Remus asked her.

"No."

"Had you ever seen her before you first met her in The Ladies Shop?" he continued.

"No. Yes. I'm not sure."

"Explain."

"Sometimes I look in the mirror and see a woman with long black hair and a thin, craggy face instead of me. I've seen that face before," Hermione said. "It isn't me."

"Who is it?"

"It's the woman who's possessing me."

"Do you recognize her?" Remus persisted.

"Yes. It's Bellatrix Lestrange. I remember seeing her picture at Grimmauld Place."

Dumbledore looked up at the others in his office. "Well done, Remus. Fawkes!" His phoenix landed on his shoulder. He scribbled a note and handed it to the beautiful scarlet and gold bird. "Please take this information to the Order, Fawkes." As the phoenix disappeared in a flash of light, Dumbledore explained to the gathering, "I've instructed them to send operatives to The Ladies Place in Hogsmeade right away. I also warned them that the owner might be Bellatrix Lestrange using a Glamour Spell or Polyjuice as a disguise, and that I'd like her captured, not killed, if at all possible."

"She deserves to die!" Harry snarled, leaping to his feet, his hands gnarled into tight fists, rage pouring from him in waves the others could feel.

"But she may give us valuable information, Harry. We can't ignore that in the name of revenge," Dumbledore said calmly, placing a hand on the angry boy's shoulder.

"I could," Harry growled. "Look at all the harm she's done, not to mention killing Sirius!"

"I know, dear boy, I do understand," Dumbledore began. "Breathe deeply, please, Harry. We need you to be rational. You can't be rational when you're enraged." He watched the boy struggle to control himself, then turned back to Hermione. "All right, Miss Granger, I think we have all the information we need from you. You need to rest for a few moments. When you wake up, you'll remember everything we've discussed. Thank you so much for your help."

He looked at Harry, who was still battling his temper. "Well, let's see, then," he said, standing up and gesturing for the boy to stand in front of him.

Harry removed his robes, sweater and shirt, and stood shivering in the cold stone room in just his trousers and shoes. The scratches were still red and angry-looking, and those little bumps Ginny had noticed were blotchy purple and blood-red, with startling yellow stripes. They looked as if they'd be hot to the touch.

"These don't look good at all," the professor said in a concerned voice. "Professor Snape, would you come look at these, please? And Miss Weasley, would you please go to my fireplace and send for Madam Pomfrey?"

"Not the hospital wing again!" Harry cried. "No! I'm fine!"

"You're not fine, dear boy," Dumbledore said in a gentle voice.

Snape leaned close to Harry's back, touching the scratches here and there. Harry cried out and flinched hard the first time he did this, then bore the rest of the pain stoically.

"These bumps have something in them," Snape said. "They need to come out. It's possible the poison was on Miss Granger's fingernails, but I think it's more likely that these bumps are something she's inserted under Potter's skin."

"Something she inserted?" Harry gasped. "How? I didn't hold still long enough for her to insert things in my skin."

"These would have been attached to her fingernails or fingertips, depending on the design," Snape drawled offhandedly. "If they are what I believe they are, these are capsules used to deliver certain specific types of poisons, any one of which would kill a full-grown hippogriff. So this witch, whoever she is, must not be as good at potions as she thinks she is, or you would have died long ago." As he continued his examination, he found one of the bumps had something sticking out of it. "This one isn't as deep as the others. I just might be able to get it loose. If I can, I can analyse what's in it and bring up the right antidotes."

"Go ahead, Severus," Dumbledore prompted.

"Is that all right with you, Harry?" Remus said in concern.

"Yeah. Let's just get this over with," Harry said, his mouth a thin, determined line, his face resigned, his body tense in anticipation of pain. He leaned forward and grasped the edge of Dumbledore's desk, his knuckles white, his jaw clenched. "I'm ready," he said grimly.

Snape worked very slowly, using his wand to ease the tiny, sharp-tipped capsule out bit by bit until it lay undamaged in a flagon he'd pulled from his pocket. "I will run a few tests and be back as soon as possible with the right antidote. I believe this is a fast-acting poison. A single capsule of this poison should have killed Potter right away. For him to survive several of them with no real illness as a result? That's remarkable, even for Saint Potter," he said dryly. Harry sneered in response but didn't say anything.

"Have you been feeling quite well?" Remus asked Harry.

"No, I've been feeling achy and tired for a couple of weeks," the boy responded. "These scratches really hurt. The pain from them hasn't lessened at all. And the bumps itch like mad. I've been doing my best not to scratch them."

"It's been a couple of weeks since the incident with Hermione, right?" Remus prompted.

"Yes," Harry answered, turning a straight wooden chair around backwards and sitting in it with his arms crossed along its back.

"I've got enough information to be going on with. I'll be in my office working on this," Snape said as he swept from the room.

"You flinched when I hugged you in the hall after you had that memory of James," Remus said suddenly. "I asked you if you were all right, and you said you were fine."

Harry sighed and shrugged. "I thought I would be eventually."

"You said you'd bumped yourself on the table, and I believed you," Remus said, giving Harry a look that said he wouldn't be quite so gullible in the future.

"I did bump myself on the table," Harry replied with a shrug and a guilty smile, "but it was my head, not my back, that I bumped."

"Next time you say you're 'fine' when I suspect you may not be, you won't get off so lightly, young man." He smiled fondly at Harry. "I wish I'd known so we could get you treated sooner."

"It isn't your fault," Harry said ruefully. "I'm a bit stubborn, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I did notice that, yes," Remus replied with a chuckle.

While they waited for Madam Pomfrey to arrive, Remus and Dumbledore studied the bumps and scabbed-over scratches on Harry's back. Harry rested with his face in his arms, trying to ignore the pain in his back. Hermione sat in a chair against the opposite wall from Ron and Ginny, who sat, quiet and forgotten, where they'd been left. They were stunned by all they'd heard, and were attempting to understand it all. Hermione was sitting where they'd left her, crying.

"What are you crying for?" Ron asked in disgust, still angry with her. Not only had she broken up with him and snogged his best mate, she'd tried to kill him? For a flagon of hair potion? Ron's brain just refused to process all the information he'd learned in the last half hour.

"I would never hurt Harry. I'd never hurt you. Or Ginny, either. I hope you all know that," Hermione said through her tears.

"Yeah, well, we'll see," Ron said gruffly.

"You'd better hope you haven't hurt Harry badly," Ginny said, her eyes snapping with barely-suppressed fury. "Spell or no spell, I won't be responsible for my actions if anything happens to him!"

"That's my warrior princess," Harry said with a chuckle. He'd raised his head from his arms and followed their conversation with interest. His comment made all three of his friends laugh for a moment and broke some of the tension in the air. Ron stared at Hermione for a long time before speaking again.

"Did you mean those things you said?" he asked.

"Which things?" Hermione said carefully.

"The ones you said to me. When you broke up with me," he said stiffly.

"Ron, I honestly don't know what I said. If it was anything hurtful, then I certainly didn't mean it. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me talk to you in private sometime soon," she asked humbly.

"I'll think about it," he grumbled, then crossed his arms tightly and turned his face away from her, his expression tight and distant.

When Madam Pomfrey arrived, she tutted as she saw Harry's back from a distance, then gasped when she saw it up close. "Mr. Potter, what have you got yourself into this time?"

"Password?" he said calmly.

She leaned in and whispered, "Scar on bum."

"OK. Hermione scratched me. There may have been something on her nails when she did it. She was under an enchantment," Harry told the nurse.

"Poppy, we want to pay particular attention to these bumps," Dumbledore said, pointing out the bumps they'd found on his back.

"I see. . .and what do you think they could be?" she asked.

"A poison delivery system, some kind of capsules. Why they haven't dissolved and delivered their dose is a mystery," Dumbledore replied.

"I see. . . ." She went back to examining Harry. "And are these all the scratches?"

Harry blushed crimson. "She, erm, grabbed my bum. There are some down there, too. And a couple in my scalp, maybe."

"Let's see then," Madam Pomfrey said quickly, ready to get down to business.

"Not with the girls here!" Harry protested. "Do all these people have to see my bare bum?"

"Sorry, Mr. Potter, I got interested in the case and forgot the patient for a moment," she said kindly, patting him gently on the shoulder. "You lot, clear out," she said imperiously.

"We can't let them go far, Poppy," Dumbledore said, almost apologetically. "We're in the middle of some things and need them here."

"All right then, just send the students outside while I examine him, or conjure some screens for me, but do it quickly!" she snapped. "This boy has waited entirely too long for treatment!"

"Yeah, that's what Ginny kept telling me," Harry muttered, with a wry grin and a wink at Ginny as she was ushered out the door along with Hermione. Ron stayed, refusing to budge.

"What about Mr. Weasley?" the nurse asked Harry when she saw Ron staying behind.

"He can stay," Harry replied. "Oh, Professor," he said suddenly to Dumbledore. "Could somebody stay with the girls? Hermione might still attack Ginny, right?" He snorted with sudden laughter. "Or Ginny might attack Hermione, come to think of it."

"I doubt that, in either case, but I'll go out there myself to stay with them. Will that set your mind at ease?" Dumbledore said kindly.

"Yes. Thanks." As Dumbledore followed the girls out of the door, Remus cleared off Dumbledore's desk and did a Cushioning Charm on it so Madam Pomfrey could use it as an examining table. Harry lay face down on the desk, his bum bare to the world, his entire body blushing.

"Crikey, Harry, even your bum's all muscles now," Ron teased uneasily. He was still very confused about what was going on here, but was doing what he could to help out his best mate.

Harry chuckled a bit at Ron's teasing. "Don't go telling everyone or they'll want one just like it," he said with a brief snort of laughter.

"Be still, Mr. Potter. This may hurt a bit," Madam Pomfrey said as she held her wand over one of the bumps. She muttered an incantation but nothing happened. She tried a few other things and still, the bump did not move. "These need to come out of there, but I'm not certain how to do it without cutting into your skin," she said uneasily. "They seem to be quite deep. Perhaps I should send you to St. Mungo's."

"NO!" Harry cried, suddenly lifting himself up on his elbows and twisting around to look at her pleadingly. "You can do it. I know you can. Please, don't send me there!"

"Calm down, calm down. Let me think."

"Go ask Professor Dumbledore if he has any ideas," Harry prompted. "Maybe something from The Refiner's Fire could help?"

A few moments later, the nurse returned from talking with the headmaster. "You were right, he did have an idea, Mr. Potter. He thinks you may be able to push the capsules out with your magic without releasing any of the toxins," she said doubtfully.

"I'll have a go," he said. "Did he say what to do?"

"He said to concentrate on one spot at a time, and to work very slowly. You need to be gentle so you don't break them."

Just then, Snape returned. "Oh my. A display of Potter's bum. How charming," he commented dryly.

"Thanks, glad you like it," Harry snapped.

"Temper, temper, Mr. Potter," Snape warned.

"Severus, did you. . ." Remus began.

"I analysed the poison and found there are three toxins in the capsule. Each one is highly poisonous. Any one of them, in this small a dosage, should have killed you very quickly. You've apparently made someone rather angry with you, Potter."

"Oh, gee, let me guess. . .Voldemort?" Harry snarled. "Can we get on with this please?"

"Do not use the Dark Lord's name so lightly, Potter," Snape cautioned. "It can get you into trouble."

"As if I'm not in trouble already," he retorted.

"I think I'm going to enjoy digging these capsules out of your behind, Potter," Snape sneered with a cruel curl of his lip. "And with no anaesthesia. Lovely."

"Professor Dumbledore suggested Potter might be able to push them out himself," Madam Pomfrey said carefully, looking sideways at Snape. She'd never understood why he was always so hateful to poor Potter. Such a nice boy, and so many bad things had happened to him.

"I have some ideas on how to get them out. Let's try those first. I believe I have a greater chance of getting Potter out of this alive than he would if he tried it himself," Snape replied.

"Yes, do enjoy yourself," Harry snapped, removing his glasses again and burying his face in his arms, willing himself not to flinch no matter what they did to him.

Snape and Madam Pomfrey worked for quite a while trying to get even one of the capsules out of Harry's skin safely. At last, they gave up. "All right, your turn," Madam Pomfrey said. "Try to work it out gently, if you can."

Harry nodded grimly, then concentrated on one of the bumps, the most painful one deep in his back. He was grunting with the effort. He stopped, panting and sweating. "I'm freezing. Can I have a blanket or something?"

"I can do a Warming Charm on you," Madam Pomfrey said.

"Best not to do any magic on his back with those capsules in him," Snape warned.

"Here you go, mate," Ron said, throwing Harry's robes across his back. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks." Harry lay there and caught his breath, then gave it another try.

"Which one are you working on?" Remus asked. "I'll uncover that part of your back so we can catch the capsule when you get it out."

"The one by my shoulder blade, the one that's so deep."

"Keep working on it," Remus encouraged, uncovering that part of Harry's back. "I'll let you know if I see any progress."

Harry said, "Could somebody please give me my wand?" and held his hand out for it. "Now point it at the bump," he directed. Remus pointed the end of the wand at the bump. Harry took a deep breath and concentrated as hard as he could. With a small "pop" the capsule came out of his back. Everyone cheered, and Harry lay gasping for breath, a moan escaping him.

"Is it very painful?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"Oh yeah," he groaned.

"I could give you something for the pain, but I'm afraid if I did, you wouldn't be able to push any more out, and we need to get those out of you as soon as possible," she said, her voice worried.

"Point my wand for me again." One after the other, Harry got the capsules out of his back and buttocks. Madam Pomfrey put ointment on each opening when the capsule was removed, and Snape put each capsule into a separate flagon, so he could test them. Finally, Harry was done. He stood up, wobbling a bit, then pulled up his boxers and trousers, zipped up, buckled his belt and then reached for his discarded shirt. Remus called Dumbledore and the girls back into the office.

"Are you certain that's all of them?" Madam Pomfrey asked. "And leave your shirt and sweater off for now. I want to watch the progress of the healing where I've put the ointment so I'll know if you need more. It shouldn't take very long."

"What about your head, mate? I remember you saying you had a couple of bumps there that itched like mad," Ron said.

"Yeah, I thought I had insect bites or something. I was putting murtlap essence on them at night, and washing my hair every morning to get the goo out from the murtlap. What a mess." Harry felt his head over his left ear. "There are two just there," he said, putting his fingers on either side of the bumps.

Madam Pomfrey parted his black hair to see the bumps. "I can't really see them, your hair is too thick. We may need to shave your head here to get them out and treat the wounds properly," she murmured.

"Shave my head?" Harry said in disbelief. "My hair may be a mess, but it's mine and I like it!"

"Calm down, Harry," Remus said, chuckling. "You can remove the hair from that area without shaving it. Just do what you do for your beard."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling stupid. "How big an area do you need?" he asked the nurse. She held her hand up with her fingers spread in a circle about three inches across. "Put your hand on my head where you need that space to be so I'll know where to put it." She did as he asked. "OK, I've got it," he said, and she backed a step away from him, looking at him curiously. He looked thoughtful a moment, and then a circular bald area about three inches across appeared in his hair just behind and above his left ear, exactly where Madam Pomfrey had indicated she wanted it.

"That's wonderful, Harry! Thank you," Madam Pomfrey said.

"I didn't know Potter was a Metamorphmagus," Snape muttered thoughtfully to Remus.

"We don't know if he is, but he can control his hair and beard," Remus replied quietly.

Madam Pomfrey was busy examining Harry's head. "There you are. Two bumps. Can you remove these as well?"

"Yeah, probably," he said, and then tried the same procedure he'd used before. One of them popped out perfectly well, but the other suddenly dissolved. Harry said a very quiet "Oh!" as his eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed on the floor, his body shuddering, his lips turning blue as he gasped for air.

"*HARRY! HARRY!*" Ginny and Hermione screamed, both running to him.

"Get away from him, you! You've killed him!" Ginny said, throwing a solid punch at Hermione that sent her reeling back into Ron's arms. He promptly dropped her and knelt by Harry's side next to his sister. Hermione sat sobbing where Ron had dropped her, holding her hand to her bruised cheek.

"All this devotion is quite touching, but I can probably cure him if you give me some room," Snape said with a sneer in his voice. "Weasley, you know the drill."

Ron held Harry's head and shoulders up so Snape could put the antidote in his mouth without choking him. Almost instantly, Harry's breathing eased and his lips lost most of their blue tinge. A few moments later, he finally stopped shuddering and opened his eyes. He lay there quietly, looking up at his friends: Ron, who still held him securely in his strong arms; Ginny, who held his hand to her cheek, her face streaked with tears; Remus, his careworn face looking suddenly much older than usual; and Dumbledore, who looked grave but managed to wink at Harry when he caught his eye. Snape sat nearby, a small flagon in his hand, a surprising look of concern on his face that was instantly masked as soon as he noticed Harry looking at him.

Harry groaned as he tried to sit up.

Ron held him tightly. "Just relax, mate, I've got you."

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore asked, his blue eyes full of concern.

"Never better," he replied with a brief grin as he sat there, supported by Ron, shaking his head as if he were dizzy.

"Headache, Potter?" Snape asked.

"No, thanks, I already have one," Harry quipped.

"Ah. His sense of humour, pathetic as it is, is intact. He's fine," Snape said, packing up his flagons of antidotes and the ones with the poison capsules in them.

"Professor?" Harry said, looking up at Snape.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Snape stood looking thoughtfully at his least-favourite pupil. After a moment, he replied, "I'm glad it worked. Try to take better care of yourself in future, all right?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said with a semblance of his cheeky grin. He leaned against Ron for a moment, then tried to sit up again.

"Be still, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey ordered in her no-nonsense tone. "You've just been through quite an ordeal. Please give your poor body time to recover!"

He nodded and relaxed against Ron again.

"Do you want to lie down, mate?" Ron asked, his face concerned.

"I'd rather sit up, if you can manage me," Harry replied, still gasping a bit, and still off-colour. "I can breathe better upright," he said resting his head against Ron's broad shoulder. "D'you mind?"

"Nope, no problem," Ron said, readjusting his hold so he could sit down and lean against the wall rather than kneeling. This way, Harry would be more comfortable as well.

"Thanks, mate," Harry replied softly, resting in his friend's arms. "I'm cold," he murmured feebly.

Remus carefully wrapped Harry's robe around him, keeping it loose across his back. Ginny tucked the robe in a bit more and made sure Harry was well-covered.

"Better?" she asked.

"Yeah," Harry whispered, closing his eyes and concentrating on breathing properly. After a few moments, his colour and breathing were back to normal. He sat up straighter and looked at Dumbledore. "What happened? Why did that one make me ill?"

"I think those two were so close together, when you got one out, the other was damaged somehow. You were focusing on them one at a time, correct?" Harry nodded. "Focusing on one of those, as close as it was to the other – there might have been an 'edge' to the focal point of your spell that somehow broke down the capsule, releasing the toxin. And it looks like you've scratched at those bumps, so there was broken skin close to the bump. The toxin got into your bloodstream there, I imagine."

"So why didn't any of them break before?" Harry wondered. "And why didn't they hurt me through the scratches on my back? Those were open at first. I've been careful not to scratch them, but these on my head drove me mad and I woke myself up scratching them. I tried not to, but I just couldn't bear the itching."

Snape answered. "I noticed when I got that first one out of you that there seemed to be a wall in your skin around the capsule. Your body walled off those capsules somehow, I suppose to protect you from whatever they were."

"That's probably the enchantment your father was working on, Harry, the one I told you about, remember?" Remus said. "He mentioned one of them was a protection against poisons."

"Ginny's necklace has enchantments to protect against poison too," Ron commented. "Would they be the same?"

"I doubt it. James wasn't sharing his research with anyone at the time, and all his notes were lost when Voldemort destroyed Godric's Hollow," Remus replied.

"A shame, really," Snape conceded reluctantly. "James Potter was a git in many ways, but even I have to admit that he was inordinately good at potions. His research being lost is a terrible waste."

Harry stared open-mouthed at Snape. He would never have expected the man to say anything that positive about his dad. It was a shock. He'd remember today for a long time, for many reasons, but this revelation of Snape's would be near the top of the list.

Ginny was sitting next to Harry, rubbing his shoulder and arm gently. "Are you feeling better now?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, actually I am," he said, smiling at her.

"Let me see your scalp, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said, leaning over Harry and Ron to examine Harry's head. "Hmmm. Interesting."

"What?" Harry asked.

"The antidote – or something – seems to have healed these lesions in your head. They're barely noticeable now. I don't think they need any ointment." She looked him seriously in the eye. "Do you need something for pain?"

"No, I'm fine now," he assured her.

"You're fine now," she said with a smile. "Are you certain?" She reached around him and touched his back very lightly, making him flinch away from her hand.

"Well, maybe a little something," he replied ruefully.

"A little something would probably be just about right," she commented, shaking her head and smiling at him. "It should require a lot, but you're a remarkable young man." She handed him a small flagon. "Two small sips." He sipped obediently. "All right. You may grow your hair back now if you'd like."

"Thanks," Harry said, and started to get that thoughtful look on his face.

"Hey, mate," Ron whispered in his ear. "Throw in a beard while you're at it. Ginny will love it and it will freak Snape out."

Harry chuckled, and followed Ron's suggestion. Ginny laughed out loud when she saw his beard appear. Snape's eyes bugged out for a second, and then he backed away from the boy, staring at him oddly.

"That's a very nice trick, Harry," Dumbledore said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, and Ginny loves it, don't you?" Harry replied, reaching out to tug on Ginny's long hair.

"Yes, I do," she giggled.

"Let me look at your back, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said. "I want to see how those wounds are now that the ointment has had a chance to work." Ron helped Harry lift the robes and sit up more so she could inspect his wounds. The scratches were still there, but already healing well. The vile colours indicating infected spots had already disappeared. "I think you'll do, Mr. Potter," she said with a smile. "No hospital wing this time."

"That's great!" he said happily. He began trying to get up but was held down by Ron and Ginny until Ron could get up and help him.

"You've been sick, mate, take it easy!" Ron laughed as he helped Harry to his feet.

"I feel loads better now," Harry said with a grin. "And I've got two redheads to lean on, so I'll be fine," he added, wrapping one arm around Ginny's shoulders and grasping Ron's broad shoulder with his other hand. Ron draped Harry's robes around his bare shoulders.

Across the room, Hermione sat alone, tears still shining on her face. When she saw Harry looking at her, she sniffed a few times, then said, "I'm glad you're better," in a very small voice.

"I'm glad you're yourself again," he replied sincerely. He let go of the Weasleys and wobbled over to her, sitting down with a "thump" next to her. "Oops, sorry about that. Didn't mean to fall on the furniture," he said with a smirk. "You OK?" he asked her, leaning over to speak softly in her ear.

She looked up at him, her eyes wary and frightened. "I'll be fine."

"Don't be afraid of me, Hermione. I'm not angry with you anymore. It wasn't your fault," Harry said kindly.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said timidly. She glanced over his shoulder and met the eyes of his two redheaded bodyguards. "It's them."

"You're afraid of Ron and Ginny?" he said, glancing from her to them in surprise. She nodded. "Why?"

"I don't think they believe me. I don't think they believe any of this."

"How could they not believe you attacked me? I was scratched all over, the evidence was there. They believe that. They also saw us release you from that enchantment," he reasoned.

"They don't look like they believe I was enchanted," she said, trying to make herself smaller as the Weasleys approached.

"Ginny? Ron? Do you believe she was enchanted?" Harry asked them, genuinely curious about their answers. He believed Hermione, so he thought they would too, but what if they didn't?

Both Weasleys nodded.

"They believe you. So where's the problem?" Harry asked Hermione.

"I think it's me," Ginny offered. "I attacked Hermione when you collapsed."

"You did?"

"Remember your 'warrior princess' crack? Well, I turned into one when you collapsed. I decked Hermione."

"Yeah, Harry, you should've seen it! I didn't know my baby sister could throw that good a punch!" Ron chortled, giving his baby sister a look of admiration.

"Learned it from Fred and George," Ginny cracked with a cheeky grin.

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione grumbled, pulling away from Harry's side as if she were going to leave.

"Oh, no you don't," Harry said, grabbing her arm. "We're going to straighten this out right now."

"Straighten what out?" she asked.

"Us. All four of us," he replied. He looked at the gathered adults, who were conferring on the opposite side of the room. "They aren't paying any attention to us right now. We need to mend some fences. Ginny, are you angry with Hermione?"

"No. I was angry that you were hurt, but now that I've had time to think about it, I realize those things she put in your skin were part of the enchantment she was under, so I guess it wasn't her fault. So no, I'm not angry with you, Hermione. I'm sorry I hit you, but I was pretty upset at the time," Ginny said sincerely.

"Yeah, I was too," Hermione replied. "Thanks."

"Ron?" Harry said. "Are you still angry with Hermione?"

Ron took his time. "I was hurt. Really badly hurt. I had Harry turn me into a collie so I wouldn't have to be me anymore, at least for a while. That was the only time I wasn't completely miserable. You said some awful things to me, Hermione. Maybe I deserved some of them. I probably shouldn't be jealous of Viktor Krum. Harry says he's not jealous of Ginny's old boyfriends, and she's still friends with all of them. So I probably shouldn't be jealous of Viktor Krum. But he's . . .." Ron hesitated, the words coming slowly and with apparent difficulty, "he's an international Quidditch star and he's older, and I'm just a school boy you've known for years. And . . . he's rich, too. Somehow, I just don't think I compare with him very well. I guess I shouldn't let that bother me too much, but it *does* bother me. I don't know how to overcome that. . .but I'll try." He stopped speaking for a moment, but everyone could see he still had more to say. "If I didn't care about you so much, you wouldn't be able to hurt me the way you did."

Hermione had tears in her eyes again. "I'm so sorry, Ron. I didn't mean those things. That wasn't me talking. I hope you know that."

"So do you still like me?" he asked hesitantly, his head bowed so he had to peek out from under his fringe.

"I haven't fancied anyone else, Ron, not ever," she replied. "That's the truth."

"Really?" His face was growing hopeful, a light coming back into his eyes that hadn't been seen for weeks.

"Yes." She reached a hesitant hand out to him, and he took it gingerly. Then he laced his fingers through hers and pulled her to her feet and into his arms.

"I've missed you," he murmured as he held her.

"Me too," she replied.

Harry smiled at them, and then pulled Ginny into his lap. "And they all lived happily ever after – at least for a day or so," he chuckled, burying his face in the thick red hair covering her shoulders.

Chapter 25 – Baying at the Moon

Harry, Ron and Hermione had finished with classes for the day and were in the seventh floor corridor on their way to the Common Room to drop off their books before going to dinner. Harry had been bouncing around in excitement most of the day, but he wouldn't say why. He caught a glimpse of Remus going down a flight of stairs several floors down and shouted down through the stairwell, "Remus! Wait a minute!" He turned back to his friends. "I'll catch you up in the Great Hall – save me a place!"

"OK," they said, laughing at his eagerness to race down multiple flights of stairs.

"What's he so excited about?" Hermione asked.

"I think he's going to tell Remus his latest secret," Ron said, a smirk on his face. "What I'd give to see Remus's face when he hears!"

"His latest secret?" Hermione asked curiously. "What is it?"

"I'll let Harry tell you. It's his secret, after all. Remus will love it, though," Ron said with a chuckle.

"Remus! Wait! I need to talk to you!" Harry called, his voice echoing through the many moving staircases. He bounded down the stairs three or four at a time, sometimes jumping half a flight at a time, sometimes sliding on a banister, which usually tried to buck him off, trying to catch up with his godfather.

Remus stood where he'd been when he first heard Harry's voice echoing around him, the rebounding sound making it difficult to work out where his godson actually was. "Oh, there you are, Harry! I heard you, but couldn't tell where. . .what are you so excited about?" he said as his godson landed gasping for breath next to him at the bottom of the staircase.

"I. . .have. . .to. . ." Harry stopped talking, holding his hand up as he panted, completely out of breath. "Wait," he said, still gasping after racing down five floors of stairs, some of which moved and made him do even more flights to catch up with his godfather. He bent over, his hands on his knees, finally getting his breathing close to normal again. "There, that's better," he said after a moment. His eyes were sparkling, his face alight with excitement and split wide in a grin of delight. "I've got something to show you," he said, looking around to see who was watching. A few younger students were passing by, their eyes wide, as usual, at the sight of the famous Harry Potter. "Come in here," Harry said, leading Remus to the empty Charms classroom.

"What is it?" Remus asked, amused at the boy's enthusiasm.

"Watch!" Harry said, holding his finger up in front of his face for a moment in the classic "wait a second" gesture, then grinning madly as dark grey fur covered his body. His head elongated into a snout, and his ears became upright and triangular. As he dropped to all fours, a long bushy tail wagged behind him. The huge grey wolf cavorted around Remus, rolling over, bounding from the back to the front of the classroom in three huge leaps, jumping up and down off the desks, chasing its tail. Remus clapped his hands in delight, laughing as Harry-the-wolf played around the room, then slid to a stop in front of him, sitting with its

tongue lolling out in a happy doggy laugh, its tail thumping the floor. Harry changed back into himself and said, "Well?"

"That's wonderful!" Remus said, still amused by the wolf's antics. "How many animals is this now, seven? Eight?"

"I don't know –something like that, I guess," Harry said with a huge grin. "I've stopped counting."

"Why a wolf? He's quite a handsome one, by the way. Well done! And the eyes aren't green this time – I could barely see the mark from your scar. You're getting better at hiding your identity."

"I've been working on that with all of them but the cat, since that's the one I registered," Harry said. He paused, almost holding his breath, then with his eyes dancing in excitement, blurted, "I did the wolf for you."

"For me? Why?"

"For when you don't get your potion in time. Now I can keep you company the way my dad and Sirius did." He was grinning, and still bouncing on his toes, thrilled with what he'd accomplished and elated that he had found a way to help his godfather.

Remus felt tears burning his eyes. "Oh, Harry, you didn't need to do that for me," he began.

"I wanted to. I can keep you company in your office even when you do have your potion." He put his hand on his godfather's shoulder and his face grew serious. "You don't have to be alone anymore when you change. I want to be there for you, like my dad, like Sirius, so you won't be alone."

Remus couldn't speak for a moment. He pulled Harry into a warm embrace. "What a generous thing for you to do."

"I've been wanting to keep you company when you change for quite a while, but I couldn't work out an animal form I thought could stand up to your werewolf until I was able to do this wolf. My black dog is a bit of a wimp," he said with a laugh. "The thestral is too big to stay in your office with you. The cat would be dinner for your werewolf, I imagine. I didn't think a bird would be as much fun as company for you as a dog would, then I thought of doing a wolf. The wolf is tough. He can take whatever you dish out!"

"This is so kind of you, Harry. I mean that. Thank you."

"I hoped you'd like the idea. And if your potion doesn't put you to sleep, we can run around the grounds at night if you want. I can change Ron into a collie and he can come along too, if that's all right with you," Harry said eagerly. "Would he be safe if I turned him into a collie? He can do a partial transformation now, but he still can't turn into the collie completely by himself. He really enjoys being the collie, though."

"Yes, he'd be safe as a collie. You two want to go and bay at the moon, eh?" Remus said, amused.

"Yeah, something like that," Harry said. He was still bouncing from excitement. "The wolf is so cool! I don't know why it took me so long to work out how to do it, but I'm glad I did."

"I am too. This full moon will be a lot more enjoyable for me, thanks to you – and Ron too, if he wants to join us. Baying at the moon can be fun if you do it with friends," Remus said with a smile. The two of them headed toward the Great Hall for dinner. "I've been meaning to ask you, Harry. . ."

"Yes?"

"How are Ron and Hermione doing since you and Dumbledore took that enchantment off her?"

"They're becoming close again. It took Ron some time to work through a lot of stuff. He was angry with me for a few days too, but since he actually saw what happened when we released her from the spell, and the injuries on my back, it was easier for him to accept that she acted the way she did because she was under a spell and that I was just plain stupid," Harry replied. "It just took him a while. I can't blame him."

"You weren't stupid. You were trying to help a friend."

"Yeah, so I thought. Stupid, eh?"

"It's never stupid to help a friend. It's just a good idea to find out first what the friend wants you to do," Remus teased, winking at Harry.

"I won't make that mistake again!" Harry said with a grimace. "By the way, I never asked you how you happened to know about that spell. Were you looking for something in particular when you ran across it, or did you just find it while browsing through the books, or what?"

Remus stopped walking and turned to look at Harry quite seriously. "I was looking for spells that might be used against you. Since you've been attacked by girls under some kind of spell a couple of times already this year, I thought it might happen again. We have never caught the person who set those girls on you, so they're still out there doing whatever they can to harm you. So I've been researching spells that use a woman as a way to harm a man – or a girl to harm a boy, in this case, I suppose. The Black Widow Curse was just one of several I found, but when you mentioned the hairs, and with some of the information Hermione shared, it reminded me of that spell."

"Then I'm glad you were doing that research so we could recognize the spell and work out how to undo it," Harry said sincerely. "I'm glad I don't have to worry about Hermione coming after me again. She knows more hexes and jinxes than anyone in D.A. I'd hate to get on the wrong side of her." He walked quietly a few more moments. "I couldn't believe it when she attacked me. I think that's why it took me so long to get serious about defending myself – I just couldn't accept that it was happening."

"That's understandable," Remus agreed.

"Did they catch that woman from The Ladies Shop? Was she Bellatrix Lestrange?" Harry asked.

"No, she escaped. We don't know if she's Bellatrix or not. When we went to apprehend her, the shop was closed and nobody had seen her for a few days. We're following up leads now."

Harry nodded, his face growing serious. "I wish they'd caught her. It would be nice to know if she was behind these things. If she was behind them, then her being captured would mean my life would be a bit easier, you know?"

Remus nodded, rubbing his godson's back comfortingly. "I know. I'm sorry we didn't catch her. We have people out there working on the case. She can't get away forever."

"If she was Bellatrix," Harry asked suddenly, "why did she send all these girls to try to kill me? I've been in her shop with Ginny. Why wouldn't she just attack me when we were in the same room?"

"Probably because she wanted to live to fight another day, Harry," Remus said quietly. "She knows what a powerful wizard you were the last time you two saw each other – you survived a fight with a much greater force, despite not knowing nearly as much magic as they did, and you've had more time to develop your skills since then. She might think she stands a better chance of success if she's sneaky about the attack. Women often use different ways of attacking enemies than men do. They tend to be stealthier, using poisons, blackmail and entrapment to defeat their enemies rather than fighting face to face as men do. She's a good fighter, no doubt, but if this was Bellatrix, she was playing to her strengths by trying to poison you. Sirius told me once she was quite good at Potions – but then he added that she was never quite as good as she thought she was." Remus smiled a bit as he studied the boy's expression, and wished he had better answers for him. "At least, that seems logical to me. It's entirely possible that this woman wasn't Bellatrix, but some other witch who's gone to the Dark side."

Harry glanced at his godfather a moment, then went back to his dark thoughts. Remus was sorry Harry's mood had gone from elation to deadly serious so quickly. He cast about for something fun to talk about, to brighten Harry's eyes again. "How are you and Ginny doing since all this happened?" he asked, a twinkle in his eye. He'd seen them together and, from all appearances, their relationship had survived the situation with no real harm done.

"We're doing fine," Harry said, smiling at the thought of her. "She's. . .I think she's probably the best thing that ever happened to me, other than finding out I'm a wizard."

"I'm happy for you, Harry," Remus said, patting his godson on the shoulder. Just then, they reached the doors of the Great Hall. Halfway down the Gryffindor table, they could see Ginny's long mane of fiery red hair cascading down her back. Ron sat across from her, so tall he was head and shoulders above the students around him. They could just see the top of the mop of curls that marked where Hermione sat next to Ron. "Have a nice dinner, Harry," Remus said, grinning as he watched the boy jogging down the aisle between tables, plopping into place beside Ginny, a grin already on his face as he greeted his friends.

Harry snuck up behind Ginny in the hall, put his long hands over her eyes and said "Guess who?" in a high, silly voice.

"Let's see now. . .Fred? Nah. George! Nope. Silly me, they don't go to Hogwart's anymore anyway! Let's see. . .Ron? No. I wonder who it could be?"

"Somebody you know pretty well and seem to like a lot," Harry hinted, a broad grin on his face.

"OH! Gilderoy Lockhart!" she said, feigning a delighted swoon.

Harry burst out laughing and turned her around by her shoulders. "I don't think so. Is there something you need to tell me about the two of you?"

"Oh, it's only you," she said, acting disappointed. "Gee, I thought it might be someone special, or famous, or a hero or something.'

Harry snorted, then lifted her off her feet and swung her around. She squealed as he did so. "What are you so happy about?" she asked when she could catch her breath.

"There's a Hogsmeade weekend this weekend. I'm looking forward to it. I thought I might try to find some pretty girl to go with me," he said, still holding her off the ground, his arms around her waist, with Ginny lifted high enough to be eye to eye with him, her arms wrapped loosely around his neck.

"Oh, some pretty girl, eh? Did you have anyone in mind?"

"Nah, I thought I'd just grab some girl in the corridor." He pretended to be surprised. "Oh, hang on! I just grabbed you, didn't I?" he said with a laugh. "Want to go to Hogsmeade with me this weekend, young lady?"

"I don't know. I was waiting for this handsome guy with black hair and green eyes I've seen hanging around school to ask me. If he doesn't, I'll think about it," she said demurely.

"Well, if he hasn't asked you yet, he's a git," Harry said, grinning. "Whaddya say? Want to go with me instead?"

Ginny couldn't hold her laughter in any longer. "You are so silly sometimes!" she giggled, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck and hugging him. As she held him close, she whispered, "I'd love to go to Hogsmeade with you, Harry."

On Saturday, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione all walked to Hogsmeade, heavily bundled up against the cold weather. The trees were hung with icicles, the result of an overnight ice storm. Everyone was walking carefully in paths created in the ice by warming charms. The groups of students walked close together for warmth as well as companionship, their breath frosting the air. As they settled into their seats in the Three Broomsticks, warm butterbeers in hand, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione smiled at each other, cherishing the fact that their friendship was fully restored. They'd passed the closed and shuttered Ladies' Shop on their way to the pub.

"What do you want to do today?" Ron asked, wiping butterbeer foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I have some shopping to do," Harry said. "It won't take long." He turned sparkling eyes on Ginny as he said this. "And you can't go."

"Well, for your information, dear sir, I, too, have shopping to do. And you can't go either!" Ginny replied tartly.

"Remind me why we came to Hogsmeade together then?" Harry said, chuckling.

Ginny turned to him, grabbed his face in both her hands, and planted a lovely warm kiss on his lips. "That's why."

Harry grinned. "Oh yeah, now I remember," he said, laughing. "So, Ron? D'you want to go with me, and the girls can shop together? Then we can meet back here in an hour or so? Will that work for everybody?"

There was general agreement, and they left the pub after finishing their drinks. Harry made sure he and Ron were out of sight of the girls and went straight to the jeweller's. "Hi, Mr. Joyero," he said as he entered the shop. "Remember those earrings. . .?"

"Mr. Potter, how nice to see you again! Yes, of course, I remember them well. Are you ready to purchase them?" the owner said as he unlocked the case.

"Yes. That necklace is wonderful. I'd like to get charms put on the earrings as well, if you can," Harry said.

"What kind of charms would you like? Love charms?" the man said with a smile.

"No, that's OK," Harry said, blushing. "I'd like protective charms on them. What can you do?"

"I can do charms that protect against certain hexes and jinxes," he offered.

"Which ones?"

"Most of the minor, annoying ones children like to use on each other, as well as some of the more serious ones. I have a list here somewhere," Joyero said, digging through a cabinet. "Ah, here we go," he said as he handed the list over.

"Can you do all of these protections on the earrings?" Harry said in amazement.

Ron's mouth was hanging open as he studied the list. "Whoa. Nobody at school will be able to hex her if she's wearing these!"

"They won't protect her from everything, mind you," the jeweller cautioned, "but they will save her having to deal with the more bothersome ones. Also, if she gets hit with a serious spell, there is some protection from spell damage. Not a lot, of course, since these are so small, but still, every bit of protection we can get these days is helpful, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, I do agree," Harry said. "I'll take them. How much are they? And how much for the protective charms?"

The deal was completed and Harry paced the little shop, waiting for the charms to be put on. Ron sighed. "I wish I could buy something like that for Hermione," he said. "If she'd had something like that, maybe she wouldn't have been . . ."

"Ask him if he can do that to silver jewellery, Ron," Harry suggested. "You'll never know unless you ask."

Ron got out his money bag and weighed it in his hand. He knew to the knut how much money he had, and it wasn't much.

When Joyero came back with Ginny's earrings nicely wrapped in a beautiful gift box, Ron blurted out, "D'you have anything. . ." he ran out of steam.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley, yes, I remember the lovely charm bracelet you bought for your girlfriend. Did she like it?"

"Yes, she loves it. She wears it all the time," he said. "D'you have, um. . ."

"Would you, perhaps, be interested in a lovely silver pendant to go with the bracelet?" the jeweller asked.

"Yes. With protective charms on it," Ron said. "But I can't afford a lot," he said humbly.

"I have several pieces that may do nicely," the man said, pulling out a tray of silver pendants. Soon, Ron stood gazing at the piece he truly wanted to buy her – a beautiful shape that looked like an abstract phoenix, all flowing lines and movement captured in silver.

"How much?" Ron said cautiously.

The man studied Ron's earnest face, seeing the love shining in his eyes, and the shabbiness of his clothes. He quoted a price much lower than the pendant's real price. Who was he to stand in the way of true love? Ron had barely enough money to cover the pendant, much less the chain or the protective charms, but soon he was carrying his own beautifully wrapped gift for his girlfriend, complete with every protective charm the jeweller could put on it. Ron's face shone with pride.

"D'you think she'll like it?" he asked Harry, a worried frown on his face.

"She will love it, Ron. It's beautiful," Harry assured him. "And I'm sure she'll appreciate the protections he put on it, as well."

"Yeah. It's good there's something that can protect them when we're not around," Ron said earnestly.

Harry smiled to himself. Hermione was the match of nearly any wizard or witch he'd ever met, but he understood what Ron meant. Ginny was a fighter too, but he wanted her as protected as possible. He clutched the gift box in his hand, hoping his gift would help keep her from harm.

They met the girls in the Three Broomsticks, their gifts carefully stowed in their pockets. The two couples went their separate ways for a while. Harry and Ginny walked down the path toward school, turning aside to a little clearing in the woods Harry had found while flying as a raven. Ginny conjured a fire and Harry conjured a big squashy armchair for them to sit in. A warming charm around them made them truly cosy. They snogged for a while, then simply held each other, contented just to be together.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Harry murmured, kissing her gently on the temple.

"Happy Valentine's Day to you, too," she said, turning her face to kiss him. "I got you something," she said with a smile.

"I got you something too." He smiled at her, kissing her cold-pinked cheeks and nose before kissing her lips again. "Do you want your present?"

"Yes! Do you want yours?"

"Even swap? Or do I have to wrestle you for it?" he teased, trying to tickle her through all her layers of clothing.

"Swap! Swap!" she giggled, wriggling around to evade his tickling fingers.

"Did you say 'swap' or 'stop'?" he laughed, burrowing under her hair to her neck and blowing a raspberry there, making her giggle even more.

"Either! Both! Whatever!" she chuckled. "You are so bad."

"Who me? You must have me confused with someone else," he said, grinning and looking for more ways to gently torment her.

"What did you get me? You're keeping me waiting, Potter!" she demanded, then burst into giggles again.

"OK, if you insist," he said, feigning resignation. "Here."

Ginny glowed when she saw the beautifully wrapped package. "Oh, Harry, what have you done this time?"

"Dunno. Hopefully, you'll like it."

Ginny opened the package as slowly as possible, careful not to tear the paper or muss the ribbons.

"Why are you taking so long?" Harry asked, amused.

"It's too pretty to mess up," she said seriously. She looked up at him with glowing eyes. "It's beautiful."

"That's just the wrapping," Harry said, teasing her. "There actually is a present inside."

"Hold your hippogriffs, I'm getting there!" Finally, she reached the box inside the pretty wrappings and opened it ever so slowly. She gasped at the sight of the gold and ruby Gryffindor lion earrings inside. "Oh, Harry. They're beautiful!" She carefully closed the box and grasped it tightly in her hand before throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him closely. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! They're ever so lovely!" She sat up and opened the box again, admiring them a few moments longer. Her eyes sparkled as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small package. "Here's yours. I hope you like it."

Harry started to open his gift as slowly as she had opened hers, then got a wicked gleam in his eye and ripped the paper off quickly, making her laugh. Inside the small box was a single earring, a small golden Gryffindor lion with a tiny ruby set in it. "Wow, that's cool," Harry said with a smile. "You want me to wear an earring like Bill, eh?"

"I thought you liked Bill's earring," she began hesitantly.

"I do," he said quickly. "It really is cool. Thanks!"

"It's only gold-plated, not real gold like the ones you gave me," she apologized.

"Ginny, I think it's amazing. Thanks. Now I have to get an ear pierced."

"Me too," she said. "Let's go to town and get it done together."

"OK – we can suffer together," he teased. "Does this have any powers or protections on it?" he asked as he held the earring up, watching how the tiny faceted ruby caught the light.

"No. I couldn't afford the place you used where they put powers on the jewellery." She looked at her own earrings. "These have some powers, don't they?"

"Yes. They have protections against a whole list of hexes, jinxes and spells. He gave me a copy of the list," Harry said, pulling a small piece of parchment out of his pocket and handing it to her.

"I wish I could've got some protections on yours. If any of us need them, it's you," she said sadly.

"Hey, you," he said, nuzzling her neck. "I love my earring. We can go to the place where I got yours and have some protections added if you want."

"I can't afford them, Harry."

"You bought the earring. I'll buy the protections. Then I'll be safer and you'll be happy, right?" He tapped her gently on the nose.

"Yes, that will work. I hope it's not too expensive. I hate that you have to pay for part of your present."

"Maybe he will throw it in with piercing our ears. I think he does that there."

They headed back to the village and visited the jeweller, who was happy to put protections on Harry's earring as well as pierce their ears.

"Wow, that didn't hurt at all!" Ginny said, amazed, when hers were done. "I thought it would hurt a little."

"Are you kidding?" Harry said, acting wounded as Mr. Joyero finished piercing his ear. "I'm dying here! This is agony!"

"Oh you," she said, poking him gently in his ribs, which were well-padded by all his winter clothes. "You're such a crybaby."

When they met Ron and Hermione in the Three Broomsticks, the girls exchanged oooo's and ahhh's over their new jewellery. Hermione had bought Ron a compass for his broom so he could "always find his way back to me," she said with a smile. She loved her silver pendant and swore she'd never take it off. Ron and Hermione were amazed to see Harry and Ginny wearing earrings that nearly matched.

"Gee, someone might think you two were going out together or something," Ron teased about their matching earrings. Harry and Ginny just grinned at each other, while treading softly on each other's toes under the table.

"Harry!" Dumbledore called in greeting several weeks later, seeing Harry in the corridor as the students hurried to their classes. "Could I have a word?" Harry turned around and joined his headmaster, who led him into the spiral staircase up to his office.

"How are you feeling these days?" Dumbledore asked kindly as he offered Harry a lemon drop and indicated a chair for Harry to sit in.

"I'm fine," Harry said with a smile.

"You are blessed with a strong constitution. You heal so quickly," Dumbledore commented. "That's wonderful. What are your plans for the Easter holiday?"

"I don't know. Either go to The Burrow with Ron and Ginny, or to Grimmauld Place with Remus. I haven't really thought about it yet."

"I was wondering if you would be interested in a project I have in mind?" Dumbledore said with a tilt of his head and a twinkle in his eye.

Harry grinned. Dumbledore's expression guaranteed this project, whatever it was, would be fun. "I promised Ginny never to agree to anything without knowing what it was. So tell me what you have in mind, and I'll let you know if I'm interested," he said dutifully.

"Wisely said!" Dumbledore said, laughing. "I am concerned about Buckbeak. He doesn't get any exercise anymore, and it's simply not fair to him for him to stay cooped up in that house. I've been in touch with Charlie Weasley. He says there's a hippogriff sanctuary in Rumania that he's working with now, as well as doing his dragon research. Hippogriffs are an endangered species there, and the few they have are becoming terribly inbred. They could do with a new bloodline to strengthen the herd they have. So he'd be willing to take Buckbeak if we could get him there."

Harry had an idea what was coming, but made Dumbledore spell it out anyway. "How do you propose getting him there? And how do I fit in your plans?"

"Buckbeak likes you tremendously, much more so than anyone else who's come in contact with him since Hagrid. I'd like you to fly him to Rumania for me."

"And how will I get back here?"

"You can return on a broom, or fly as a thestral, which would actually be faster. I know you're becoming proficient at Apparating now, but you can't Apparate across national borders, so the fastest and most secret way for you to travel is to fly. Are you interested?"

"Can Ron come with me?" Harry asked, his eyes bright with excitement. This sounded like a great way to spend the Easter holidays!

"Certainly, if he'd like. Buckbeak can carry both of you easily, and Mr. Weasley can carry your broomsticks in his pocket, with a Shrinking Charm on them, so you can use the brooms in case you get tired flying back as a thestral. It's a day and a half long trip each way. Charlie told me about a place where you will be able to rest for the night each way."

"That sounds great, Professor. Yes, I'll do it," Harry said with a grin. "And I think Ron will be excited about it as well. He hasn't seen Charlie in a while." He thought a moment. "Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Does Hagrid know what happened to Buckbeak?"

"No, he's never been told."

"May we stop off and let him say goodbye to Buckbeak, then? And tell him what really happened?"

"I think that's a grand idea, Harry! Certainly. I'll make the arrangements for your trip. I'd like you to go into the forest with me this evening, as a thestral. I want you to confer with the thestral I once rode to Charlie's camp, so you'll know the way. I'm not certain, but I believe that, once you know the way as a thestral, you should remember the directions as a human."

"That sounds logical."

"Have you tried such a thing before? Going somewhere as a thestral, then trying to remember how to get there when you're in human form?" Dumbledore asked curiously. "I don't know any other wizards who've become thestrals, so I'd be interested to find out if their directional sense crosses over into your human intelligence."

"I can give it a trial run before we go, if you like," Harry suggested. "I don't know how it will work either."

"Wonderful! Thank you for your time. I'm sorry I've made you late for class. I'll give you a note," he said, scribbling something on a scrap of parchment.

Harry took the note and stood up. "Thank you, Professor. I'll talk to Ron about it today. When do you want us to leave?"

"As soon as the holidays start, I believe. That will allow you plenty of travel time, as well as a day or two to rest there before coming back."

Harry's eyes sparkled. "That sounds great. Thanks! Bye!"

"Goodbye, Harry. I'll talk to you again soon."

That evening, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Professor Dumbledore walked into the forest together to visit the thestral herd. Harry's friends were excited at the idea that Harry might be able to communicate with the thestrals and wanted to be there even if they couldn't see what was happening. When they were deep in the forest, Harry changed to a thestral, and Dumbledore made an odd chirruping sound, somewhere between a hoot and a whistle. Soon they were surrounded by a herd of thestrals, all looking at Dumbledore, Ron and the girls curiously, and keeping well away from Harry.

"What's happening?" Hermione whispered.

"The herd is here. Harry is strange to them, so they're keeping their distance. He's walking slowly toward them now. One of the thestrals is moving away from the herd, coming toward Harry." Dumbledore grew quiet and tense.

"What's going on now? Why'd you stop talking? Is Harry all right?" Ginny asked, worried.

"The thestral that approached him is smelling him. That's how they get to know each other. They're rather like horses that way." They heard two high-pitched squeals and a grunt. "Oh dear," Dumbledore said.

"What?" Ginny asked, sorry now she'd asked to come.

"The thestral is trying to show dominance over Harry. They are giving a display of aggression, I suppose you could say, seeing which one is tougher. That thump was Harry being kicked. He's backed away a little and is trying to communicate again." Dumbledore went silent again, his silence watchful as he observed the animals interacting.

Harry had no idea at first that this thestral was a stallion that was worried about Harry wanting his mares. The stallion's thoughts were a whirl of colour and images that Harry was having trouble making out, so he was unable to communicate with him at this point, other than by posture and gestures. Harry tried mirroring the actions of the stallion, and when the stallion whirled to kick again, Harry was quicker and kicked him hard in the belly, then immediately backed away, bowing his head, offering respect in every way he could think of. The stallion stared at Harry for a while, pawing the ground as he did so, snorting aggressively for a while. Another group of thestrals joined the first one, and one thestral moved quickly to stand by Harry's side. This one smelled Harry and nickered to him in a friendly way. Harry nickered back and the two began to make friendly gestures to each other. The first stallion observed all this and finally relaxed.

"Ah," Dumbledore said finally. "Harry has been accepted. I'm not certrain what happened, but a second group of thestrals showed up, and one of them befriended him. That action seems to have calmed down the stallion that was aggressive to Harry before." He sounded relieved.

"Oh," Ron said, relieved as well. "That's good then. Right?"

Dumbledore turned to Ron and smiled. "Yes. Very good indeed." Dumbledore put his hand on the stallion's shoulder and made some sounds that seemed to make sense to the thestral. The stallion turned to look at Harry and made some nickering sounds, which Harry returned. They snorted and arched their necks at each other, shaking their manes and half-rearing from time to time. After a while, the thestral that was Harry turned and looked at Dumbledore, who said, "Have you got the information you need?" The thestral that was Harry nodded. "I'll give them the meat we brought for them, and you can transform while they're eating and ignoring you. Then we can go."

On their way back to the castle, Harry was rubbing his side. "Are you hurt?" Hermione asked. "The professor said he kicked you."

"Yeah, he hit me pretty hard. Good thing I dodged, or he would've hit me harder!" Harry said, grinning wickedly. He'd enjoyed his adventure even if he did get a bit bruised. "It didn't occur to me that I'd be seen as a stallion coming to steal his mares." Harry laughed at the thought. "It's hard to think how to act humbly when you're a thestral. They're proud, sort of like hippogriffs in a way. You don't want to cross them. I did kick him back at one point, and after that he was more willing to listen to what I had to say."

"So did you get directions somewhere?" Ron asked.

"Yeah. I got directions to Hogwarts from Grimmauld Place, and from Hogwarts to Charlie's place in Rumania. I'll make a test flight to Grimmauld Place to be sure I understand the directions. We'll have to get in touch with Charlie before we get there so the dragons don't think we're bringing them dinner, though."

"I've taken care of that," Dumbledore interjected. "Charlie will meet you a few miles from his camp. He'll owl directions to the meeting place to us soon."

"Great!" Harry replied. "So we're leaving here and going to Grimmauld Place, getting Buckbeak and stopping back here to see Hagrid for a little while before flying off to France for our first night stop, right? Then Rumania the next day?"

"Yes, that's the plan," Dumbledore agreed.

"Cool! I can't wait!" Harry said, nudging Ron and grinning madly.

"Wicked. We're going to have a blast!" Ron added.

"I wish we could go," Hermione said sadly, and Ginny nodded her agreement.

"We'll tell you all about it when we get back," Ron promised her.

Harry's scar seared in pain and without any further warning, he was facing Voldemort, in the midst of a raging battle near the top of a cliff. Harry had no idea how he got there, but he pulled his wand out and prepared to fight his nemesis.

Ginny ran up behind Harry. "I've got your back!" she said, standing back to back with him.

Harry didn't want her there, he didn't want her anywhere near Voldemort!

With a flick of his wand, Voldemort had captured Ginny and pulled her into his arms. "Did you miss me?" he said in a sneering voice.

"No!" Ginny screamed, kicking, squirming, fighting madly to get away from him.

Harry stood there with his wand ready, but there was no clear shot. Voldemort had Ginny in front of him, using her as a shield against Harry.

"Get him, Harry!" Ginny called, still struggling to get away from him. "Don't worry about me! Get him!"

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort said, aiming his wand at Ginny, his laughter ringing through the hills around them. She screamed and writhed, a moving ball of misery hanging from his arm. Harry took his chance and shot a spell at Voldemort. Voldemort dodged it, still holding on to Ginny. "Give up, Potter, or she dies," he said in his high, cold voice.

"Never!" Harry cried in a rage. "Let her go. This is between you and me."

"Let her go? All right, if you insist," Voldemort said, then threw Ginny over the cliff and down into the dark lake fifty feet below. As she fell, he threw an *Incarcerous* charm at her, wrapping her tightly in ropes. She screamed as she fell, her long red hair a flaming sail behind her. She hit the cold lake feet first, her small body not making much of a splash. Her hair looked like a smear of blood on the water's surface that disappeared quickly as she sank into the depths of the lake.

"GINNY!" Harry screamed as she fell. He threw another spell at Voldemort, then jumped off the cliff, following Ginny to whatever doom she was about to meet. He could barely think, and he was still throwing spells up at Voldemort as he fell. Finally, in a flaming rage, he blew up the rock the evil wizard was standing on. The explosion shook the entire area, and Voldemort disappeared from sight. Harry hit the water just then, rocks and dirt falling around him as he sank into the dark water. He managed to throw a *Protego* spell around himself so the falling stones wouldn't injure him.

As he sank into the dark lake, he calmed himself enough to work a partial transfiguration, and soon gills appeared on the sides of his neck, and his feet and hands grew wide and webbed. Swimming as fast as he could, Harry headed down into the murky depths of the lake, looking everywhere for a glimpse of bright hair. After what seemed an eternity, he spotted her. He swam to her, pulled her into his arms and started for the surface. She was only unconscious. She couldn't be dead. He wouldn't allow her to be dead. Not while there was breath left in his body. He took a deep breath, then removed his gills, placed his mouth over hers and breathed into her. Then he held her mouth and nose closed while he created gills on himself again, got a good breath, removed the gills and blew into her mouth again. He continued this until their heads broke the surface. He pulled her to the edge of the lake and carried her out, then pounded on her back to try to get her breathing again. She was so pale. Her face looked like parchment against the dark burnished red of her hair.

"Wake up! Ginny, wake up! You are NOT going to leave me like this. *Wake up!*" He pulled out the pocket knife she'd given him for Christmas and cut the bonds around her, rubbing her

cold arms and legs to warm her, doing mouth to mouth on her to get her breathing again. Several eternities later, she coughed and water came out of her in a torrent. She lay there gasping for breath. "Ginny? Are you all right? Ginny?" Harry begged. "Please be all right, my sweet girl. I need you. Please." By this time, he was sobbing. "Please, please, Ginny, wake up!"

With a start, Harry moved, his flailing hands making the mountain of books beside him collapse, some of them hitting him in the head before he got out of the way. He stared around him in a panic. "Ginny? Ginny? Where are you?" He stood up and raced across the Common Room, calling up the girls' dormitory staircase. "Ginny? Ginny?" No answer. He looked frantically around the Common Room, his eyes landing on Ron. "Where's Ginny?"

"I dunno, probably in the library studying," Ron said with a shrug. "Why?"

"She's in danger. I have to find her," Harry said, still frantic.

"What do you mean, she's in danger?" Ron asked, startled. "What kind of danger?

"Voldemort had her, and there was a cliff, and then . . . ." Harry was still looking around wildly, as if Ginny might be hiding behind a chair near the fireplace or something. "I have to find her. Will you help me look?"

"Sure, mate, calm down. You were asleep. It was probably a dream," Ron said, trying to reassure his friend.

"Dream or not, I have to find her," Harry insisted, his eyes fierce.

"OK, OK, I'll go look around. You look in the library. I'll ask Hermione to check the dormitories. She can't be far," Ron said, hoping he was right. Harry was scaring him now.

"Thanks!" Harry called as he raced through the portrait hole to the library. Once there, he stormed into the room, looking anxiously from section to section, causing Madam Pince to reprimand him several times for running in the library. Finally he saw her sitting quietly in the back, at a table with other Fifth Years doing revision for their O.W.L.s. "Ginny!" he cried, sliding to a stop by her chair.

"Harry, what's wrong? You're white as a sheet! You're shaking! What's happened?" Ginny asked, greatly concerned about him.

Harry was gasping for breath. "Come with me," he said, taking her hand and pulling her along behind him. He led her to the very last section of bookshelves, the darkest corner of the library. He pulled her to him and covered her face with kisses, moaning her name over and over.

"What's wrong? Tell me! You're scaring me!" Ginny insisted.

Finally, he calmed enough to kiss her properly and answer her questions. He buried his face in the thick hair lying across her shoulder. He breathed deeply, drinking in the smell of her, relishing the warmth of her body in his arms. "I thought I'd lost you," he said shakily.

"I was just here studying," she protested, thoroughly confused.

"I. . .I had a dream," he began hesitantly, then he told her all about the dream. Her mouth was hanging open and her eyes were huge by the time he was done.

"Was it one of your visions, or honestly just a dream?" she wanted to know.

"I don't know. But I'll tell you this. I am going to teach you, Ron and Hermione how to do the Bubblehead Charm and how to levitate yourselves without wands if it's the last thing I do. If I can teach it to you three, I'll teach it to the rest of the D.A. I don't want to be worrying about people drowning anymore. That Second Task was bad enough – I don't need to be reliving it in my dreams with the people I care about as the victims."

Ron found them then, out of breath from running all over the castle looking for his sister. "Ah," he panted. "I see you found her. Everything OK then?"

"Yeah. Thanks for helping me look, mate," Harry said sincerely, holding on to Ginny tightly.

"No problem," Ron gasped, turning away to start the long walk back to his studying in the Common Room. "Next time you lose her, how about remembering the Adfero Charm," he muttered as he walked away.

Harry's face fell. "The Adfero Charm?" he repeated. "How could I be so stupid?" He pounded his forehead with the heel of his hand.

"I prefer being found this way, though," Ginny said, snuggling into his arms.

"Uh, yeah," he agreed, bending down and burrowing his face into the hollow of her neck, breathing in her scent again. "It has its points."

The Weasleys had gone to Grimmauld Place to meet Ron and Harry for the first day of Easter break, and to pick up Ginny. Hermione had stayed at Hogwarts to have the library all to herself and start revision for her N.E.W.T.'s, which they wouldn't have to take until the seventh year. The boys had tried to convince her to spend the holiday with Ginny, but she was adamant. She thought she needed the time to revise, and revise she would.

After a fine dinner and a good night's sleep, the boys were up bright and early the first full day of their holiday, ready to fly Beaky back to Hogwarts for a short visit with Hagrid.

"Harry, you will be careful, won't you?" Ginny said as she held him tightly in her arms. "I'm worried about you having to fly so far as a thestral."

"Ron has our brooms. If I get tired, we'll just get on them. Please don't worry," Harry said, trying to console her.

"I'm supposed to worry about you. That's my job," she said, teasing him a bit.

"Come here, you," he murmured, lifting her chin and kissing her thoroughly. "Mmm, I'm going to miss that," he said softly, moving his mouth to just under her ear, "and this," nibbling

her neck whenever her parents looked the other way, which they were considerate enough to do fairly often.

"You be sure you DO miss that, Mr. Potter!" she said tartly.

"I will. Absolutely. And it's only for a few days. This will give you time to do your revision for your O.W.L.'s without Ron and me being around to distract you."

"You mean, being around to help me," she grumbled. "OK, off with you then," she said bravely, pushing him out the door.

He leaned in for one last kiss. "Take care of yourself, sweet girl," he said.

"Ron, you take care of Harry!" she called to her brother as he passed her.

"Fine! Who's going to take care of me, then?" Ron teased her.

"I'll take care of you, no worries," Harry said with a laugh.

"Just a moment, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I'll put a Disillusionment Charm on all three of you." With that, he tapped each of them on the head. A feeling like cold water running over him washed over Harry, and soon he saw he blended in with whatever he was standing near. "Remember to use that whenever you'll be exposed. You do remember how to do the charm, Harry?"

"Yes, thanks, Professor! C'mon, Beaky, let's go," he said, pulling on Buckbeak's chain. The Weasleys, Remus and Dumbledore watched as the boys mounted Buckbeak and quickly got airborne, the Disillusionment Charm making them look like glistening miniscule slivers of light where the sun caught the edges of their bodies. Ginny waved until Beaky was a tiny glint of light far off in the sky.

"They'll be fine, dear," her mother assured her, putting her arm around her daughter's shoulders and pulling her back inside the house. "Let's go home and start enjoying our holiday."

"Whoo-hoooo!" Ron cheered. He'd never flown on a hippogriff before and he loved every minute of it. Harry laughed to hear the joy in his friend's voice.

"Having fun back there?" Harry called, his voice whipped over his shoulder by the wind.

"Yeah!" Ron said, elated. "This is great! Whoo-hooooooo!"

Buckbeak seemed to be enjoying the exercise too. They turned north, England flowing below them as a rolling multicoloured carpet, the rivers ribbons of silvery light in the bright sunshine, the cars and trains looking like tiny toys far below them. They were flying as high as Buckbeak could manage in case anyone could see them through the Disillusionment Charm and wonder about flying horses with odd heads in the sky. From such a great distance, surely Beaky would appear to be an airplane or a large eagle if anyone did notice them among the clouds. They finally reached Scotland's craggy hills, landing quite a while later in a clearing

in the woods a good distance from Hagrid's hut. Harry took the Disillusionment Charm off them all, then handed a bag of dead rats to Ron. "You keep him happy here. I'll go get Hagrid."

"OK," Ron agreed.

Harry changed into the raven so he could fly quickly through the trees to Hagrid's hut. When he changed back, he scouted around the place quietly to make certain Hagrid was alone, and then called "Hagrid? Hagrid!" In a few moments, Hagrid's huge form could be seen striding through the trees toward the hut. "Hi, Hagrid!" Harry said.

"Harry! I thought you went off with the Weasleys for the holiday," Hagrid said with a twitch of his beard that Harry knew meant he was smiling. Hagrid's beetle-black eyes sparkled. "It's good ter see yeh!"

"Good to see you, too. I did go with the Weasleys, but I'm on an errand for Dumbledore. I wanted to stop by here first. I have a surprise for you." Harry's face was alight with anticipation. This was one surprise Hagrid should love.

"A surprise? Fer me? What on earth. . .? Harry, you shouldn't'a," Hagrid said fondly. "I don' need nuthin'."

"You'll like this. Come with me," Harry invited, turning to lead Hagrid through the forest to where he'd left Ron and Buckbeak.

"I can't imagine what kind o' surprise you'd give me, bu' if it's summat in the woods, it should be a good 'un!" Hagrid muttered good-naturedly. When they reached the clearing, he stopped, speechless as he stared at the hippogriff. "That's not. . .that's never. . .blimey, bu' it looks like. . . ."

"It's Buckbeak," Harry said happily. "We brought him to see you. He's on his way to Rumania to join the breeding stock of the endangered hippogriffs Charlie Weasley is taking care of."

"Beaky's goin' ter be a daddy?" Hagrid said, tears in his eyes as he ran his hands over the hippogriff's magnificent head. "Bless yer lit'l beak. Yer goin' ter be a daddy. You'll be free! What a fine life you'll have!" Hagrid pulled out a spotted handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and blew his nose noisily. "He looks wonderful! How'd you find him, Harry?"

Harry told Hagrid all about the Time Turner and his and Hermione's adventures rescuing both Buckbeak and Sirius. Hagrid was amazed. "And yeh got back just in time, eh? Well, Harry, I just don' know. You an' Hermione, an' Ron, here, too – you three get up ter some amazin' adventures. I can't thank yeh enough for savin' me Beaky. And now getting' him such a good home! I'm that proud," he said, beaming.

Before long, it was time for the boys to leave so they'd be arriving at their rest stop in France while it was still light enough to land safely. Hagrid gave both boys a huge hug, and patted Buckbeak fondly on the neck. "I'll never forget you, Beaky," he said, dabbing at his streaming eyes with his huge, spotted handkerchief. "And Harry, Ron, I can't thank yeh enough, and Hermione too, for savin' him and getting' him to a good new home. You have a safe journey. I'll see ya when you get back ta school."

Harry performed the Disillusionment Charm on Ron, Beaky and himself and they took off for France. Their flight was uneventful, except for being cold. Both boys were uneasy flying over the channel – so much dark water beneath them with no land in sight for a while in any direction was unnerving, but at least that lonely feeling didn't last too long. Beaky flew on untiringly, seeming to know he was going somewhere he'd be happy, and to be enjoying the freedom of flight once more.

Daylight was gone and full dark nearly upon them when they landed outside a little wizarding village in France. Three people stood waiting for them in the clearing where they'd been told to land. Harry decided to be extra careful, and landed in another clearing not far away. They then approached the designated clearing cautiously, looking for any signs of danger. They were surprised to see a flash of red hair in the moonlight, a red that looked suspiciously like Weasley hair. Charlie wasn't supposed to come to France and fly back with them. Who was this? Harry and Ron watched the three men for a while as they grew more and more impatient, waiting for a hippogriff and two young wizards who were long overdue.

"I'm going to send an Adfero to Dumbledore," Harry whispered to Ron while backing away from their vantage point. "Keep watch." He walked deeper into the woods, where hopefully nobody would notice the silver streak of the flying Adferos.

Dumbledore answered him immediately. *"Charlie is still in Rumania. Avoid contact with those men. It could be a trap."*

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out to calm his nerves, then made his way quietly back to where he'd left Ron. He told Ron what Dumbledore had said, and the two boys looked nervously at each other.

"Now what?" Ron asked quietly.

"You take Beaky further into the woods and wait there. He can catch enough bats to keep him happy, and your mum packed enough sandwiches that we won't starve," Harry replied. "I'm going to change into the raven and try to overhear what they're saying," he added, handing Ron his bag. "Save me some sandwiches, all right?"

"Yeah," Ron answered uneasily. "You be careful."

"Yeah, I will," Harry replied, then swiftly became the raven, whose eyes were now golden with barely a hint of green. The mark from his scar just looked like a pale smear of pollen on the bird's forehead. Harry had mastered the problem of disguising his markings. He flew off toward the clearing where the men stood waiting, and perched in a branch deep inside a tree where he could see them, but not be noticeable. He suddenly wished he understood French – his spying might be worthless if these blokes didn't speak English.

"Where the bloody hell can they be?" a short, pudgy man said.

"Dunno," the tall thin one replied. "We were told they'd be here at dusk. S'pose they ran into trouble?"

"Not yet," the redhead said with a quiet laugh. "We'll give them all the trouble they can handle."

The raven moved quietly along the branch, tilting his head to see past the tree branches better. He still couldn't see the faces of the men. He backed away, then took off toward the woods, away from the clearing, circling around and landing in a tree on the other side, where he could see better. It couldn't be. . .it certainly looked like Charlie Weasley. But he'd been talking in a threatening way. Why? The raven flew back through the woods, looking for Ron and Buckbeak. When he saw the moonlight shimmering on Beaky's silvery grey feathers and coat, he landed and changed back into Harry before Beaky could consider having him for dinner.

"What did you see?" Ron asked as soon as he saw Harry.

"It's Charlie – or it looks like him. But he didn't talk like Charlie. He said 'we'll give them all the trouble they can handle.' He was talking about us!" Harry's eyes were wide, still struggling with what he'd seen, and trying to resolve it with the Charlie he knew. "I don't know the other two. When I got there, I realized they might be speaking French, and then I wouldn't know what they were saying, but they're English. I don't understand what's going on."

"Me either. Send Dumbledore another message, see what he says," Ron replied.

"Shh," Harry warned, pulling Ron's hood up to cover his bright hair, and throwing his own cloak over Beaky's silvery coat.

"Whassup?" Ron whispered, staying covered.

"I heard. . ." Harry was turning around, trying to locate the sound he'd heard. Something was coming, something big, or several somethings. Whatever, or whoever it was, they weren't too worried about being quiet. Harry did a quick Disillusionment Charm on all three of them, and then knelt by Beaky, his hand on the animal's beak, hoping to keep it quiet. He saw the moonlight glimmer on Ron's wide eyes as his friend glanced warily around. Ron had his wand out, and was listening intently. He glanced at Harry, and then nodded. Yes, he'd heard the sounds too. They stayed very still. The sounds went past the place where they sat nervously waiting for whatever was going to happen. Then they disappeared in the distance.

"D'you. .." Ron began.

Harry held his hand up, warning Ron to keep quiet. He listened as hard as he could, but heard nothing now but normal night sounds. He began to relax, then said, "We're going to have to go on and find somewhere else to stay for the night. It's not safe here."

"Beaky's tired," Ron said, running a hand down the hippogriff's feathered neck.

"He can take us a bit further," Harry said with more assurance than he felt. "C'mon. Let's go." He got Beaky to his feet and he and Ron mounted. Harry squeezed Buckbeak's sides with his knees and whispered, "C'mon, Beaky, not much further." The hippogriff cantered across the little glade, building up speed to take off.

His muffled hoofbeats caught the attention of the three men who'd been waiting for them.

"There they are! That way!" they shouted.

Harry flattened himself against Buckbeak's neck, Ron holding onto Harry tightly and leaning forward as well. There was no way to make Beaky a small target. The Disillusionment Charm was the only defence they had other than Beaky's speed. The red light of Stunning spells shot across the glade, narrowly missing the boys and the hippogriff. Buckbeak got airborne, his mighty wings making only the slightest sound – but that sound drew the attention of the men on the ground. One of them shot a Revealing charm at them, and the three were suddenly exposed, Beaky's beautiful coat and Ron's bright hair gleaming in the moonlight. Harry tried to steer the hippogriff in some evasive manoeuvres, but it wasn't like flying a broom – the hippogriff had a mind of its own.

Ron held tightly to Harry's waist with one arm, shooting spells back at the men on the ground with his wand hand. He grunted and shivered once, then twice. He fell against Harry and held tight to him. "Got your back, mate," he muttered hoarsely, switched his wand to his left hand and kept shooting spells as fast as he could.

Harry gave up aerobatics with the hippogriff and let his rage mount, then aimed his open hand at the place he'd seen the spells coming from. He channelled all his rage into his arm, his hand, his fingers, and into a ball of energy that hit the earth with a mighty *BOOM!* The spells stopped coming from the ground. He chanced another look behind him and saw a small burnt-looking crater where the glade had been, and nothing else, not one trace of the three men.

"Ron," he said in horror, "I killed them!"

"Good," Ron groaned. "They deserved it. But I would've liked to know who that bloke was who made himself look like Charlie." He coughed and leaned heavily against Harry.

"Where are you hurt?" Harry asked, wishing they were already on the ground. "That explosion means we'll have to put some distance between us and this place. Can you hang on for a while? Are you bleeding?"

"I'll be OK. I'm hurt, but not bleeding much," Ron muttered.

"I don't like how you sound," Harry said, really worried about his friend. "Where are you hit? What kind of spell hit you?"

"I don't know what it was. Hit me in the side, and in the arm. I think my arm's broken." He was quiet for a moment, and then added, "At least I didn't lose my new wand. It works great. I got two of them down before you blew them up."

"You had two of them down? Good job, Ron. I wish I'd known. I wouldn't have done such a big spell if I'd known I was only fighting one of them. That clearing was so shadowy, and they were hidden, and . . . . I just couldn't see everything, not and fly Beaky." He was quiet a moment. "I killed three men, Ron. I. . .killed. . .them." The horror of the deed was beginning to set in. He'd be sent to Azkaban for certain now. Harry's heart constricted at the thought.

"It's OK, Harry. It was the right thing to do," Ron assured him. "You were defending yourself – and me. That makes it legal."

Does it make it right, though? Harry wondered, but kept his fears to himself. "I think Buckbeak's hurt. He isn't flying as well as he was."

"He was already tired, y'know," Ron muttered, his voice sounding weaker by the minute.

Harry knew they had to land, and soon. He shot off an Adfero to Dumbledore to let him know what happened, and looked for an open field or meadow somewhere so Buckbeak would have plenty of room to land. Unlike thestral's, which could take off from a standstill and land instantly as well, hippogriffs needed a bit of a running start and a place to run to stop, as well. Finally, he saw a place, and guided the hippogriff down.

Ron was a sagging weight against Harry's back now, and hadn't spoken for several minutes. Harry held tightly to Ron's arm around his waist. His heart was in his mouth. He'd invited his friend along as a lark, and now Ron was hurt. The meadow Harry found was at the edge of a rocky area that led up into the foothills of a small mountain range. Maybe he could find a cave for them to hide in until Ron was better. And Buckbeak. . .he wasn't sure the hippogriff was strong enough to take off again, much less make it to Rumania. Beaky must have an injury somewhere. Harry wished he was as good at the healing arts as Ginny. He was just grateful he'd remembered to bring the book on healing magical animal injuries that Hagrid had given him for Christmas. Maybe something in there would help.

Buckbeak landed roughly, stumbling as he ran, holding his wings out for balance. Ron fell off, landing on one of Beaky's outstretched wings. Harry held onto him valiantly until the hippogriff was at a standstill. Then Harry slid down and pulled Ron down with him. Ron was barely conscious.

"Good job holding on until we landed, mate," Harry said encouragingly as he opened Ron's robes to look for his wounds. Ron yelled when Harry moved his arm. "Yeah, broken arm, all right. Wish Madam Pomfrey was here – she'd have you right in a tick." He found a huge spell burn on Ron's side, and another on his leg. Ron was in so much pain from his arm and side, he hadn't even noticed the burn on his leg. Harry sighed, wishing more than ever that the hospital wing was close at hand.

"Hang on, mate, I have to straighten your arm before I set it," Harry said. "On three – one, two, THREE!" he said as he pulled the arm straight, realigning the bones properly. "*Ferula*," he said, conjuring splints and bandages around the injured arm. "You rest here. I'm going to check on Buckbeak and bring you some water," he said, leaning Ron against a rock and putting his own cloak over his friend to keep him warm.

As he walked to the tree line, he stopped to look at Buckbeak. The hippogriff had several small wounds Harry could see, but nothing major. He should be able to take care of the hippogriff with the help of his book, as long as he could find the necessary herbs nearby, but what about Ron? Harry knew he could heal the smaller spell burn on Ron's leg, but he was worried about the large one on his side. It could mean internal injuries. His method of healing bruises was fine, but anything deeper than a bruise, he was afraid to try for fear he might misunderstand the injury and cause even more damage. He had no response from his last Adfero to Dumbledore. What was going on? He sent another message, telling about Ron's and Buckbeak's injuries, and that he was going to try to take care of them himself – but he'd appreciate some help if it could be sent. With a sigh, he went off to find some wood to make a small campfire, and hopefully a stream. He was certain Ron and Buckbeak would both be thirsty.

"They've been attacked!" Dumbledore said, greatly distressed. "Ron and Buckbeak are hurt. Harry asked for help, but he doesn't know where he is." He looked around the kitchen in the Grimmauld Place house at Remus, Snape, Tonks and Mad-Eye Moody. "We need to send help to those boys, but first we need to find them. And we need to let the Weasleys know Ron's hurt," he said heavily. "The boys thought they were off on an adventure. How did our enemies find out about this trip of theirs?"

"Who knew about it?" Mad-Eye said, his magical eye rolling around wildly in his head.

"Harry, Ron, the Weasleys and I – and Hagrid. Oh, and Remus, too," Dumbledore said.

"What about that bleedin' sod of a house elf that still hangs around here?" Moody asked.

"Kreacher? I. . ." Dumbledore thought a moment, and then his shoulders sagged. "I'm getting old. I wasn't careful enough. Of course, Kreacher could have overheard some of our conversations about the trip. He's probably the leak."

"How are we getting help to Harry?" Remus asked, his face worried. "Ron will need medical care."

"I think we need to include the Weasleys in this discussion," Dumbledore said.

"I'll call them," Remus offered, walking to the fireplace kneeling on the hearth rug and throwing some floo powder into the cold firebox. "The Burrow," he said in a firm voice. "Molly, how nice to see you," he said pleasantly when his face appeared in the Weasleys' fireplace.

"Remus! How are you? Have you heard from the boys yet?" she said warmly. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you very much, though. Yes, we've heard from the boys. Is Arthur around?"

"Yes, let me call him." She turned away from the fireplace and called, "Arthur! Arthur, it's Remus. He wants to talk to you."

"Has he heard from the boys yet?" Arthur said as he walked into the kitchen from the sitting room.

Ginny bounded down the stairs. "Did I hear Remus's voice? Has he heard from them?"

The three Weasleys stood looking hopefully at Remus, but their faces sagged when they saw the sadness in his eyes. "Yes, we've heard from Harry. He and Ron were attacked at their landing site. Ron and Buckbeak were both injured. Harry has taken them to a different site and is trying to care for them. He said Ron has a broken arm and a spell burn on his side and on his leg. Buckbeak has several wounds but managed to fly them away from there and land safely. Harry's got his book on caring for injuries in magical creatures, I remember him packing it, but I don't believe he knows much about attending to human wounds." He was silent as Ginny and Molly clutched each other, crying. Arthur looked stricken. "We're here at Grimmauld Place discussing how to help them. We thought you'd like to come to the meeting."

"Yes, we'll be right there," Arthur said. "Ginny, Molly, go get dressed. Remus, we'll be there in just a moment."

"See you then," Remus said, pulling his head back from the fireplace. "They'll be here soon," he told the gathering in the kitchen. A few minutes later, three Weasleys came out of the fireplace, Molly and Ginny with tear streaks running through the soot on their faces.

"Is Harry all right?" Ginny asked Remus. "You didn't say."

"He says he's fine."

"Oh wonderful. When he says he's fine, he's usually in pretty bad shape," she said, trying hard to blink back her tears.

Remus put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him in a warm embrace, patting her gently on the back. "There, there, Ginny. He sounded fine in his message, and he knew what to do for a broken arm."

"He doesn't have any bone-mending potions with him, does he?" she asked.

"No, but Muggles use things they call 'splints' where they put strong things around the broken limb, like pieces of wood, perhaps. These splints support the broken limb until it heals. In Ron's case, it will support his arm until a healer can repair his arm," Remus assured her. "I conjured one for Ron's leg when he injured it at the Whomping Willow that time. Harry knows that spell now. Hopefully, he'll remember it."

While Remus comforted Ginny, the others were trying to work out how to get help to Harry as quickly as possible. They would need medical supplies, a healer, food. . .so many things. Dumbledore shook his head. "I'm getting old. I thought I was sending the boys on a simple errand, a little adventure for them. I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"We do understand that we're at war," Arthur said. "Bad things happen in wartime." He stopped talking and swallowed hard, dropping his head for a moment before going on. "So someone was impersonating Charlie? You have got in touch with Charlie himself since all this happened, haven't you?"

"Yes, yes, Charlie's fine. He can't imagine how someone could have impersonated him," Dumbledore answered.

"Perhaps the red-haired man simply looked like Charlie, rather than looking exactly like Charlie," Ginny suggested.

"You could be right. But Harry changed into a raven and got close to them, close enough that he thought it was Charlie until he heard him making threats against them – or so Harry told me in his message," Dumbledore replied. He sighed heavily. "Harry described where they are, but the sky is overcast now and he can't give me a reading from the stars, so we can't pinpoint his position."

"Send Hedwig – she can find him," Ginny offered.

"That's a good idea. It's too bad she's white. She's so easily spotted," Remus replied.

"So send Pig," Ginny replied reasonably. "He's brown, and so small most people don't notice him anyway."

"Pig?" Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon."

"Ah, I see," Snape replied, his nose wrinkling as if he'd smelled a basket full of owl droppings.

So the plan was made. A group of Order members would use brooms and fly to France, and release Pig somewhere near the initial landing site. He would fly to Ron wherever he was, and they could follow him. In a short time, the group was ready to go.

"I'm going too," Ginny announced, a bag on her back and her broom in her hand.

"No, you're not, young lady," her mother snapped. "You're only fifteen. . ."

"Nearly sixteen, and they need a healer. I'm not fully trained yet, but I know a lot, and I have a medicine bag all ready. I can help. Please let me go!"

Dumbledore smiled at Ginny fondly. "Miss Weasley, I believe we've risked two too many Hogwarts students in this endeavour already. Tonks has her Field First Aid Kit and her Auror's training in the medical arts. She'll do a fine job for us. We'll have the boys back here before you know it."

"But. . ."

"No buts, Miss Weasley. You stay here. I'm sorry to disappoint you," Dumbledore said kindly.

Ginny stood in the doorway watching the group take off, absolutely furious at being left behind like a small child. Her mother shooed her inside and told her to go to bed in her old room. Dumbledore left to go back to Hogwarts to do what he could from there. Snape left to do whatever it was Snape did when he wasn't teaching.

Ginny clumped up the stairs, more angry than she could ever remember being. She was not going to take this, *no, she was not!* She was perfectly capable of helping, and that was not only her brother but also her boyfriend out there, hurt, cold, hungry, scared. She could help! She slammed the bedroom door, making Mrs. Black's portrait shriek downstairs. Under the cover of all that noise, Ginny opened a window and stood on the ledge, her broom between her knees. "Sorry, Mum, but I have to do this," she murmured as she kicked off and followed the pack of brooms she could see as tiny glints of reflected moonlight in the distance before her.

Chapter 26 – Rescue

"How's Beaky?" Ron asked when Harry came back to the cave he'd found to shelter Ron. Beaky wouldn't fit in the cave, but there was a nice little copse of trees just outside the cave entrance that made good shelter for the hippogriff.

Harry had just finished bringing water to both Ron and Buckbeak. He'd tended Beaky's wounds as best he could, and had amazed Ron with the splint and sling he'd made to support Ron's broken arm. Harry performed a Cushioning Charm on the floor of the cave, and a warming spell, as well, so Ron was as comfortable as Harry could make him. Beaky, too had a comfortable bed of pine needles that Harry had made for him.

"He's fine. He's busy catching bats right now. Apparently they fly through that little grove of trees a lot," Harry replied, trying to find a comfortable place to sit.

Ron snorted. "Yeah, they do fly through those trees, because they seem to live in here!" He pointed at the massive mound of bat guano in the back of the cave. "Did you know they pee when they fly? Gross!"

"Yeah, I noticed that, but there wasn't any other good shelter around," Harry said with a shrug. "Sorry the accommodation isn't as advertised."

"Huh?"

"Oh. That's a line from an old TV programme – can't think what." Harry yawned hugely, his jaw cracking, making him laugh. "How are your spell burns? I didn't mean to neglect them."

Ron put on a brave face. "Not too bad."

"Let's have a look," Harry said, helping Ron lift the tattered remains of his sweater and shirt to see the more serious spell damage on his side. "I don't know, mate. That one looks like more than I can manage. I can heal bruises, but I'm afraid to try that one. You might have internal damage of some kind."

"Have a go, Harry, please?" Ron said, his face twisted in pain as he tried to maintain a position where Harry could see the entire injury.

"OK." Harry breathed deeply several times and shook his hands, trying to relax and become more alert at the same time. He put his hands on Ron's injury as lightly as possible. Ron flinched away from the contact. "Sorry if my hands are cold," Harry apologized, pulling them away from Ron's skin and tucking them in his own armpits to warm them.

"'S'OK," Ron groaned. "Hurts like hell."

"I can see that," Harry said mildly. "Hang on, I'm trying again." He watched as Ron braced himself, and then put his hands on either side of the injury. "Better?" He smiled when Ron nodded briefly. Ron's fair skin was so badly burned, Harry was afraid to rub his thumbs over it as he'd done with previous injuries he'd healed. He concentrated on sensing the injury, trying to feel any "wrongness" in his friend's body. Magic flowed through his hands, healing a lot of the damage. The burn itself appeared to be lighter, and Ron breathed a sigh of relief.

"I think that's all I'd better do," Harry said as he pulled his hands away. "There are things in there I don't understand. I'm afraid I'll do more harm than good if I mess around with them."

"It's better, really. Thanks!" Ron said with half a smile. He groaned as Harry pulled his shirt and sweater back in place and rolled him onto his back.

"Sorry, mate," Harry said, wishing he knew spells that would block pain.

"No problem. I'll live."

"Let's hope so! OK, next we need to pull your jeans down so I can see your other injury," Harry said, looking at the hole in the thigh of Ron's jeans. "You've got a burn on your leg, just there, that doesn't look too bad. I might be able to fix that one."

Ron nodded and unbuckled his belt with his one good hand. With some difficulty due to his broken arm, a few yelps of pain due to his injured side, and some awkward help from Harry that made both of them laugh, Ron got his jeans down below the injury.

"It's not too bad," Harry commented. "I'll have a go." He put his hands on his friend's thigh, both of them giggling about how silly they felt, and then started rubbing his thumbs gently over and around the wound. Within a few moments, the burn had completely disappeared. "Cool," Harry said with satisfaction. "I haven't done any burns before. How does it feel?"

"No pain at all! Thanks, mate," Ron said, starting to struggle back into his jeans. Harry helped him pull his jeans back up, fasten them and buckle his belt. Ron was soaked in pain-induced sweat by the time they were done.

"Here, this may help," Harry said, dampening the last remnant of his own sweater with water he poured out of a jug he'd conjured on top of the hill. He wiped the sweat from Ron's face, then rubbed his friend's face dry with his hands. "Better?"

Ron nodded. His face was pale and tight with pain, but there wasn't anything else Harry could do for him.

Harry yawned, his jaw cracking again, then shook his head trying to wake up more. He wiped the damp sweater remnant over his own face to make him more alert. "One of us should keep watch. Since you're the one who's hurt, I guess that's my job, eh?" He yawned again and stretched, then stood up. "D'you need anything else before you go to sleep? I'll be just outside the opening."

"No, I don't need anything. Thanks. Ginny would be proud of what a good healer you're being," Ron said with a wan smile. He was in so much pain, even his freckles were pale.

"I wish I had some kind of potion to give you. I know it must hurt. How's your side?"

"It'll keep. Don't worry about it. I doubt if anyone but a real healer could've done any better than you did. I'm sure Dumbledore will send us help soon."

"Yeah. G'nite. Let me know if you need anything, OK?"

"Yeah. Thanks," Ron said, pulling Harry's cloak up around his neck.

Harry shivered in the night air. They had worn layers of clothing because they knew it would be cold when they were flying, but he was worried Ron might go into shock, so he'd insisted Ron keep his cloak. He'd also torn his shirt into strips to make a sling for Ron's arm, so he was missing a couple of layers now. He was down to just his undershirt, and it was a cold night in early Spring. He did a Warming Spell and settled down for a long night's watch.

Hours later, in the cold light of pre-dawn, his scar woke him up. *Some guard I am – couldn't even stay awake a few extra hours*, he berated himself. He moaned and pressed his hand against his scar, then opened his eyes and looked around. He couldn't see anyone approaching, but of course, with Invisibility Cloaks and Invisibility Spells a reality in his world, not seeing anything didn't mean there wasn't anything there. He invoked the powers of his glasses, checking to see if there was someone invisible nearby. Nothing. He listened hard, straining his ears to catch the smallest unusual sound. Nothing. The hair on the back of his neck wasn't standing up, so he probably wasn't in immediate danger. So why did his scar hurt, only for a moment? That was odd. He had just stood up to go and check on Buckbeak and Ron when his scar hurt again. This time the pain knocked him to his knees, and he groaned in agony, then fell over on his side, his legs pulled up to his chest, a tight ball of excruciating pain.

"Harry?" Ron called softly from inside the cave. He'd heard Harry's cry of pain, and heard him fall, and then all he could hear was his best mate groaning. Ron's stomach clenched. Was Harry under attack? He got painfully to his feet and hobbled to the cave opening, his wand out, ready to fight whoever had attacked his friend. Harry lay twisting on the ground in torment, biting his lips trying to stay quiet and not reveal their location. Ron looked around but saw no enemies, and no signs that Harry had been attacked. He fell to his knees beside his friend, putting his good hand on Harry's shoulder and trying to hold the writhing boy still so he could see what was wrong with him.

"Is it your scar?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry managed to nod once – that's all he could do. Finally, the pain passed and he lay exhausted on the ground, gasping for breath.

"Did you see something?" Ron asked.

"He's furious. One of his plans didn't work again." Harry lay there panting, trying to catch his breath. After a moment, he went on. "He was screaming at a group of people, throwing curses everywhere. He said he's getting pissed off at his so-called best Death Eaters screwing up the simplest tasks. He said he was going to handle it himself, and then he left."

"Handle what himself?" Ron said, aghast. "Not us?"

"I have no idea," Harry said honestly. "It's possible he's after us. I don't know how they would've found out about us flying Beaky here, but after what happened last night, I have the feeling somebody found out and told Voldemort about it."

"Kreacher. I'm going to kill him when I get home," Ron growled.

"And I'll help. And then we're taking all those awful heads off the wall of that house. I'm going to do a serious clean up, like Sirius and your mum had started. No more snake door knobs. No more screaming portrait in the hall, if I have to burn the house down to get rid of her," Harry muttered, his voice hard and angry. He sat up, rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, pushed his glasses back up his nose, pressed on his scar again with a small moan, then stood up shakily. "I'll go and get us some water," he said, stumbling up the hill toward the spring he'd found the night before. "You stay here and rest," he told Ron.

"Right," Ron said, disgusted with himself for needing someone to look after him. "Just now, I think I'm probably in better shape than you are, mate," he muttered at Harry's retreating back.

"We're close enough. Release Ron's owl," Moody said.

"Come on out, ickle Piggy," Tonks encouraged the little owl as she got him out of her pocket. "Go and find Ron for us." Pig jumped off her fingers and flew toward a range of mountains which were fronted by tumbled boulders and patches of forest. Pig made straight for a rocky wall behind a small grove of trees and disappeared.

"Good spot Potter picked," Moody growled as they followed the owl's flight path, then circled to scout the area. "Ah, there's the hippogriff hidden in the trees. Well done. That boy has the makings of a fine Auror."

"Where are the boys?" Arthur asked as they flew nearer to the rocky face of the mountain.

"There's an opening in the rock just there, beyond the trees," Tonks said. "Let's look in there."

Wands at the ready, the Order members landed and quietly approached the entrance to the cave. When they glanced inside, they were greeted by the sight of a patch of Ron's bright hair peeking out from behind a cleft in the rock wall.

"Ron? Ron, it's Dad. Come out," Arthur said, more relieved than he could say to see that glimpse of brilliant red in the gloom of the cave. "Are you all right?"

Ron stayed hidden, his wand still pointed at the group. "Somebody give me a password, quick, or I'll. . ."

"I took care of your mum when she got cut after Harry's tantrum. Good enough?" Tonks said cheekily. Then, when Ron peered out from his refuge, she changed her nose into three different shapes in quick succession. Ron laughed, a nervous sound that echoed eerily off the cave walls. "And who else would bring that silly little owl to find you?"

"OK, so it's you. Thanks for finding us," he said, coming out and slumping in relief against the cave wall. "Hi, Dad. Did Mum go spare when she heard?"

"She and Ginny both," Arthur assured him, moving over to stand next to him. "Let's have a look at you. That's a splint, eh? Remus told me about those. How clever! Good for Harry, knowing how to do it!"

"Where is Harry?" Remus asked, staying by the entrance and glancing around outside.

"He said he was going to bring us some water from the spring," Ron answered. "It's somewhere over the top of this hill. He spotted it when we were flying in. He's been quite a while, actually."

"I'll go and look for him," Remus said, turning toward the cave's opening.

"I'll go with you," Tonks offered, following him.

"Thanks," Remus replied, smiling at her. They walked outside and looked for a path to the top of the hill. "Here we go," Remus said when he spotted the sheep trail Harry had followed. They started climbing.

"My goodness, it's quite a climb up here, isn't it?" Tonks said, gasping for breath.

"The footing's loose here, be careful," Remus said, holding out his hand to help her up the steep slope.

"He couldn't have found a stream that's *down* the hill, I suppose," Tonks grumbled cheerfully. "He must be exhausted, and then with this climb to get water, and having to carry enough down for Buckbeak and Ron – I bet Harry will sleep for a week when this is over!"

"I imagine he'd enjoy that," Remus agreed with a fond smile, picturing Harry's face if he got an actual week's holiday to do whatever he wanted, no homework, no revision, no. . . . He stopped suddenly, listening intently. "What's that?" he whispered.

"It doesn't sound good," Tonks whispered in reply, gripping her wand more tightly and stooping down to make the best possible use of the surrounding brush as cover. Remus followed her example. From somewhere high above them, they could hear faint shouts, voices bellowing spells and curses, and, when they moved out from under the trees, they could see the occasional flash of red, purple, orange, blue or green light as spells flashed by overhead. Remus sent an Adfero to Mad-Eye and Arthur and followed Tonks silently up the hill.

When Harry left Ron, he stopped in the little copse of trees to see how Buckbeak was doing, then trudged up the hill to a spring he'd spotted when they'd flown in at dusk the night before. He grumbled a bit as he walked. "Could've flown up here, but no, I have to stay hidden, and besides, after my stupid scar acting up, I'm too sore to even think about flying. Blast the flaming scar anyway." He sighed and kept walking, slipping every so often on the loose gravel that littered the slope.

Just over the crest of the ridge was a pretty little clearing surrounded by trees, ending in a cliff with a spectacular view of the lake and valley below. A spring bubbled up in the clearing, the ground around it soft and marshy. The stream created by this spring spilled ribbon-like down a sheer cliff. About one hundred and fifty feet below was a deep, dark lake shadowed by the surrounding mountains, which gave on to a river that flowed down through the valley beyond. It would've been a beautiful sight if it hadn't required such a difficult trek to get up there. And after all that walking, Harry would have to conjure jugs and carefully levitate them down so he could bring water to Beaky and Ron – and Beaky drank a lot of water, usually twelve to fifteen gallons a day. Since he'd been injured, he was drinking even more than usual. Harry was glad he could levitate the jugs instead of carrying them, but he was exhausted, hungry,

cold, and was hard-pressed to keep enough water in the small trough he'd conjured for Beaky to drink from. At least Buckbeak had enough energy to catch his own meals. If Harry had needed to find food for Beaky as well as water, he probably would've just offered the hippogriff his own arm or leg to gnaw on. He was that tired.

He trudged up the hill, aching and weary, but still doing his best to be alert. When he neared the top of the hill, he stopped. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up. His scar was prickling intensely. He pulled his wand and moved carefully from one shrub to another, trying to stay under cover while scouting the area. He couldn't see anyone. He invoked the powers of his glasses, and saw, behind a pile of boulders on the other side of the spring, a gathering of Death Eaters. He silently blessed Dumbledore for thinking to add so many powers to his glasses.

He was just backing down the hill when a broom appeared in the sky, with. . .oh, no, it couldn't be! Ginny was about to fly over the clearing. *What's she doing here? Where are the Order members?* Harry thought. He hadn't seen them arrive because he'd been sticking tight to cover on his way up the hill, and they'd been Disillusioned and careful in their flight. Ginny's angle of approach didn't allow her to see the gathered Death Eaters. Before he could send her an Adfero or react in any other way, one of the Death Eaters had shot her out of the sky, then stood there laughing about it.

"Like shooting ducks on a pond," said the one who had shot the spell at her.

His companion laughed nervously. "You don't want to be doing stuff like that, just playing around like that. The Dark Lord. . . ."

"Oh, stuff the Dark Lord. That's a pretty little girl, probably out for a lark. I'm going to see if she's as pretty as she looked from a distance. She's mine, I caught her," he chortled, and started toward the banks of the stream where Ginny had landed with a "thump." Her broom lay just a few feet from her. She lay there dazed for a moment, then pulled her wand and looked around carefully as she started to get up.

Harry knew he and Ginny were seriously outnumbered. Ginny was a good fighter, given a chance, but she wasn't going to be given a chance, from the looks of things. And Voldemort might be on the way – these wizards certainly seemed to be waiting for something. How had they found him? He didn't have time to think. He was about to step out and fight for Ginny when Voldemort Apparated just next to her.

"Ah, what have we here?" Voldemort said. "I remember you. You're that silly little girl who wrote in my diary, aren't you? Ginny Weasley?"

Ginny's face had blanched at the sight of him. She'd never seen him before. His red eyes, and pale snake-like face were horribly frightening, but the worst thing was, she remembered him as handsome young Tom Riddle. She was nauseated at what he'd done to himself.

"Answer me, girl!" Voldemort snarled. "You're Ginny Weasley, all grown up now, aren't you?"

"And you took a handsome young man and turned him into something hideous," she spat, her back arched like that of a cat ready to spring.

Voldemort laughed, a high, cold sound. "Oh, she does have spirit! I like that in a victim, don't you?" he asked his Death Eaters, who were gathering around him and Ginny.

Harry stood frozen, his mind racing but no coherent thoughts appearing in it. *"Think, Potter, think!"* he berated himself. He took a deep breath and blew it out, steeling himself for whatever was coming next. Before he could move, Voldemort had grabbed Ginny's arm and pulled her to him, twisting her arm cruelly behind her. He was nose to nose with her, if the slits in his face could be called a nose.

"What are you doing here, my dear?" he asked smoothly. "Come to meet your lover? Harry Potter, yes? I've heard you two are quite the item."

"Bloody hell, don't you ever brush your teeth? Your breath smells like owl shit!" she snapped, her eyes flashing as she defied the Dark Lord right to his face.

"Ah, the famous Weasley humour. Too bad no one here appreciates it," he said with a chuckle. "What shall we do with you?" He looked at the gathered Death Eaters. "What say you? Shall I throw her to you for your pleasure?"

A round of affirmative grunts and replies answered him. As they started to move closer to Ginny, Voldemort loosened his grip on her, and Harry stepped out from behind his boulder. *"Accio Ginny!"* he cried. Ginny's body flew from Voldemort's hand to Harry's arms. He caught her with his left arm and pushed her behind him quickly. "Run down the hill," he told her. "Go and hide there."

"No. I'll guard your back," she said, standing behind him.

"No!" Harry began, but spells had already started flashing around them. Harry pulled her behind his boulder and pushed her to the ground. She pushed him away so she could sit up and shoot some spells around the rock. The boulder was crumbling under the force of the Death Eaters' spells. Harry and Ginny were both shooting spells as fast as they could, while dodging shrapnel from the boulder at the same time. They were rapidly running out of shelter.

"Harry, Harry, Harry. We meet again at last," Voldemort said calmly. He sounded as unconcerned as he might if they were all about to sit down to afternoon tea. With a casual wave of his wand, Voldemort made the boulder vanish completely, exposing Harry and Ginny.

Harry pushed Ginny behind him again, but she simply would not stay hidden, leaning around him to send hexes and jinxes so fast her wand was a blur. Harry had to admire her courage despite his being fully occupied with shielding, dodging and parrying Voldemort's curses. He finally pulled her behind another boulder. She guarded one side while he guarded the other. She was determined to protect him and be part of the fight, no matter what he said. His "warrior princess" indeed. Harry's heart swelled with love for her, and fear for her safety. How were they going to get out of this? He finally hit on a strategy – it might not work, but it was worth a try.

"This is between you and me," Harry snarled. "Call them off, let her leave safely, and you and I can have it out right here."

"Oh, you think you can set the terms of our engagement? Think again!" Voldemort laughed, the high, cold sound sending shivers down Harry's and Ginny's backs. "I would like some questions answered before I kill you, though, Harry."

"What questions?"

"There have been repeated attempts on your life since last we met, yet you keep surviving them. Why is that?" Voldemort sounded genuinely curious.

"Just lucky, I suppose," Harry snapped, his eyes roving, his mind racing, searching for an advantage somewhere.

"Oh, really?" Voldemort seemed amused. "I think your luck has just run out." He threw a spell that should have blasted the boulder to pieces, but Harry had put a shield around it just in time. Voldemort's spell bounced back at him. He barely managed to parry it in time. "Ah, learned some new tricks, have you?"

"A few."

"I wish you'd join me, Harry. We would be such an excellent team." His voice dripped with charm. Harry thought it was similar to a snake charming its victim; only Harry was not going to sit still long enough to become a victim.

"I've made my choice, and it isn't you. Sorry."

"A choice you would live to regret, if you were going to live very long. But you're not!" Voldemort shouted, moving around the small clearing, raining spells on Harry and Ginny as fast as lightning.

Harry ducked and rolled, coming up on his feet and shooting back before rolling behind another boulder. He was hoping to draw Voldemort's attention away from Ginny. Harry shot spells at the Death Eaters who were sneaking up on Ginny, then heard a familiar scream as one of his spells hit home. Bellatrix. It had to be. His attention was now divided between Voldemort and Bellatrix, which wasn't the best situation, but he was going to kill Bellatrix. He was certain today would be the last day of her life.

Sudden spell fire from below the ridge caught Harry's attention and he nearly laughed out loud as Remus and Tonks came roaring up the hill, taking out Death Eaters with nearly every spell. Voldemort stood with his arms folded, watching. When Harry came after him, Voldemort Disapparated and didn't reappear. Harry whirled around, searching for him, then found himself dodging spells from Bellatrix. He returned her fire and they duelled across the clearing, spells flying, the colours overlapping until they looked like walls of multicoloured light.

"Why don't you die?" Bellatrix screamed.

"It's not my turn," Harry replied calmly. "I'll bet you were pretty frustrated this term when none of your plans worked. I'll bet he was pretty angry with you, eh?" He shot an *Impedimenta* curse that she barely managed to dodge.

"Why don't you die?" she screamed again. "What magic is this that you won't die?" She shot the Killing Curse at him over and over, but she couldn't catch him, he was too fast, ducking, rolling, and dodging as if this were merely another Quidditch game. Sometimes he threw up a Repelling Charm as well as the Extra-Strong Shield Charm he'd learned from his Dark Arts books just before she sent her Killing Curse, and then he laughed mockingly at her as she dived for cover from her own rebounding curse.

"Just good, clean living and a kind heart," Harry teased, deliberately enraging her further. Just as he'd hoped, her rage made her careless. He threw a strong *Expelliarmus* at her that she was unable to block or dodge. She was thrown back fifteen feet, hitting the rock wall behind the spring with a resounding *crack*. She lay still. Harry walked over to her, ignoring the battle still going on around him, and snarled, "That was for Sirius." He was about to hex her again to repay her for making Ron sick with the sparkly potion, for Polyjuicing Parvati to make her impersonate Ginny, for Millicent attacking Madam Pomfrey and impersonating her to poison him, for possessing Hermione, for making him sick so many times, for everything she'd done to people he cared about. But there were no hexes necessary. When she hit the rock, her skull had split open. Brain matter smeared the rock and matted her long black hair. Her blood was fouling the pretty little spring. Harry wanted to retch, but steeled himself.

"You deserved to die," he snapped grimly. He kicked her body away from the water, then turned away from her to rejoin the battle.

He glanced around. Ginny was holding her own, Remus and Tonks were fighting back to back, Moody and Arthur Weasley had joined the battle and were injured but still fighting. Harry leaped back into combat with a will, running to Ginny and fighting beside her as long as he could. The battle eventually separated them again.

As Harry moved across the clearing, Voldemort reappeared and captured Ginny before she could fight back. He pulled her wand from her and said, "Naughty, naughty. Nice children don't go around trying to hurt people."

"Apparently that's a lesson you never learned," she snarled, kicking and biting for all she was worth. Arthur Weasley tried to run across the clearing to her, his face anguished at the sight of his baby girl in the Dark Lord's arms, but was attacked by several Death Eaters and went down. Ginny didn't see her father fall – her attention was all on Harry. She watched him for a signal, a sign of what to do, all the time fighting Voldemort with every bit of strength she possessed.

"Let her go!" Harry demanded, standing only a few feet in front of Voldemort. "This is between you and me. She's not involved."

"She is if I want her to be," Voldemort said with a sickening smile. "Let's see now, how shall I play with my little doll first? Ah, I know. *Crucio!"* Ginny writhed in agony, still held tightly by Voldmort's arm around her waist. Her plait came loose and her hair rippled down her back and over Voldemort's arm, shimmering in the light as she suffered wave after wave of pain.

Harry realized with horror that Voldemort was at the edge of the cliff. *Oh, no,* he thought. *It's my dream.*

"I think I've found a way to hurt you, Harry," he said smoothly. "Let's see if I'm right." With that, he threw the still-writhing Ginny over the cliff. Arthur Weasley had just regained his feet. He gasped when he saw his daughter fall, but he was busy holding off three Death Eaters and unable to run to help her.

Ginny screamed as she fell, her hair a red sail above her, just as Harry had dreamed. He sent an *Expelliarmus* at Voldemort, hoping to knock him over the cliff, but Voldemort dodged the curse. Harry was too far from the cliff to jump after her, and Voldemort and several Death Eaters were in the way, in any case. He saw Ginny's broom lying nearby and sent it flying to her with a neatly aimed Banishing spell. He reached down and picked up her wand, which Voldemort had dropped when he threw her off the cliff. Ginny's screaming stopped suddenly. There was no splash – would he hear a splash this far up? Or had she hit the rocks? His insides felt frozen with fear. *Please, please, please let her be all right!* he prayed as he sent spells in two directions in quick succession from the wands in each hand. Suddenly, there she was, flying overhead on her broom. Harry breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief, threw another curse at Voldemort to keep him busy, cried "Ginny!" and tossed her wand to her. She caught it deftly and went back to work raining down spells on the enemy.

There were only a few Death Eaters still fighting. Voldemort was livid, sending spells at Harry with the speed of light. Harry was shooting back just as quickly. Voldemort shot at Ginny, but she dodged in time to avoid being hit. However, the spell destroyed her broom and again she fell toward the lake far below.

Harry looked around quickly. Nobody but him was near Voldemort. He released his rage into a ball of power that ran from his fingertips to Voldemort. The rocks around the Dark Lord actually melted, such was the heat of Harry's fury. Molten rock washed over Voldemort's feet and he screamed.

At last! Harry thought, *I've finally hurt him!*

With a roar of pain and rage, Voldemort Disapparated.

Without a backward glance, Harry leaped off the cliff, ignoring the cries of the Order members who saw him go. As he fell, time seemed to stand still. He had time to notice an eagle soaring on thermals far away. Wildflowers dotted the valley below, creating wide swaths of reds and golds. He saw the beautiful sparkle of sunlight on the ripples in the lake. Below those lovely ripples, Ginny's bright hair was a shimmering red stain far below the lake's surface. He prayed she wasn't too injured or too scared to be able to do the Bubble-Head Charm – if she could remember to do it in the midst of falling off a one hundred and fifty foot cliff. He threw a shield above him to protect him from the spells and shards of rocks that were falling toward him, did an Aresto Momentum spell to keep him from hitting the water hard enough to get injured, then did a partial transfiguration, growing gills and webbed hands and feet as he hit the water.

Harry swam down as fast as he could, looking for the gleam of bright hair somewhere in the dark water surrounding him. Far below him, he saw it, just a glimpse. She was still sinking, her arms and legs splayed out weirdly around her. She must be unconscious or she'd be trying to swim. At least she wasn't bound, as she'd been in his dream. He pointed at her and did a Summoning Charm, which began bringing her toward him, and swam down to meet her.

When he finally caught her, he held her close and kicked hard for the surface. She'd managed a partial Bubble-Head Charm, but not enough of one. It only covered her eyes and nose, like a mask. She was unconscious. As he swam, he took in a deep breath, removed his gills and blew air into her lungs, the memory of this same scene in his dream making his heart shrink in fear. *She'll be fine. She's alive. She'll be fine.* Thinking positively should help, right? He continued his unusual version of mouth-to-mouth as he brought her to the surface and pulled her to the shore. Harry picked her up and carried her to shelter under an overhanging rock in case the Death Eaters aimed more spells at them. She still wasn't breathing. She was so pale, even her freckles were translucent. He removed the Bubble-Head Charm and kept breathing into her mouth.

"Ginny? Ginny! Wake up! *I will not let you die!*" he cried as he turned her on her side and pounded on her back so she could cough out the water she'd inhaled. "Wake up! I need you, Ginny! Wake up! Come back to me!" Tears began to flow unheeded down his cheeks, mixing with the water streaming from his hair as he worked over her. He hadn't been able to save Casey. He damned well would save Ginny! "Please! Sweetheart, please! *Wake up!*"

Sobbing, he continued to breathe into her mouth, to pound on her back, whatever he could think of to get her breathing again. Finally, she coughed and retched, a small torrent of water coming out of her mouth, leaving her gasping, but breathing on her own at last.

"Wake up! C'mon, you can do it!" he encouraged her. Her eyelids fluttered open, then closed again, the motion gentle as the beat of a butterfly's wings. "Ginny, come back to me," Harry encouraged. "Open your eyes." Her eyes opened again, once, twice, then closed, and she sighed and her body went limp. She couldn't die, she just couldn't!

"No! Wake up! *Ginny!*" he cried, frantically.

She took a deep, shuddering breath and opened her eyes again. She looked at him without really seeing him, then glanced away, her eyes still unfocused.

"Good girl, that's it, you can do it. C'mon, Ginny," he encouraged, his heart in his mouth. "Please, sweet girl, be all right."

Ginny's eyes roved around, as if searching for something, still with that unfocused look. They landed on his face again and finally she appeared to be really seeing what she was looking at. Her hand moved a bit. Harry reached for it and held it tightly.

"I'm here, sweetheart," he said, kissing her hand repeatedly. "You're going to be fine." He prayed he was right.

"Hhhhaaa. . ." she whispered. "Hhhhaarry."

"Yes, baby, it's me," he said, sobbing in relief. "I'm here."

"Wha'?" she murmured, looking at their surroundings. "Where?"

"Voldemort threw you off the cliff into the lake. I came after you," he said simply.

"Like. . . your dream?" she said, a little colour coming back into her face.

"Yes, a lot like my dream," he said.

She laughed softly, which made her cough. When she caught her breath again, she said, "Professor Trelawney. . ."

"Yeah, I know. Ron thinks I should take over her job," Harry said, smiling through his tears. Leave it to a Weasley to come out of a life-threatening situation with a joke on their lips.

"She'll. . . be jealous," Ginny said, smiling. She lifted her hand to touch his face. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine," he said dismissively.

"When you. . . say you're 'fine,'. . . you're usually . . . in bad shape," she scolded, a trace of a twinkle in her eyes.

"OK, if you want a full report, I'll do it later. I don't have any major injuries. Is that good enough for now?"

"Yeah." She gazed at him fondly, a slight smile curling her mouth. "I seem to remember being kissed underwater."

"That was me breathing into your mouth," he explained, his eyebrows raised in surprise. "I'm amazed you remember it. I thought you were unconscious."

"I don't know what state I was in – conscious or not – but I remember distinctly being kissed underwater – a lot. And I remember thinking that I liked it." She smiled at him, her eyes with that familiar teasing twinkle making his heart turn over.

"We can re-enact it any time you want," he promised, leaning over and gathering her in his arms. "But please be conscious for it the next time, OK?"

"OK," she replied, wrapping her arms around him and gladly accepting the kiss he offered.

Harry kissed her softly at first, and then gently kissed her forehead, eyes and the tip of her nose. "I was so scared," he murmured, kissing her lips once more. His body flooded with joy when she tickled his lips with her tongue. Their kiss deepened and didn't end until she started coughing.

"Oh, sorry," she said when she could get her breath again.

Harry laughed. "I don't know that serious snogging just after nearly drowning is an acceptable medical treatment."

"Works for me," she said throatily, and pulled him down for more. He returned her kisses eagerly, but then noises from above cut through his concentration on her.

"I have unfinished business to take care of," he said apologetically. "I'll take you to Ron so you can rest."

"No, I want to fight!"

"You lost your wand in the lake, sweetheart. And you just came back from nearly drowning. You should rest."

"I will not rest until the battle's won," she declared fearlessly, struggling to get up. "And can't you Accio my wand?"

"I'll give it a try," he said reluctantly. "Just sit still and rest a bit, all right?" When he saw she was going to cooperate at least for the moment, he leaned over and did a Summoning Charm with his hands in the water. He waited for several minutes, but no wand appeared. "I think it's gone for good. It must have washed down the river, or gotten snagged somewhere."

"No wand?" she said in a small voice. "Oh no."

"Come on, then, you need to rest," he encouraged, helping her to her feet.

She stamped her foot furiously. "The battle isn't over yet! I want to fight!"

Harry sighed. If he took her to the cave, she'd just climb the hill to rejoin the battle, even if she had to throw rocks to hurt the enemy. "All right. Do you want to ride the thestral up there, or do you want to hold on to the phoenix's tail?"

"Thestral," she said immediately.

"Here, take my wand," he said, holding it out to her. "Try not to lose it. I'm rather fond of it."

"I can't take your wand," she protested.

"Then what are you going to fight with?" he said reasonably. Her face fell, but then became resolute as she held her hand out for his wand. She coughed a bit more, but her colour was good now and she seemed to have most of her energy back. "Keep your hand on my shoulder so you can find me," he said as he changed.

"Oh, Harry! I can see you!" she said, amazed. She realized then that she'd seen people die on top of the cliff. That's why she could see him now. She shook off that thought and admired the handsome animal next to her. "You're gorgeous! For a thestral, I mean," she said as she put her foot on his wing joint and climbed onto his back.

With a leap, the thestral was airborne. He flew around the top of the cliff at a distance, observing how the battle was going.

"Look! Ron's there too!" Ginny said in surprise. "I thought he was injured. Oh, I see his arm's in a sling. From the way he's moving, he's hurt! We have to get down there, Harry."

The thestral shook his head as if arguing with her, then finally straightened his flight path and landed a short distance away from the fighting. Ginny dismounted and the thestral flew away. Moments later, Harry emerged from the trees, surveying the battlefield before him. Bodies were lying everywhere. Mad-Eye and Arthur were injured but continued to fight, falling repeatedly under barrages of spells, then struggling to their feet again and fighting on. Remus

and Tonks had been separated, each of them fighting several Death Eaters at once. Apparently more Death Eaters had arrived while Harry and Ginny had been at the bottom of the cliff. His friends were about to be overwhelmed.

Harry felt a roaring in his ears as he watched the scene, his blood raging through his veins, his muscles hard and ready. His spell of choice in such heavy combat would normally be Expelliarmus or the Bone-Removal Curse, but he'd seen a Death Eater still manage to cast spells after being so injured. Tonks and Remus were both in mortal peril. The fastest way to remove that danger was to kill those enemies outright, and the Killing Curse was his only choice for that. All these thoughts raced through his mind in an instant, the choice having been made before he had time to consider. But once he did have time to think about it, he saw no other options.

He took a deep breath and began striding forward, his face stony, his eyes furious. Green light flew from his fingers as he threw Killing Curses in quick succession at several Death Eaters who had Tonks cornered, several who were surrounding Remus and two who were sneaking up on Ron. He started casting the purple curse that had so injured Hermione in the Department of Mysteries at the enemies who weren't as close a threat as the first ones he'd attacked, and Death Eaters fell left and right.

Ginny and Ron were battling with determination, Ron stumbling from time to time, favouring his injured side, but still fighting like a champion. A Death Eater sent a Killing Curse at Ron, and Harry deflected it with a curse of his own, and then killed that man as well.

Remus was still fighting, then went down under a hail of curses from the few Death Eaters who remained. A Death Eater bent over Remus. A silvery hand emerged from his sleeve and was nearing Remus's chest.

"You will not take any more family from me!" Harry roared in a rage as he killed Wormtail with an Avada Kedavra. He blew away the other Death Eaters who were coming toward Remus with the same explosive curse he'd used on the three men who had attacked him and Ron on Buckbeak. A crater appeared, and the men were no more. He glared around, searching for more enemies. Not a single Death Eater was upright or conscious. Many were dead. An eerie silence fell over the clearing for a moment, and then Harry ran to Remus's side.

"Remus!" he cried in a broken voice as he slid to a stop on his knees beside his godfather. "Please be all right. Remus?"

Remus's head rocked side to side and his eyes opened slightly. He took a deep breath, then coughed. He squinted around him, his eyes falling on Harry. "Harry!" he said, his voice a raspy whisper. "I was afraid. . .when you went off that cliff. . ."

"I'm fine. Ginny's fine too. Where are you hurt?" Harry asked, his face filled with concern.

"Don't worry about me. I'm a werewolf, remember? I'll be all right in a little while," Remus said with a wry grin as he sat up. "You'll have to tell me about your rescue of Ginny. It must have been amazing."

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry said with a shrug. He sat back on his heels and surveyed the devastation around him. The trees around the little spring had been reduced to splinters by the

spells that had hit them when they missed their marks. Harry's molten rock had solidified into an oddly shaped mass, something like a melted pudding with a pair of footprints in the centre that held blackened masses that must have been shoes at one time. There were bodies everywhere. Mad-Eye Moody was limping around, whacking each prone fighter with his wooden leg to see which Death Eaters were dead and which were not, stunning and tying up the ones who were still alive.

"Remus?" Harry said, his voice sounding odd. "I killed three people yesterday, those men who attacked us? I killed them, all three of them, with one spell." For a moment, he shuddered, looking like a lost little boy. Then his face hardened. "I killed Bellatrix Lestrange a little while ago. That was an accident – I wanted to hex her some more, but she died after an Expelliarmus threw her against a rock. I just killed Wormtail. He was going to do something to you with his silver hand. And I think I killed at least seven or eight of these Death Eaters – maybe more. I stopped counting after a while. I used Unforgivable Curses and the curses we learned from that Dark Arts books after Voldemort threw Ginny over the cliff. I don't regret it, not any of it. They deserved to die."

He looked at his godfather, his face the image of a battle-weary soldier in his forties, not a sixteen year old boy. But behind those hard eyes was the kind heart of Harry Potter. "I killed people, Remus. He's making me be like him." Harry looked at his hands as if they belonged to someone else. "I'm turning into a monster," he whispered. "Why?"

Remus took the boy in his arms and held him, comforting him the only way he knew how. "You are certainly no monster, Harry. You're a wonderful person with a good heart who's been pressed beyond all endurance. I can't tell you why these things happened. All I can say is, we're at war. We need fighters, and you're the best fighter I've ever seen. Sirius used to hold that title, but you surpassed even him today. I'm proud of you, lad."

Harry held tightly to his godfather, too frightened and heartsick to cry. "Will they send me to Azkaban for . . ." he asked in a weary, sad voice.

"NO!" Remus cried, pushing Harry away and looking him in the eye. "Absolutely not. You were fighting for your life, and for the lives of your friends. Self-defence is allowed by our laws, you know that."

"But the Unforgivable Curses and the Dark Magic I did. . .and we're in a foreign country. . ."

"Don't worry about those things. If Dumbledore didn't want you to learn how to use them, he would have taken those books away. And Dumbledore has power here too. You're safe." He squeezed Harry's shoulders encouragingly. "You were amazing today – and yesterday, too, for that matter. I'm so sorry what should have been an enjoyable holiday for you boys turned into such a nightmare."

"Yeah, me too," Harry said, and then glanced around at the others. "Mr. Weasley got hurt. I saw him fall. I think I saw Tonks get hit too. We should go and see how they're doing."

"Yes, we should. And we need to check you over, as well, young man. You were the target of most of the spells flying out there today."

"I'm fine," Harry said as he stood up, making Remus laugh. "And yes, I know I always say I'm fine. But you can see I'm walking and talking – that's close enough to fine, right?"

"For now, I suppose," Remus said, accepting the boy's offer of a hand to help him get to his feet. They walked across the clearing to where the Weasleys were having a tearful family reunion.

"How's your dad?" Harry asked Ron as the redhead backed a step away while his father embraced Ginny. "And for that matter, how are you?"

"I'm fine, and he's loads better since he saw Ginny's OK." Ron looked at his best friend gravely. "I've never really understood how you do what you do, Harry, but I can't tell you how glad I am that you're on our side."

Harry looked at Ron in confusion. "Huh?"

"Look around us. Most of these blokes we got? You did that, not the rest of us. And going over that cliff after Ginny – stories will be written about that rescue for years to come, I guarantee it." Ron looked quite serious. "You're like a storybook hero come to life. Unbelievable – but everything anyone's ever said about you, your powers, all that? It's all true. None of us have ever seen you fight You-Know – oh, bloody hell, Voldemort – before. Incredible. A film of what happened here today would make those adventure films we saw over the holidays look like picnics in the park."

Harry was silent for a moment. He didn't know how to take this. "You're kidding, right?" he said, hoping Ron wasn't going all weird and fan-like towards him.

Harry's just been through hell and looks like it, too. It's time to remind him how to laugh, Ron thought, then hit on a strategy. "Nope. I can see it – 'Harry Potter, The Musical.' It will be a film starring some little boy from Surrey or London, to try to get the accent right. He'll have to have loads of messy dark hair. They may have trouble matching your eyes. D'you mind if they cast someone with blue eyes, maybe?" Ron's eyes were twinkling merrily. "There will be dancing hippogriffs in the background. . . ."

"What are you on about?" Harry said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Just teasing you," Ron said with a grin. "This was an enormous battle, and you were absolutely brilliant. I'm glad it's over! Hey, Binns will have to add it to the History of Magic curriculum! I might actually pay attention in class for that one!" He smiled brightly at the thought. "Hermione will be proud of me if I can manage that!" He looked at Harry intently. "I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted – and starved!"

Harry laughed, amazed he was still able to do so. "When are you ever not starved?"

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley said, finally releasing Ginny from his arms. "I can't thank you enough for saving my little girl."

"Thanks for coming to our rescue – we really needed the help!" Harry said bracingly. "How are you feeling?"

"I'll be fine. Some spell burns, this and that, enough to keep Molly busy fussing over me for a while," he said with a smile. "And thanks for taking such good care of Ron. That splint is brilliant!"

"I'm just glad Remus showed me that spell," Harry said modestly.

"Potter!" Moody called as he approached. "You will make a fine Auror." He stumped up close to them and pulled his magical eye out, rubbing it on his shirt then dipping it in the spring to wash and rewet it before popping it back in. "Seven of us fought fifty-four Death Eaters and You-Know-Who himself, and we won! And three of the seven are students! That's extraordinary. All down to you, Potter," Moody said generously.

Harry blushed under the praise of the old Auror.

"Where's Tonks?" Remus asked, coming back from a quick look around. "Has anyone seen her?" He began turning bodies over, looking for her in the mass of prone figures.

"I saw her by the edge of the woods, over that way," Harry offered, walking toward the place where he last saw her. Remus joined him. Over the crest of the hill there, they found three Death Eaters, all three of them dead. Farther down the hill lay Tonks, her blue hair making an odd contrast with the rusty pine needles that formed her bed. She was too still.

"Oh no," Remus said, tears in his voice as he rushed to her side. "Tonks? Tonks?" He lifted her in his arms and held her close. "Oh no. Not you, Tonks."

"Is she. . .?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"She's in bad shape," Remus said, his voice breaking as tears slid unheeded down his face.

"Let's have a look," Harry said, kneeling beside his godfather. Remus put her gently back on the pine needles. Harry shouted, "Ginny! I could do with some help here!" Ginny came over the rise. "Did you lot bring medicine with you?" Harry asked Remus.

"Yes, Tonks had it," Remus replied. "It should be lying by our brooms in the cave."

"I have some medical potions with me," Ginny offered. "They're in my bag." She pulled off her small backpack, which had been on her back through battle, torture, being tossed over a cliff twice, a one hundred and fifty foot fall into a lake, near drowning and more battle. Miraculously, the potion bottles inside were all intact.

"See what you can do for her with what you brought," Harry said. "I'll go down and bring up her kit." He ran partway down the hill, out of sight of the others, then changed into the phoenix and flashed into the cave. In the cave, he changed back into himself, located the stack of brooms and found Tonks's medical kit in a sling on her broom. Jumping on her broom, he flew back up to the top of the cliff, landing by his godfather.

"How's she doing?" he asked as he knelt by Remus's side.

"She's alive. I don't know any more than that. She's the one with medical training. I don't know how we're going to manage," came Remus's tense reply.

"Harry?" Ginny said, "Can you Adfero Madam Pomfrey for me? I can't do that and examine Tonks at the same time. I'm just not that good with the Adfero Charm yet. I don't think I can cast it over such a long distance, anyway."

"Yeah," Harry said eagerly. At least there was something he could do to help, and Ginny seemed to be confident in what she was doing. Maybe they could pull Tonks through this yet.

"I can do it," Remus offered.

"I need you to help me with her," Ginny said calmly. "I can tell Harry what needs to be sent to Madam Pomfrey while you're helping me. All right?"

"OK. Whatever you need me to do," Remus replied.

Ginny had already opened Tonks's clothes looking for wounds. She had some injuries which were bleeding freely that Ginny and Remus had been busy bandaging and applying pressure to when Harry returned from the cave. Now she was bandaged but still unconscious, still very pale.

"I've got Madam Pomfrey's attention," Harry said suddenly. "She can't do Adferos herself. She has McGonagall helping her on that end. She wants to know what the injuries are." Ginny went down a list of the injuries she'd been able to find, and Harry relayed them to Madam Pomfrey.

"Now she wants to know what potions we have here." Ginny told Harry and he relayed that information.

"OK," Harry said, "she says to give Tonks a dose of Pepper-Up Potion, and three drops of a potion Madam Pomfrey said would be in Tonks's kit, in a purple vial. It's standard issue in First Aid Kits."

Ginny found the purple vial and the Pepper-Up Potion and gave them to Tonks. A few moments later, Tonks opened her eyes and looked around, her expression dazed until it fell on Remus.

"Oh. What happened?" she murmured. "My head feels like it's been trampled by a herd of hippogriffs."

"You had a pretty bad knock on your head," Remus told her gently, "and a few other injuries, but Ginny has taken good care of you."

"With Madam Pomfrey's help," Ginny added modestly. "I treated the injuries I could find. Do you have any pain somewhere I might have missed?"

Tonks moved around a little. "I think it's mostly my head," she said with a small smile. "I've one bugger of a headache." She struggled to sit up. Remus put his arm around her back and helped her get upright, while Harry conjured a cushion to support her back.

"Better?" Remus asked kindly, relief plain in his face.

"Yeah. Thanks," Tonks replied smiling up at him.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look and smiled at each other. Remus and Tonks? How nice for both of them! They wondered if Remus and Tonks were aware of how attracted they were to each other.

"Potter!" Moody called. "Can you give us a hand here?"

Harry looked at Ginny, then at Remus. "Do you still need me here?"

"Just tell Madam Pomfrey I said 'thanks' and that the patient seems to be doing well," Ginny said with a smile as she started packing up her and Tonks's medical kits.

"Right," Harry said. "Tonks, I'm glad you're OK," he added as he turned to leave.

"Thanks," she replied, lifting her hand to give him a little wave.

"What is it?" he asked Moody when he reached the old Auror's side.

"We need to ship this lot off to Azkaban. I could use some help hauling them all to one spot, and making note of their names and where they're from. Then we'll make a Portkey to Azkaban for 'em," he growled, leering at the prisoners nearby. "Azkaban's too good for 'em if you ask me," he added.

"OK. Where do you want me to start?"

"Just bring any of them that aren't dead over here. Make sure they're tied up good and proper. And the ones you think are dead? Give 'em a good swift kick in the kidneys. That way, you'll be able to find out which ones are faking."

"Got it." Harry went off to do as he was told. He forced himself to be dispassionate, to look at the dead bodies as so much baggage. It was hard the first few times he had to kick a body, but kick them he did, and with a will. He discovered two who were nearly unhurt, just pretending to be dead, so he bound them and levitated them over to Moody's gathering of prisoners. Soon they had all the live ones collected and sitting close together, bound into one large bunch of irate humanity.

"Stop yer whingin'" Moody snarled as the murmuring in the crowd of Death Eaters escalated.

"I have an idea," Harry said. "*Silencio*." The murmuring ceased instantly.

"Ah, well done, Potter. I should've thought of that myself. Busy with this damned paperwork. Never did like paperwork. It's the bane of an Auror's life. Arrest someone and you're the one who gets punished by having to fill out so many forms, and in triplicate, mind you!" He continued grumbling this way for a while.

Harry, in the meantime, was going from person to person, removing the Silencing Charm long enough to get a name and where they were from. When he finished, he handed the list to Moody.

"We captured Lucius Malfoy – again. He should be on the other list – the list of dead ones. You don't suppose anyone would mind if my wand just . . . slipped. . .now, do you, boy?" he asked Harry with a leering grin as he leaned over Malfoy's tightly trussed body.

"I certainly wouldn't miss him," Harry agreed. He glared down at the man lying at his feet, thinking how easy it would be to kill him. A small voice in the back of his mind said, *No. That's not your way.* Harry sighed. "I suppose we need to let the court decide what to do with them."

Moody looked up at him, startled. "After all he and his young whelp have done to you and your friends?"

"Yeah."

Moody paused, then took a step back and looked at Harry seriously with both eyes. "You're a better man than I am, Potter." He finished his notes and rolled up the scroll of parchment with the list of names Harry had made rolled inside. He sealed the roll, then tied it to the handle of Ginny's demolished broom, which was going to be the Portkey. "This is a one-way ticket to Azkaban, boys and girls," Moody said. "I'm tying it to the ropes that bind you. You'll all go together. I'll go along for the ride to make sure you're delivered good and proper."

"Do you need me to go with you?" Harry asked, suddenly concerned about the old Auror going by himself to Azkaban with so many prisoners.

"No, I've already asked more of you than I should ask of a student, or even a young Auror like Tonks, there," Moody declared. "Now, you just get Remus to help you turn the bodies into a single bone each and bury them, and you'll be all tidied up here. Oh, make a list of the names of the bodies, all right? Give the list to Dumbledore, and if you get a chance, send a copy to me."

"OK," Harry agreed.

"I'll come back as soon as I have this lot delivered safely. You all need to rest for at least a night. You'll need to find another place. Once you find it, send me an Adfero so I'll know how to find you. We'll help you deliver that hippogriff, Potter, and then you can enjoy the rest of your holiday." Moody turned a leering eye on his band of prisoners, grabbed the rope that tied them and pressed the damaged broom handle against the rope as well, then counted down, "Three, two, one. . ." and with that, they were gone.

Chapter 27 – Aftermath – and Beginnings

Harry looked at Remus and Tonks. Remus was still holding Tonks's hand, his face alight with joy that she was all right. Harry didn't have the heart to ask Remus to help him identify the bodies. He looked at the Weasleys, who were talking about what had happened that day and the day before, three bright red heads close together bound in a circle of love.

Harry felt very remote from them all just then. He took out the parchment, ink bottle and quill Moody had handed him and went from body to body, writing down the names of those he knew. He had to turn a lot of them over. He did his best to recognize people, some of whom now had only parts of a face instead of a whole one. He took particular delight in kicking Wormtail numerous times, although he knew the man was, at long last, truly dead.

Only a few of the dead were Death Eaters he recognized or whose names were familiar to him. *These must be new recruits*, he thought sadly. For the ones he didn't recognize, he went through their pockets looking for identification. The more bodies he dealt with, the more his heart ached. He recognized one man's name and realized he had a son and a daughter in Hufflepuff. Among the dead were several who had finished Hogwarts in recent years, every one of them a Slytherin. Marcus Flint, Warrington, Terrence Higgs. He remembered them from Quidditch matches. Dirty players, every one, especially Flint. There were others who he recognized as past students, but he didn't know their names. He sighed. He actually felt sorry for these boys, whose lives were cut off before they'd really begun. They'd made bad choices all through Hogwarts, and obviously, from being part of this fight, after Hogwarts as well.

Harry continued with the task Moody had given him. His heart ached when he discovered that some of these people were married. He learned a lot from family photos he found in some people's pockets. Many of these couples lying here dead had children at Hogwarts, as well as children too young for Hogwarts. Each person here was somebody's child, sister, brother, wife, husband, friend, but worst of all to Harry, many of them were parents. In the photos, they laughed, played with their children, hugged their spouses, waved at the camera. They were so alive, having no idea that their lives would soon be cut short.

Harry fought to quell the emotions raging in him. *These were bad people, stupid people who hungered for power, people who were easily led by a monster. They deserved to die! Didn't they?* Then he wondered if any of them had been forced to serve Voldemort, as many had declared after his first reign of terror. He had no way of knowing if they were here voluntarily or if they were forced. The idea that these people had possibly been forced to work for Voldemort and had died in his service was tearing at his soul.

Finally overwhelmed, Harry sat down and folded his arms on his upraised knees, burying his face in his arms. His body shook with sobs, but he bit his lips, forcing himself to be quiet. Suddenly, he felt an arm come sympathetically around his back, then another, then a hand kindly touching his shoulder, another softly touching his hair, and one small wiggly body working her way under his arms to snuggle tightly against him. He looked up to see Arthur, Ron, Remus and Tonks surrounding him, and Ginny, of course, with her arm wrapped tightly around his waist, her other hand cupping his cheek, wiping away his tears with gently caressing fingers.

"What were you doing, Harry?" Remus asked, his sad eyes full of heartache for his godson.

"Moody. . .Moody told me. . ." he began. He couldn't say it for some reason.

"He wanted a body count?" Remus suggested.

"No. Names," Harry replied, indicating his list. "I don't recognize all of them, so I'm . . . I have to . . .go through their pockets." His voice shook and his hand trembled as he held out a photo he'd removed from someone's pocket. "I know these kids. They're in Hufflepuff. *Hufflepuff!*" He sobbed as he pointed at a body lying nearby. "That guy's twin sons are in First Year in Slytherin. These people. . .they have *families*." He shuddered at the horror he'd created. He didn't think he could bear it. "Some of these kids – *both* parents are here. They're. . ." his voice faded to a hoarse whisper, "*orphans* now." He broke down completely then, sobbing on Ginny's shoulder. His friends didn't know how to comfort him. Arthur looked at Remus, unsure what to do.

"C'mon, Dad," Ron said gruffly. "You and I can do this."

Arthur looked at his youngest son with great pride as he took the list, ink bottle and quill from Harry's limp hands.

"Where'd you stop, mate?" Ron asked Harry gently.

"Here. I was working left to right across the clearing," he said, indicating his pattern with a gesture, "and I started over there. Thanks."

Harry gave Ron a look that seared Ron's soul. He'd never completely understood the depth of pain Harry felt from losing his parents. Now Harry had been a part of killing several sets of parents himself and it was breaking his heart.

"You get some rest, Harry," Ron said huskily. "You didn't have any sleep to speak of last night, and you've had a rough morning."

"Yeah. Rough. And all before breakfast," Harry said with a strange laugh.

"Breakfast! That's why our day started so badly! We didn't eat!" Ron said, poking Harry gently in the shoulder, trying to get him to smile at least a little. Harry glanced up at Ron and gave him the tiniest possible half-smile. It was enough. Ron knew his friend would be all right eventually. He just had to get past this horrible day first.

"Harry?" Remus said gently. "You do need some rest. Moody should've asked one of us to do this, not you."

"You and Mr. Weasley were both busy, and Tonks, Ron and Ginny were all hurt," Harry said quietly. "I didn't mind. . . ." He broke off as fresh tears flowed down his cheeks.

"We need to get you, Tonks and Ginny down to the cave to rest while we finish cleaning up here," Remus said. "Come on now, get up."

"Ron and I can take care of things up here, Remus," Arthur said. "You stay down there with them. They need a bit of looking after."

"Thanks, Arthur," Remus replied, picking up Tonks's broom and medical kit and helping Tonks to her feet.

Harry got slowly to his feet and, with his arm around Ginny, followed Remus and Tonks down the hill. Ginny, small as she was, was nearly supporting Harry at first, then he took several deep breaths and straightened, walking more firmly. It was as if the air in the killing field was bad, and his health improved as he got farther away from it. Remus was supporting Tonks as they made their way carefully down the hillside. When they reached the bottom, Harry turned aside.

"Where are you going?" Remus asked.

"I should check on Beaky," Harry said, stopping to look at his godfather. Harry's face was still bereft, but his colour was better.

"Don't be long, Harry," Remus replied. "You do need to rest."

"OK."

"And Harry?"

"Yes?"

"If Beaky needs water or anything, come and tell me. I'll get it for him. I'm serious. You need to rest." Remus had on his best parental face. Harry felt warmed by his concern.

"OK." He and Ginny turned aside to see Beaky for a while. Harry sat down and leaned his back against the hippogriff's side, and Ginny sat beside him. Beaky made soft chirruping noises and rubbed his beak in Harry's hair as if to comfort him. Harry patted his beak, then pulled Ginny into his lap and wrapped his arms around her tightly, burying his face in her shoulder. Beaky lifted his wing from behind them and opened it partway, creating an arched cover over Harry and Ginny as if they were his nestlings. They sat that way for a long time, Ginny gently rubbing Harry's back, running her hands tenderly through his hair, massaging his neck, with Harry holding on to her as if for dear life, not crying anymore but still shaking hard with reaction to the morning's events. Ginny and Buckbeak both crooned to Harry, comforting him as well as they could. Finally, Harry sighed and raised his head, looking at Ginny for the first time since they'd gone to see Buckbeak.

"I'm sorry," he said, his broken heart in his eyes.

"For what?" she said in surprise.

"For getting you and your family into so much danger. For getting you nearly killed. Twice. No, more than that. I lost count. For Ron's broken arm. For your dad being hurt." The litany of misery poured out of him relentlessly. "For Tonks being hurt. For all those people up there. . . ."

"Harry Potter!" Ginny snapped. "Stop that! You are not to blame for any of those things. We're at war. You are NOT the bad guy here. You saved my life several times today. You saved Ron's life yesterday when you two were attacked, and at least twice today that I saw. I

know you saved Tonks's life today – those three bastards would've had her if you hadn't got them. You probably saved Beaky's life too, knowing you. Stop blaming yourself. Nobody thinks you're bad, Harry. You're about as good as it's possible to be!"

Harry gave her a sad half-smile. "You are a stroppy one, aren't you?"

"You'd better believe it!" she retorted. "If you want a fight, get mixed up with a redhead!" She laughed, a startling sound in the gloom of the pine grove. She laced the fingers of both hands in his hair, making it far messier than usual. She held on and rocked his head gently from side to side. "What do I have to do to knock some sense into that thick head of yours, Potter?" she teased.

"Got a Bludger handy?" he said with gloomy eyes but an attempt at his crooked smile, trying to tease her in return.

"I could probably conjure one if it would help," she said confidently. "How many would you like?" she added with a cheeky grin.

Harry had to smile at her. She was absolutely irresistible. "However many you think I need," he murmured, then leaned down to kiss her. When they parted, he held her closely again, hiding his face in her neck again. "Thanks for being here. Thanks for caring."

"How could I not? I love you, Harry," she said simply.

He pulled back to look at her, truly astonished. "With all this? After what I've done? You . . . love me?"

"Harry, you saw me attack people and do my best to kill them, over and over again. Do you think any less of me for that?" she reasoned.

"No. I'm proud of you."

"And I'm proud of you for what you did. Believe me. I'm serious. And I'm serious when I say I love you. I do."

He tilted his head and studied her face, looking deeply into her eyes. "I believe you are serious," he said slowly, his face showing his amazement.

"Good. Then it's settled."

"What is?" he replied, genuinely curious now.

She started counting off on her fingers. "You're a hero, I'm a heroine, Ron's a hero, Tonks is a heroine, Remus is a hero, so are Dad and Mad-Eye. All the other people involved today were enemies. Bad people. People who made bad choices at the very least. That's the way it is. And it's settled. You won't worry about it anymore, right?" She said all this with the utmost assurance and gave him a look daring him to defy her.

Harry rewarded her with a legitimate, if brief, laugh. "As you wish, m'lady," he said, valiantly going back to their game.

She kissed his chin. "Got your dimple!"

"And you may keep it, or give it back. . .as you wish, m'lady." He smiled sadly at her, hoping his heart would lift soon to match her sprightly spirit. In the warmth of her embrace, with the faithful hippogriff sheltering and protecting them, Harry Potter finally slept.

In the cave, Remus did a Cushioning Charm and settled Tonks in as comfortably as he could. He spent a lot of time fiddling around trying to conjure every comfort she could need.

"Remus, calm down. I'm fine," Tonks said, both touched and amused by his efforts.

"You're injured. I'm just trying to help," he said, sounding a bit hurt.

"And I appreciate it. Come and sit with me," she invited, patting the ground next to her and smiling at him warmly.

"I should go and look for the kids," he said, moving toward the cave's opening.

Tonks reached up and put her hand on his arm, stopping him. "Number one, they are no longer kids. Today made them adults. Number two, if they need help, they'll yell. They know we're here and that we can come to them if they need us. They just have to call out, and we'll be right there. And Ginny's a fighter – she'll look after Harry. She's done it before. Harry's heartbroken, not badly injured physically, and can still fight if he needs to. And Buckbeak is very attached to Harry. He'll look after him, as well. They'll come back when they're ready," she said reasonably.

Remus sat down next to her, pondering what she'd said. "Today did make them adults, didn't it? The battle last year in the Department of Mysteries was awful, but Sirius was the only one who died, and Bellatrix killed him, not Harry. Harry didn't have to feel guilty about anything but being duped by Voldemort, and part of the reason he was so easily fooled was that he was a kid. Have you really looked at him today? He must have aged twenty years. Did you see his face?" he said, sadness in his every gesture. "He looked much older than James did when he died." He paused. When he went on, his voice broke with emotion. "James would be so proud of him. Lily, too. Harry was magnificent, wasn't he? But at what cost?" Remus bowed his head, his hands rubbing his face roughly, as if he could erase the memory that way. "At what cost?"

Tonks sat up and began caressing Remus's back gently, trying to comfort him. "Harry's strong. He'll be fine," she assured him.

"People think he must have a wonderful life because he's the 'famous Harry Potter,'" Remus mused, staring off into the distance. "If they only knew the hell he has to go through because of who he is."

"Everything he goes through and survives makes him stronger," Tonks reasoned, still rubbing his back comfortingly. "He'll be as powerful a wizard as Dumbledore before he's thirty at this rate."

Remus smiled at her. Tonks was such a positive, cheerful person. It was heartening just being around her. "I'm so glad you're all right," he said, turning to face her.

"Me, too. When you went down – I was so worried about you. You had so many of them after you at once."

"And you didn't?" Remus teased, chuckling as he tilted his head to look her in the eye.

Tonks gazed at him steadily. Remus felt something odd in his chest, something he hadn't felt in many years. She put her hand on his cheek, her thumb stroking his moustache. Her eyes were confident, bright, and. . .lustful? Could he be reading this right? Remus felt his breathing speed up, his heart start racing as Tonks leaned against him and kissed him. He returned the kiss, folding her gently in his arms, trying to be careful of her injuries. Apparently Tonks wasn't bothered much by her injuries, because she pushed him to the ground and threw herself on top of him, chuckling in the back of her throat as she kissed him more passionately. Remus felt his heart lift in delight and matched her passion for passion. After a few moments, he rolled her over on her back and kissed her more thoroughly, his hands starting to explore a bit, as if they had a mind of their own, but then he gasped and pulled back.

"We should stop. Someone could come in," he said cautiously.

"Then they'll be jealous. So what? Come here, Remus. I've wanted to do this for ages," Tonks said, grabbing his shirt front and pulling him down to kiss her again. When she pulled him down, the hand he'd been using to keep his weight off her slipped and he lost his balance, his full weight falling on her. She groaned in pain and he pulled back, horrified.

"I'm so sorry! I knew we shouldn't do this. You're injured. . ." he said, distraught.

"Yes, I'm injured," she said when she stopped panting with pain. Then she gave him a cheeky smile. "But as soon as I get the right potions to mend myself, you're mine, Professor!" she chortled, flashing her eyes at him and sliding her fingers between the buttons of his shirt to tickle the bare skin of his chest.

"Oh, I am, am I?" he teased, elated that this amazing woman was interested in him. He'd admired her for months now, but had not even considered approaching her romantically. Who, after all, would want to be with a werewolf? But she knew all about him and was interested in him in spite of his affliction, even aggressively interested! He smiled in delight, cherishing the special nature of this lovely, spirited, fascinating lady. He leaned down and kissed her softly. "I don't think I'll fight you very hard," he murmured as he kissed her neck and nibbled her ear, making her gasp in pleasure.

"Good. I'd hate to have to hurt you, you know," she chuckled, nibbling his ear in return, then kissing him deeply, passionately, and pulling his shirt tail out of the waistband of his trousers, then sliding her hands deliciously over the bare skin of his back. A small noise broke them apart, blushing. "What was that?" Tonks breathed, reaching for her wand.

"Could be the bats in this cave, or it could be the kids coming back," Remus said, softly kissing her nose before getting to his feet. "I'll go and check." He walked to the entrance, tucking his shirt in quickly as he went. Wand at the ready, he looked around outside, trying to

stay hidden as he did so. "I don't see anything. They've been gone quite a while. I'm going to go and look for them, make sure they're all right."

"All right, but remember what I said – they're adults now. They could be comforting each other the way we were," she called with a flirtatious grin.

Remus laughed and thought a moment. "I will keep that in mind – and I wouldn't blame them in the least. It's important to remember how good it is to be alive," he said, turning back and looking at her again. She was sitting up against the wall, her blue hair bright in the darkened cavern. "And thanks for reminding me of that fact. It is, truly, good to be alive," he said tenderly, then smiled and waved at her before walking off.

Remus walked toward the grove of trees, thinking Harry and Ginny might still be with Buckbeak. The hippogriff lifted its head when it saw him coming. Remus bowed to Buckbeak and Beaky bowed in return, but raised the crest of feathers on top of his head and on his neck in warning when Remus tried to approach.

"Oh, you're guarding them, eh?" Remus said quietly. "I won't bother them, I just want to see if they're all right." He called Harry's name softly, but got no response. Listening carefully, he could just make out the sounds of steady, slow breathing and an occasional soft snore. He chuckled at hearing that, then walked at a distance around the expanse of Buckbeak's huge wing and saw Harry sound asleep, resting against the hippogriff's side. Ginny was in his lap, her head nestled in his shoulder. Beaky had covered them with his wing so they were in what appeared to be a silvery white cave. Ginny glanced up when Remus moved behind the edge of Beaky's wing. She put her finger to her lips and nodded ever so slightly toward Harry. She didn't want him disturbed, it was clear. Remus looked at Harry's weary face. He looked so exhausted, so pale, so old before his time, the circles under his eyes dark and enormous. Remus's heart turned over, wishing there was a way to help his godson.

"Do you need anything?" he whispered.

Ginny shook her head slightly and murmured, "He just needs to rest. He's exhausted."

"I know. I'll be in the cave with Tonks if you need me," Remus replied quietly, backing away from the tender scene.

When he returned to the cave, he found Tonks fast asleep, lying on her side with her head cradled on her folded arm. He sat near her and she stirred, opening her eyes.

"Hi there," she murmured. "I could do with a pillow."

He started to move away to bring a cloak back to her, but she grabbed his robes, stopping him. "Lie down, Remus. Your shoulder will be fine." Her eyes sparkled with mischief, sleepy though they were. He chuckled and did as she asked, lying down and raising his arm so she could snuggle in next to him.

"Are you comfy now?" he said, laughter in his voice.

"Mmm-hmmm," she sighed, nestling her head into his shoulder. Remus wrapped his arms around her snugly and she was soon asleep again, her fingers once more between the buttons

on his shirt, touching his bare chest. She seemed determined in that endeavour, which amused and pleased Remus enormously.

Remus revelled in the feelings that were opening up in his heart. He'd been alone for so long. Simone was the love of his youth. It had been many years since he'd allowed himself to even think about caring for someone. It seemed Tonks wasn't going to give him much choice in the matter – and that was fine with him. He smiled, rested his cheek against her blue hair, sighing contentedly. Before long, the many sleepless hours of flying to this site and worrying about the boys, as well as the exhaustion of battle, caught up with him, and he, too, fell asleep.

Some time later, Ron and Arthur trudged down to the cave, weary and heartsick after the job they'd done. They'd not only written down the names of all the dead and collected personal items to give to their families, but had transfigured each body into a single bone and had buried the lot in a mass grave. They'd used the crater Harry had created when he blew up the three men who were after Remus as the grave, grateful they only had to cover the hole, not dig one as well as filling it. Even with magic, that was a lot of work in such stony ground. When they entered the cave, they saw Remus and Tonks in each other's arms, peacefully asleep. Both Weasleys lifted their eyebrows and looked at each other. Arthur grabbed Tonks's medical kit and drew Ron back outside. They sat by the entrance to the cave, waiting for Dumbledore to arrive.

"Did you know about them?" Arthur asked Ron, tilting his head back toward the cave indicating the couple inside as he dug out the proper potion to treat Ron's injuries and his own spell burns. Tonks hadn't had time to get the potion to repair broken bones, so Ron's arm would have to wait for Dumbledore's arrival before it could be healed.

"It's news to me," Ron replied, equally surprised. "But you know what? I'm happy for them. Remus always seems a bit sad, even when he's laughing."

"Yes, I've noticed that. He's smiling now," Arthur said with a chuckle. "Tonks will be a handful for him to deal with, if they actually build a relationship."

"Yeah, but she'll make him laugh. He needs that," Ron replied with a grin. After a moment, he said, "Wonder where Harry and Ginny are?"

"I'm almost afraid to go looking for them," Arthur said uneasily.

Ron was shocked. "Why?"

"I don't want to . . . erm. . .walk in on them," his dad replied uncomfortably.

"Walk in on. . .? Oh! You think they're. . .erm. . . ." He blushed furiously at the thought, then a little voice in the back of his mind said, *Lucky dogs.* Ron immediately scolded himself for envying Harry and Ginny whatever they might be doing. They'd both been through hell today and deserved whatever comfort they could find. He'd just have to have a little talk with Hermione when they got back to school. He'd had a hard couple of days too, after all.

"It's possible. When you've been through a lot of strong emotions, especially grief, you look for comfort where you can find it," Arthur said wisely. "And Ginny's where Harry will find

comfort. I just don't know that I'm ready for her to be making adult decisions at her age. She's only fifteen."

"Yeah, Mum will go ballistic," Ron agreed. He looked at his dad's uneasy face, trying to think of a way to comfort him. "I don't think they've done. . .that. . .yet, so maybe. . . ."

"Have you watched the two of them together?" Arthur said sadly. "It won't be long. I hope they're wise enough to be careful."

"Don't worry about them, Dad," Ron said. "They both know how to take care of themselves."

"And do you?" Arthur asked, a slight twinkle in his eye.

Ron blushed beet red again. "Erm. . .yeah. . .but I don't need to yet."

"OK. As long as you know. I wasn't certain that talk 'took' when we had it."

"Harry had the 'little wizards' talk with both Sirius and Remus and he and I compared notes. I think we have everything clear now," Ron said with a grin, although he was still blushing.

Arthur patted his son on the knee. "Good. Then I'll just trust you and your sister to be sensible, shall I?"

"Yeah, that would be a good idea," Ron said laughing. "Don't worry, Dad. We'll be careful." Ron was astonished his dad was taking this whole idea so well. He had thought the idea of Ginny becoming involved sexually with anyone would have made his father explode. *Give Dad some points for being a reasonable man,* Ron thought with an inward smile. *Mum, though. . .I don't think she'd be quite so charitable.*

"Good." Arthur sighed. It was hard to be a good parent to your children when they were hundreds of miles away most of the time. He and Molly had done their best. They'd learned several sons ago to train their children the best they could before they left for Hogwarts, then just trust the kids to get through life as well as possible. It honestly wasn't worth the effort to spend any more time than necessary worrying about them. With a war on and all his children involved in it now, worrying about them having sex was the least of his problems, as long as they were careful about it. Having babies in wartime wasn't the best possible idea.

Harry woke up slowly, wondering why his legs were asleep and what the weight was in his arms – and what was he leaning against that was actually *breathing*? His scar didn't hurt, and the hair on the back of his neck was comfortably in its usual messy place, not standing up in warning. He opened his eyes, looked around and smiled a bit. It was Buckbeak who was breathing behind him, and Ginny who was the lovely warm weight in his arms, and who had made his legs fall asleep by sitting on his lap for so long. From the sun's position, it had to be mid-afternoon – they must have been there for hours. Beaky's wing still sheltered them, a beautiful silvery white cave with iridescent edges where a sunbeam that had managed to peep through the trees glimmered through the feathers. Harry leaned his cheek against Ginny's hair, relishing the warm feelings he had when she was near. His movement woke her. She looked up at him and smiled, glad to see he looked better.

"Good nap?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yeah. And I do enjoy waking up to see your pretty face so close by," he replied, lifting her chin for a kiss. "Ouch, my legs are asleep!" he said with a laugh, lifting her off his lap and sitting her beside him so he could work the kinks out of his legs.

"I'm a bit stiff myself," she replied, stretching her arms over her head and arching her back against Buckbeak. Her breasts pushed against her sweater as she moved. When Harry saw this, he looked away, blushing, but couldn't help glancing back. She noticed he was peeking. She kept stretching in various directions, displaying herself as well as possible while under several layers of clothes. She smiled to herself, knowing she was teasing him mercilessly.

Harry swallowed hard, then started massaging his legs, moving them around some more to get the circulation back.

"May I help?" Ginny said mischievously, reaching for his thigh.

Harry blushed crimson. "Erm. . .that's OK, I've got it."

Ginny sat back against Beaky again, crossing her arms petulantly, her face in a playful little pout. "You never let me have any fun."

"Sorry?" he replied, studying her face for a moment, then smiling cheekily. "Oh, is it fun you want? You should've said so," he said, then grabbed her and pushed her gently to the ground, tickling her lightly, trying to be mindful of her injuries.

Ginny giggled and squirmed under him, then suddenly said "Ow!"

"Did I hurt you? I'm sorry!" Harry said, sitting back, his face full of consternation. "Where does it hurt?"

"I'm OK," she said. "Just a bit of spell damage, nothing major. Come here, you." She grabbed a handful of his sweater and pulled him down to her. Harry landed with his hands carefully supporting his weight on each side of her, afraid of hurting her again.

"I could, erm, kiss it and make it better," Harry offered, blushing again but determined to play her game.

"Oh really? That would probably be a big help," she said with a teasing grin, lifting her sweater and shirt from her waist, exposing the spell burn on her side. Harry leaned down and tenderly kissed the injury, then gently rubbed his thumb over it, making it disappear in a few moments.

"That feels good," she murmured contentedly. "I can probably come up with other injuries that need your attention. . . ." She gazed at him with half-closed eyes, her smile suggestive.

"Mmm, that could be fun," he said, propping himself on his elbow next to her, that hand in her glorious hair, and kissing her thoroughly. He was careful to keep his other hand on her waist, since he'd just healed her injury there and he knew he couldn't hurt her by resting his

hand in that particular place. Their kisses had deepened when Harry's eyes opened wide in surprise. Ginny had moved his hand from her waist to her breast.

"Erm. . . ." His throat was so dry, he could hardly speak. "Uh . . ." He was afraid to move. He lay there looking at her, his hand barely touching her breast, her hand holding it in place and trying to press it down harder than Harry would allow.

"I'm not fragile, Harry," she murmured. "And that feels good. It will feel better if you do more with it."

Blushing furiously, Harry leaned away from her and tried to do the right thing. "Um. . .that could. . .erm. . .lead to. . .uh . . .other things if we aren't careful."

"It might at that. Or it could just be fun as it is. Whatever. Aren't you ready for this yet?" she asked him, her eyes shadowed with disappointment.

"Um. . .yeah, no, well, um, actually, I've been, uh, ready for a while," he stammered nervously. His cheeks felt like they were on fire. Other parts of him were having similar reactions.

"I've been ready for ages," Ginny replied patiently. "Please, Harry."

Harry looked from her face to his hand on her breast. He moved his hand around experimentally and was delighted with her reaction. His reaction was rather interesting as well. He leaned down to kiss her, his heart pounding. He'd done his best not to fall in love with her. Falling in love with Harry Potter was a dangerous thing to do. Casey had died from loving Harry. Yet here was insistent little Ginny, determined to love him no matter what happened, willing to forgive him for the most horrible things he'd ever done, and apparently determined to have her way with him in spite of everything. He'd become so dependent on Ginny's support, her comfort, her concern and her good cheer, he hadn't noticed when friendship, even fancying, had turned to love. But it had, and in the aftermath of the horrible day he'd had so far, the blossoming of this love in his heart was a delicious, dizzying wonder.

He trailed kisses down her neck, nibbled her ears, lapped at her earlobes, licked her collarbone, and went back to kissing her luscious mouth. His hand was having an excellent time on its own, exploring new territories he'd only dreamed about. He laughed inwardly – he'd dreamed about those "new territories" a lot since Parvati had appeared as the nude Ginny in his bed. The reality was far better than his dreams, although he hadn't arrived at skin yet in his explorations. What a lovely thing to look forward to, though!

He leaned away from her and looked at her. Her face was languid, her eyes half-closed, a small gentle smile on her mouth. Her hair was spread like a wide silk scarf around her, creating an aurora of red-gold light. Harry's heart turned over at the sight of her. He swallowed hard, calmed his breathing, and said, "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

Ginny's eyes flew wide open and she gasped in shock. "You've. . .you've never said you . . . love me . . .at all – just that you fancy me. I thought that maybe. . I hoped. . .but. . ." She looked uncertain, as if she was afraid to believe she'd heard what she thought she'd heard.

"I do love you, Ginny," he said tenderly, bending down to kiss her again. Between kisses, he said, "I love you. I love you. I love you."

When Arthur and Ron had been waiting outside the cave for a couple of hours, Dumbledore arrived on a thestral. He removed a large bag and several smaller ones from the thestral's back when he dismounted. "Hello, Arthur, Ron. How are you two doing? Where are the others?"

"Hello, Albus. I'm glad you're here. Ron and I are fine for now. Tonks is the worst injured, not counting Ron's broken arm," Arthur replied. "Tonks and Remus are asleep in the cave. Harry and Ginny aren't in there, but since Remus is so relaxed, I assume they're safe somewhere. He came down the hill with them, so he should know where they are."

"We have injuries to attend to, and plans to make, and I imagine we have some young folk who need some counselling after what they've been through today. Am I correct?" Dumbledore said, raising his eyebrows at Arthur.

"Yes. I think the kids are holding up remarkably well, all things considered. Harry looked a bit peaky and was pretty upset, but Ron and Ginny seem to have come through it all in good shape," Arthur said proudly. "Mind you, they didn't kill anyone, and Harry killed a lot of people. That's weighing on his mind terribly."

"Let's get everyone together, even if we have to wake them up. In the case of these injuries, the sooner we get them healed, the better. And I am quite concerned about how Harry is handling all this," Dumbledore said, moving into the cave. "Ron, come here. Let's take care of that arm."

Ron took his potion and was able to remove his splint in just a minute's time. "Wizard medicine is so much better than Muggle medicine," he said in delight. "Harry told me Muggles with broken bones have to wear splints for six weeks or more! I can't imagine having to live with this for much longer," he said, laying aside the splint pieces and the sling made from Harry's torn up shirt.

"What about that bad spell burn Harry said you had on your side?" Dumbledore asked.

"Harry healed most of it, and Dad gave me some potion that took away the rest of the pain. I think it's fine now."

"Let's have a look."

Ron obediently lifted the tatters of his sweater and shirt and waited while Dumbledore and his dad inspected his side. "It looks fine, Ron. And you say there's no more pain?" Dumbledore said.

"I'm fine now."

"Wonderful! Then, would you please go and find Harry and your sister for me?" Dumbledore said, picking up the medical supplies he'd brought with him. "I'll attend to Tonks, Remus and your dad while you're gone."

"OK," Ron agreed, ducking his head to clear the low entrance to the cave. He didn't know where to start looking, but thought they might be somewhere near Buckbeak, so he headed for

that grove of trees. "Harry? Ginny?" he called as he walked, not wanting to walk in on something embarrassing. "Harry? Ginny? Where are you?"

Harry froze when he heard Ron's call, his arm around Ginny's back, his hand trying to work out the intricacies of the clasp of her bra. "Bloody bad timing!" he grumbled, then chuckled and pulled her shirt and sweater back down.

"Could've been worse," she giggled, stroking his cheek. "Harry?"

"Yes?" he said, sitting up and pulling her up to sit beside him.

"Grow your beard for me. It's the holidays, after all," she said, snuggling into his arms once she had her shirt properly tucked in.

"You are a demanding little witch, aren't you?" he teased, then concentrated for a moment and his "pirate-style" beard that she so enjoyed appeared.

Ginny's mouth dropped open in shock. "Oh, Harry!"

"What's wrong?" he asked, scared by her reaction.

"Your beard! You have white stripes on each side of your chin now!"

"What?" Harry was appalled. "I'm too young to go grey!" He bent his head in front of her, running his fingers frantically through his hair, making a far worse mess of it than even Ginny had done during their snogging session. "Is my hair grey?"

"No, just those stripes in your beard. It looks quite distinguished, actually. You're a very handsome and distinguished looking pirate indeed." She smiled, hoping to smooth over the fright she'd just given him. *He looks like he's in his forties with his eyes so tired and that grey in his beard*, she thought, *but I certainly can't tell him that!*

"But grey in my beard? I'll never grow a beard again," he declared, truly upset about this development.

"No! It looks sexier than before, really!" she said, tracing her finger down the grey streaks. "Please keep it. You can probably learn to change the colour from Tonks, if it really bothers you. But now that I'm used to it, I like it."

Harry sighed and shook his head. "The things I do to please you," he murmured, kissing her soundly and rubbing his bristly chin over her face, tickling her. "By the way. In case I haven't told you lately? I love you."

Ginny wriggled with delight. "I love you too!" They shared a gentle kiss and just held each other, listening with amusement to Ron's carefully noisy approach.

"Harry! Ginny!" Ron's calls were getting closer.

Suddenly, Buckbeak stiffened, his face alert, his crest of feathers standing upright in threat. He made a screeching sound that left no doubt he wasn't about to let anyone near him.

"Easy, Beaky, it's me," Ron said, bowing deeply.

Harry stood up so he could see over Beaky's wing. "That's right, show the proper respect to the hippogriff and you can get along with him," he teased.

"You look loads better," Ron commented, still keeping his distance from the hippogriff.

"I had a good nap," Harry commented, then ducked behind Beaky's wing again to hide his blush. He took Ginny by the hand and picked up her cloak, and the two of them patted Beaky before leaving the shelter he'd provided for them. "Thanks, Beaky," Harry said. "You're a wonderful hippogriff. And a good pillow."

"Dumbledore's here. He's brought some medicine," Ron said as his sister and his best friend came out from behind the hippogriff's wing. "Harry! What happened to your beard?"

"Dunno. It came out that way," he said with a shrug. "Ginny thinks it's sexy."

Ron laughed, glancing fondly at his sister. "She would. Are you feeling better, Ginny?"

"Yeah, I feel fine," she said, wriggling under Harry's arm and wrapping her arm around his waist. "Harry healed my biggest spell burn. The others aren't bad."

"Handy little talent you've got there, mate. You could open a hospital if you wanted," Ron teased as he fell into step beside the couple.

"Nah, I think I'll be an international Quidditch star instead," Harry joked.

"Giving up on the Auror idea, huh?" Ron queried.

"Well, for today anyway. It wasn't as much fun as it seemed like it would be to do Auror stuff. Moody said what we did today was Auror business, and that I'd be good at it. I don't think I *want* to be good at this stuff," Harry said, a visible shiver running down his spine.

"Ron! Ginny! Harry! Hurry up! Professor Dumbledore brought food from Hogwarts!" Arthur called in the distance.

"Food? Do you realize we haven't eaten today at all?" Ron exclaimed, his face lighting up at the prospect of a good Hogwarts meal.

Harry smiled a bit at his friend's enthusiasm. Harry didn't know if he'd ever want to eat again. Then again, there was a huge hollow spot where his stomach should be. Maybe a little something. . . .

Dumbledore spread the food on a table he'd conjured just outside the cave, and drew up comfortable chairs around the table. "Come along, everyone! Let's tuck in!" he encouraged. After everyone was seated and had started serving themselves, Dumbledore turned to Harry and Ginny. "Harry, Ginny, it's good to see you both looking so well. Harry, that's quite a nice beard. Why the stripes? Trying to look older?"

"They came with it this time," Harry answered with a shrug. "Sort of freaked me out when Ginny told me about them."

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "Ah well. You know, there are many tales of people who have gone grey overnight after a traumatic event. That could be what happened here."

"You mean I may have all grey hair in the morning?" Harry cried, aghast.

"No, no, dear boy. I was just saying that traumatic events can lead to such things. I suspect your youth will protect you from further encroachments of grey hair for a while," Dumbledore assured him, his eyes twinkling.

After everyone finished eating and all their wounds were tended to, Dumbledore got down to business. "All right. We need to discuss what happened here, and what happened yesterday when the boys were attacked. I found out that it was Kreacher who betrayed you."

"How did you find out?" Remus asked.

"I simply asked Kreacher. He was proud of what he did. He went to Narcissa Malfoy with the information he overheard and the rest, as they say, is history. She and Bellatrix Lestrange are the last of the Black bloodline who he respects, so he felt it was right to speak to one of them. He couldn't find Bellatrix easily, so he went to Narcissa. I do apologize for not making certain he was not a threat. I'm getting old, making more mistakes all the time." He turned regretful eyes to Harry. "I'm so sorry this happened."

"Don't blame yourself, Professor," Harry replied. "We should have done something about Kreacher after he betrayed Sirius. We can do something now. I inherited him along with Sirius's house, right?"

"Yes, you did, but he would never acknowledge you as his master since you aren't of the Black bloodline. But you don't need to worry about Kreacher anymore."

"Why not?"

Dumbledore sighed, his eyes quite serious. "He's dead."

"And good riddance!" Ron exploded.

"How did he die?" Harry asked, worried about the sadness in Dumbledore's eyes.

"Dobby found out what happened and killed him."

Everyone gasped.

"What?" Harry asked. "Dobby killed him?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. "As you know, Dobby is extremely devoted to you, Harry, and when he heard what Kreacher did. . .well, the house elves have a law among themselves that says betrayal of their master can be punishable by death. So Dobby took it into his own hands and killed him."

"What will happen to Dobby for killing him?" Harry asked, his voice quiet and nervous.

"The punishment for such an act according to our laws is either death or enslavement. I have talked to the Ministry and they have agreed to let Dobby be enslaved again rather than executing him. Dealing with this situation and others related to this attack are why I'm so late in getting here."

Sounds of anguish flew around the group.

"Did Dobby know what the punishment was when he did it?" Ron asked.

"Oh yes. He came to me and confessed as soon as it was over," Dumbledore said sadly. He looked at Harry seriously. "Dobby couldn't bear knowing Kreacher had betrayed you that way. He was willing to give his life for you. He came to me expecting to be handed over for execution."

"But he can go back to being enslaved instead, you said. So he'll be working at Hogwarts for no pay then?" Harry asked, feeling sick to his stomach that Dobby had lost his freedom on his behalf.

"No, he can't work at Hogwarts. The other house elves will not accept him there anymore."

"Why not, if his killing Kreacher was in accordance with house elf laws?" Ron asked.

"Because it's only in accordance with their laws if it's done by another elf in the same household. Dobby wasn't part of the Black household, so his killing Kreacher is frowned upon by other house elves," Dumbledore explained.

"That doesn't make any sense," Ron protested. "What about households that have only one elf, like Kreacher, or like Winky when she worked for Mr. Crouch? If they do something like Kreacher did, there's no other house elf to punish them for it."

"That's all very reasonable, Mr. Weasley, but house elves have their own way of looking at things, which don't always seem logical to wizards," Dumbledore said with a shrug.

"Then what's going to happen to Dobby?" Harry asked, horrified at the thought of Dobby being sent to work for someone who would be cruel to him.

"I've worked out what I think will be a satisfactory arrangement – if you're agreeable, Harry," Dumbledore replied, the twinkle back in his eye. "Dobby has to be enslaved and cannot be freed for any reason. Those are the terms of his punishment. But I've arranged for him to be your house elf, Harry, to work for you wherever you live. For the time being, he will work at Grimmauld Place. And he can come to Hogwarts whenever you need him. The Hogwarts house elves won't bother him if he belongs to you."

"But his freedom means so much to him," Harry began miserably.

"You mean more to him," Dumbledore cut in. "I know he'll be happy working for you, and that you'll be a kind master to him. This is the best solution I can come up for Dobby. Is this

arrangement satisfactory, Harry? I need to let the Ministry know as soon as possible. Dobby's being held in a dungeon until a decision is reached."

"Oh, yes, of course I'll take Dobby!" Harry said quickly. "But I don't know what's involved in owning a house elf. And I don't really want to 'own' him. Can I give him wages and clothes and things, and just pretend he's enslaved?"

"Yes, you can do that, Harry, and Dobby will thrive in such an environment. I hoped you'd say that." Dumbledore smiled and added, "And if she's willing, I'll be happy to talk to Winky about joining Dobby on your staff so Dobby won't be lonely. I think they'd both like that. They've become close. She's been beside herself with worry about Dobby since all this happened."

"That's fine – whatever will make them happy. What do we have to do to get him out of the dungeon?"

"I'll send an owl right now and let the Ministry know that you have agreed to take him on as your house elf. I'll explain that you're on holiday out of the country, and that Dobby will be at Hogwarts when he isn't at your place of residence."

"Will I have to take him to Privet Drive? Aunt Petunia will go mad if there's a house elf around," Harry said. Suddenly, he had a mental image of Aunt Petunia's face if she did have to deal with Dobby in the house and he burst out into the first genuine laughter he'd done since the attack the previous day.

"What are you laughing at, mate?" Ron asked, bewildered.

"I just thought of what Aunt Petunia's face would look like if Dobby lived there," Harry said, still chuckling. "And Uncle Vernon! Ha! Oh, and Dudley – house elves can do magic too! Maybe I'll take Dobby to Privet Drive with me after all." He sat there grinning roguishly, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"You can do what you like with him, Harry, but he must not be seen by the neighbours around Privet Drive," Dumbledore warned.

"Oh, I know. That's part of what will drive Aunt Petunia wild!" He giggled a bit more, then finally calmed down. "Thanks. I needed a good laugh," he said, grinning at Dumbledore.

"I'm glad you found something amusing in all of this," Dumbledore said with a wink. "That shows you'll be your old self in no time."

"Whoa, Harry," Ron said after a moment. "Hermione's going to freak! You know how she feels about house elf rights! And you'll own one! No, wait – two, with Winky!" His eyes were wide as he envisioned Hermione's tirade when she heard the news.

"Miss Granger is right in wanting to improve the lot of house elves," Dumbledore said quietly, "but in Dobby's case, Harry is actually saving his life. She should not find fault with that." Dumbledore wrote the note he needed to send to the Ministry and pulled an owl out of the pocket of his robes. He gave the letter to the owl and sent it off. "There. Everything is in place now. Dobby should be fine. Winky will be happier having a new house to serve and being

with Dobby, and she will be free, Mr. Weasley, so Harry will only actually own one house elf. Thank you, Harry."

"No problem," Harry said with a shrug.

"Professor?" Ron asked Dumbledore. "How did Dobby kill Kreacher?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily, his face grave. "There are killing spells among house elves as well as wizards, but Dobby used his bare hands. He was that enraged. Kreacher was so old, he had no chance."

"He didn't deserve one!" Ginny snapped, her eyes flashing.

"I don't disagree with you, Miss Weasley. However, killing someone with your hands is different than killing them with a wand. Harry knows what I'm talking about. Harry used spells, yes, but he used his hand rather than a wand, from what I've been told so far, for much of the battle." He looked at Harry. "Did you kill anyone with your wand?"

Harry seemed to shrink in on himself, pain obvious on his face. "Yes."

"And you also killed with wandless magic? I did hear about that – I simply wasn't sure how much of the battle you did with a wand."

"I did a lot more of the battle wandless than with the wand."

Dumbledore patted Harry kindly on the shoulder. "I'm sorry to put you through this, Harry. We'll deal with it in a few moments, all right?"

Harry just nodded, looking miserable.

Dumbledore went back to his subject. "Using your hands to kill affects your spirit differently than killing with a wand. I don't know how to explain it any better. Harry and Dobby will both need their friends while they assimilate their experiences into their lives and learn to live with what's happened. They both need to learn to forgive themselves, although in Dobby's case, he doesn't feel guilty about what he did at present. At some point, he may. I'm just saying this to make you all aware of the situation. Dobby may be as emotional at some point as Harry is right now. Just be aware of that and be kind to him if and when it happens, all right?"

Everyone nodded.

Harry shook himself and drew a deep breath. "Kreacher's head isn't on the wall, is it?"

"No, it isn't," Dumbledore replied.

"Could we get someone to remove all those things soon? I don't want to see them. Dobby probably shouldn't see them either."

"I will have it done immediately, Harry. They will receive a proper house elf burial and be treated with the utmost respect. I'll also have the walls cleaned where they were, so the spots where they were won't be so obvious."

"Thank you." Harry heaved a sigh of relief.

"Now, on to other things. Tell me what happened yesterday, boys," Dumbledore said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table, giving Harry and Ron his full attention. When they were done with their story, he said, "And Buckbeak was able to fly you this much further. Excellent. How is he, by the way?"

Harry brightened up a bit. "Hagrid gave me a book on taking care of injuries of magical creatures, particularly those that fly. I brought that with me, and I was able to find the right herbs in the meadow over there to make the potions to heal him. Professor Sprout and Professor Snape will probably be shocked that I managed it," he finished with a wry half-smile.

"Well done, Harry! I will be sure to tell them about this. Perhaps you can get extra credit on your marks for taking such good care of Buckbeak."

"Thank you, Professor. But isn't Beaky still a fugitive from the Ministry? If you tell, won't we get in trouble for keeping him?"

"I'll just say it was a hippogriff – I won't name him. I will say that I asked you to bring him to Charlie to add to the breeding herd in Rumania, everything just as we'd planned, with the exception of the identification of the hippogriff. Everything will be fine."

"OK," Harry said, relaxing back in his chair.

"So tell me about today. Harry, you were the first on the scene, weren't you?" Dumbledore asked, leaning toward Harry again.

"Yes." Harry told the story, everything he'd witnessed or been part of. The others added their comments and viewpoints when Harry ran out of steam. When they were all finished, Dumbledore sat back in his squashy armchair stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"You know," he said after quite a lengthy silence, "I am amazed at how well seven people, three of them students, did against such a large force. I cannot say how proud I am of you three in particular," he said, nodding to Harry, Ron and Ginny. "I will be recommending the Ministry award medals to everyone involved. . .except you, Harry."

Harry looked up, startled, as the old professor paused.

"By your efforts on both days, for training the Weasleys and other D.A. members to fight so well, and for rescuing Miss Weasley from certain death twice, you will be recommended for an Order of Merlin, Second Class." He smiled benignly at Harry.

The others beamed and patted Harry on the back. He looked around at all of them, bewildered. "No. I don't want it. I don't deserve it. I killed a lot of people," he began.

"You killed a lot of enemies of good people everywhere," Dumbledore reminded him. "You didn't do anything wrong. You set some things that were wrong, right."

"And orphaned a lot of kids in the process," Harry snapped, his eyes wild. He stood up so fast, he knocked his chair over. "I made orphans. I've been an orphan all my life. I would never willingly make someone else an orphan."

"But you didn't fight willingly, Harry. You fought because you had to," Remus reminded him.

"It's not fair, it's not right! The whole thing is screwed up," Harry said desperately, then stormed off to sit with Beaky again. The rest of the group watched him go, then looked at each other in silence.

"What can we do for him?" Arthur asked the group in general. He was met with shrugs and disconsolate faces all around, except for Ginny. Her face shone with resolve.

"I'll go," Ginny offered, and ran off to join Harry under Buckbeak's wing.

"He's taking this much harder than I'd hoped," Dumbledore sighed.

"He was loads better when he came to dinner," Ron said. "You should have seen him before he had his nap."

"Well, I did just force him to relive the entire thing," Dumbledore said regretfully. "However, it's a necessity. I needed to have the full story from him as well as the rest of you."

"What's going to happen now?" Ron said after several quiet moments. "Do we go back home, or take Beaky to Rumania or what?"

"You'll continue on your journey, and these Order members will go with you," Dumbledore replied. He was quiet a few more moments. "Do you know if anyone has tried Cheering Charms on Harry?"

"I think Ginny may have," Ron said, "but I'm not sure. He was a lot happier when I called them to dinner than he had been before."

"Maybe she can work her magic on him again, then," Dumbledore replied.

Harry lay with his arms across Buckbeak's back, his face hidden in the crook of his elbow, his body racking with sobs, when Ginny found him. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry," she said, wrapping her arms around his back.

"Go 'way!" he cried, flailing one arm around as if to push her away – but he was careful not to hit her.

"Nope. Won't do it. You can't make me, either," she said with supreme confidence. "I'm here for the long haul. You can't get rid of me, Potter."

He rubbed his face on his arm, trying to scrub away his tears, and turned to look at her. His face was as bereft as it had been when he'd broken down doing the body count. "I can't do this, I just can't do it."

"Do what, sweetheart?" she said softly, sitting next to him and tenderly smoothing his hair off his forehead.

"I don't know. I don't know," he said, shaking his head, rocking back and forth in misery. She pulled his head down onto her shoulder and comforted him as she had done before, crooning to him, letting him get it out, just being there for him. Finally, he relaxed against her. "I really can't get rid of you, can I, no matter how badly I behave?" he murmured into her shoulder.

"Nope. I'm sticking to you through thick and thin. This, apparently is the thick part," she chuckled, rocking him a little as if he were a baby in her arms.

"Thanks," he muttered, then sat up and wiped his face on his sleeve.

"Don't you have a clean hanky? You're such a boy sometimes!" she scolded fondly, and handed him hers.

"Hanky? I don't think I've ever owned one," he said, a bemused expression on his face as he gazed at her. He wiped his tears and blew his nose resoundingly, then pocketed her handkerchief. "It's too gross now to give it back to you. I'll wash it for you," he said, much calmer now.

"OK. Thanks," she replied, tilting her head and smiling mischievously at him. "Have you noticed we're alone again, in 'our spot?'"

"We are, aren't we?" he said, his eyes puffy and his nose red from crying. "And I must look a treat, right? You're into blokes who've just been bawling their eyes out?"

"I do like a sensitive nature in my men," she said wisely. "Come here. You need kissing pretty badly."

"You don't kiss badly at all, so what are you going to do?" he teased as he leaned toward her. His eyes were still heartbroken, but at least he was trying again to fight his way out of his depression.

They kissed gently for a while, then just held each other, comfortable in each other's arms. Harry stroked her hair, enjoying the silkiness of it, the way the colour flashed even in the shadow of Beaky's wing. Eventually, Harry's hand seemed to take on a mind of its own and strayed to her breast. She gasped a little, then leaned into his hand. "Oh, that's nice," she said, lifting her face for his kiss.

"Yeah, I rather like it myself," he murmured. This time, he managed the catch on her bra perfectly well and discovered how lovely girl skin feels to a teenaged boy's hand.

Chapter 28 – To Rumania and Back

"Harry? Harry, Dumbledore has to leave soon, and he needs to talk to you," Ron called, walking uneasily toward the hippogriff again.

Harry kissed Ginny tenderly, then helped her get her clothes straightened out properly before pulling his own sweater back into place. When they were tidy again, he stood up. "I'm here, Ron. What's he want now?"

"Dunno, mate, but he says it's important. You did take off in the middle of the meeting, y'know." Ron smiled a bit. There was no reproach in his voice at all. "You OK?"

"I've been better," Harry acknowledged, "but I'll be all right. Your sister has this healer thing completely under control," he added as he and Ginny emerged from behind Beaky's wing. Ginny was blushing.

"I really don't want to know what you mean by that," Ron said with a grin. "I'm just glad to see you looking better. I know it's going to take a while for us to be back to our old selves again, especially you, but you seem to be feeling better than before."

"Yeah, a bit," Harry agreed. They walked back to the cave in silence, Harry's arm tight around Ginny's shoulders, his face taut. He didn't want to think about what had happened, but he knew Dumbledore would want him to face it again and again until he'd accepted it as part of his life and moved on despite those awful experiences.

"Ah, Harry, I'm glad to see you," Dumbledore greeted him when they arrived back at the cave. "I'm sorry to spring so much on you at one time. I've been in a terrible rush ever since I got your news yesterday. I should have taken more time with you, made certain you were feeling quite well, before going on like that. Please accept my humble apologies."

"No apology necessary, Professor," Harry said seriously, trying his best to do the right thing. "I surprised myself with that outburst. I'm sorry. I know the Order of Merlin is a tremendous honour. Thank you for thinking I'm worthy of it."

"You have earned it. I'm sorry I upset you. I wanted to talk to you again before I left. I have a great deal of unfinished business to do at home as a result of this battle. The Ministry is in an uproar over British wizards fighting on foreign soil. The French Ministry of Magic has been screaming about this ever since they learned of the attack this morning."

"How did they hear about it? We only told you," Harry asked, amazed.

"Just as our Ministry has ways of immediately discovering the use of magic by an underage wizard, for instance, the French Ministry has similar guards in place. They discovered massive amounts of magic being used in this small area, some of it by underage wizards," he said, nodding at Harry and Ginny, "and sent a team of Aurors to see what was going on. They saw Voldemort here and fled, reporting back to their Ministry. Both those Aurors and the French Ministry refused to send help to you. As a result, our Ministry and the French Ministry are at odds with each other now. I'm hoping to be able to build some cooperation between the two Ministries, rather than letting them go on burning bridges as they're attempting to do."

"Why would they not want to help us?" Harry was astonished that trained Aurors, seeing wizards under attack from Voldemort and his Death Eaters, would not leap into battle. He knew he would assist anyone facing such odds, and he was certain Tonks, Moody and the other Aurors he knew would do the same

"A lot of it is political. The French in general don't want to be involved in other countries' problems. Unfortunately, some of them are Voldemort's supporters, and some of them don't want to believe he's back. Most of them think the British should deal with him because he's a British wizard, and they're very upset there was a battle on their soil." Dumbledore shook his head. "Some people. . .I just don't know. They just blind themselves to the truth and think things will turn out all right with no effort on their part."

Harry steeled himself. He could see something coming. "What do you want me to do?"

"Bless you, my boy, you have such a good soul," Dumbledore said, smiling affectionately at Harry. "I appreciate your offer, and I will let you know if I do need your help. Right now, we need to move this camp elsewhere for safety's sake. Alastor was right – you shouldn't stay here, but I realize many of you were too badly injured for you to be able to move immediately after he left you."

"Is he all right? Have you heard from him?" Harry asked, worried that no one had mentioned hearing from the old Auror since he'd left with the prisoners.

"Yes, he's fine. He delivered the prisoners safely and will be going back to Order Headquarters when he's finished with his paperwork up there at Azkaban. By the time he's done and returns to Headquarters, you lot should be safely finished with the delivery of Buckbeak and on your way home."

"That much paperwork, eh? No wonder he was complaining about it," Harry said with half a smile.

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore continued, "I'd like you to allow me to do a strong Cheering Charm on you. I think it will help you through this rough patch."

"OK."

Dumbledore performed the charm and asked, "Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a trace of his normal cocky grin. "I tried to do one on myself earlier, and Ginny tried too, but they didn't work."

"You needed a very strong one, one we normally don't teach until Seventh Year at Hogwarts. I will teach you how to do it another time. And you, too," he added, pointing to Ron and Ginny, "as well as Miss Granger. It will do all of you good. Shall I do one on you two as well?"

"Yeah, I think it would help," Ron said. Doing the body count was harder for him than the battle itself.

"I don't honestly think I need one," Ginny said. "I'm pretty happy as it is." She was bouncing on her toes at Harry's side, her eyes dancing, her normal youthful energy back in full force.

"And you look it, my dear," Dumbledore said with a knowing nod and a twinkle in his eye. "Harry, I may need you to talk to people in the Ministries of both England and France. Not only will you be a help because of what you went through these two days, but your name will make the French authorities pay closer attention to what we're saying. I know you don't like to use your fame in any way, but in this case, it will be for the greater good."

"I understand. Just let me know when you need me."

"Good lad."

"Albus?" Arthur said suddenly. "Would you take Ginny back with you? Her mother. . ."

"NO!" Ginny snapped. "I'm not going back! I'm going with you!"

Harry's face fell, but he turned resolutely to her and said, "You'll be safer, sweetheart. You weren't supposed to come anyway."

"Maybe not, but who's the one who's been able to cheer you up?" she said, her face determined. "I fought as hard as anyone else! I can take care of myself! And who's going to take care of you if I'm not here?"

"We can take care of Harry," Arthur began.

"NO! I'm going with you! If you try to make me go back, I'll just follow you again!" Her body was vibrating with rage, her eyes brown fire.

Arthur gazed at her sadly for a long moment, then turned back to Dumbledore. "You'd have to Stun her and tie her up to keep her from trying to find us, I suspect. She's her mother all over again. Just leave her here, we'll manage, I suppose."

"Thank you, Dad!" she said, launching herself at her father and wrapping her arms around him in delight. "I can take care of myself. You'll see."

"I know that, baby girl," Arthur said fondly as he returned her embrace.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and wrapped his arms around Ginny when she moved back to his side. He bent down and kissed the top of her head. "I'll look after her, Mr. Weasley."

"I know you will, lad," Arthur said, smiling fondly at the boy, then looking at his wilful daughter with eyes full of love and concern. "You have to follow orders, Ginny. If you don't, you could endanger all of us." She nodded her understanding.

Dumbledore noticed the change in Harry's face, from stony but heartbroken resolve when Arthur said Ginny couldn't go, to a mixture of relief and concern when he agreed to let her go. The old wizard smiled at the young couple, who were already more like two halves of a whole than simple boyfriend and girlfriend. As long as she stayed safe, Harry truly would be better off with her close by.

"All right then, everyone, I'm going back to Hogwarts. You have a safe journey, and give Charlie Weasley my best regards when you see him, all right? Goodbye," Dumbledore said, then mounted his waiting thestral and flew away.

It didn't take long to pack up the camp and get ready to go. Harry and Remus examined Beaky, trying to decide if the hippogriff was strong enough to fly.

"It looks to me as if Beaky's injuries have healed enough so that he can fly safely," Remus mused.

"He still seems a bit sore," Harry said, his face concerned as he moved around the animal, touching him here and there, trying to complete the healing process quickly wherever he could. "It might be best if I ride him by myself."

"You're probably right. It's a good idea to conserve his energy as much as possible. Ginny's lightest, but she hasn't flown a hippogriff before, has she?"

"No, she hasn't. Beaky seems to like her, but flying him isn't at all like flying a broom, and his flying may be rough or unsteady given that he's injured. Since she's not used to him in the first place, she probably shouldn't be the one to ride him," Harry commented. He looked over toward the cave and called, "Oy, Ron!"

"Yeah?" Ron replied, straightening up from packing the rest of his supplies in his bag.

"Beaky probably shouldn't carry two. You and Ginny will need to ride brooms. Can you get my Firebolt out for her, since her broom's gone?"

"No problem," Ron replied, taking both brooms from his pocket and restoring them to full size. "Here you go, Gin," he said, handing her the Firebolt.

"Thanks, Harry!" Ginny said with a huge grin. "You know how much I love riding this broom!"

She mounted the broom gleefully and was about to take off when Arthur said, "Ginny, *no*!"

"No what, Dad?" she said in surprise.

"Don't go anywhere. We need to put Disillusionment Charms on all of us before anyone takes off. There may still be Death Eaters in the area, and who knows where You-Know-Who's gone." His face was worried. He was very concerned about having to face more unknown dangers with two of his children and Harry along to look after.

Harry seemed to read his mind. "Mr. Weasley, we may be students, but we're good fighters," he assured his friend.

"Oh, I know that, Harry, but. . ."

"Yeah, they're your kids. I understand."

"You're as good as one of my kids, as well. I worry about all three of you."

"I suppose asking you not to worry won't do any good then?" Harry said with a wry smile.

"No, it won't." Arthur shook his head ruefully and smiled sadly. "It's my job to worry about you lot."

"OK, then," Harry replied, waving his hand grandly, "worry away!" He laughed. The Cheering Charm had done him a lot of good. He was almost giddy at times now. He walked over to Ginny, pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed her tenderly. "Fly safely, baby!" He was so concentrated on her, he didn't seem to notice he was kissing her right in front of her dad and everyone else. He gently rubbed noses with her, making both of them laugh.

Ginny was blushing like mad but looking at him fondly. "You too, sweetheart."

With another laugh, Harry got on Buckbeak and performed the Disillusionment Charm on the two of them. He pointed his hand at Ginny and said with a small but formal bow, "Please allow me Disillusion you, m'lady," then performed the charm wandless, since he'd insisted Ginny keep his wand for protection. Ginny and the Firebolt now matched their surroundings as well as Harry and Beaky. Harry started to Disillusion the others, but they were already at work on the charm. Soon the entire group took off, planning to fly as far as Beaky could manage in the remaining daylight.

A few hours later, they landed and made camp, after an uneventful flight. Beaky was tired but seemed to be feeling well enough. After Harry finished getting Beaky settled in and as the others made camp, Arthur called to Harry. "May I have a word?"

"Of course!" Harry replied, smiling.

"Let's go look for that stream we saw as we were flying in," Arthur suggested.

The others, Harry included, looked at him in confusion. Arthur knew very well where the stream was. Ron and Ginny exchanged an uneasy glance. Arthur had that "parental talk" look on his face.

When they were alone, Arthur turned to Harry. "Are you feeling better now, lad?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Harry replied, wondering why Arthur was acting so oddly. His Cheering Charm had mostly worn off now, and he was feeling rather wary of anyone acting strangely.

"Your wounds are all healed?"

"Yes."

"Your reaction to what happened up there was quite understandable, Harry. Being distraught after a battle is normal. I want to be sure you understand that. It's especially true after you kill someone for the first time."

"Have you killed very many people, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked seriously.

"Not until today, but only two, and I knew they well deserved it. I'll be fine, don't you worry about me," he said to Harry's sudden look of concern. Arthur hadn't told anyone that he'd never killed anyone before, or that he'd killed two men today. He thought his children and Harry had enough to be concerned about, but with Harry asking directly, he couldn't lie to him. He gathered his thoughts and went on. "What I cannot imagine is what you're going through, as young as you are, trying to deal with all of this, trying to put it into perspective. I know Remus is here for you to talk to, but if you ever need to talk to someone else, I'd be pleased to help you in any way I can."

Harry nodded and smiled, warmed by his friend's concern. "Thanks."

Arthur sighed. He didn't want to get into this discussion, but he knew Molly would expect him to deal with the situation somehow. "Harry, Mrs. Weasley and I love you as much as we do our own children. I hope you know that."

Harry was touched. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley."

"We enjoy your company, and we have the highest regard for you. Truly."

"Thank you." Harry was beginning to worry about where this conversation was going.

"Having said that, I do need to talk to you about Ginny."

Uh-oh, here it comes, Harry thought, his throat suddenly dry and his nerves on alert as if he were about to go into battle. "Yes?"

"She's our only daughter, and our baby. You know that. We want her to be happy, healthy and safe. I know the two of you are becoming close. . . ."

Harry gulped. He'd been afraid for a long time that the Weasley parents would come to this conclusion at some point. "And she's. . .not safe around me. I understand. Do you. . .erm," *Damn, this is hard,* "want me to stop being friends with Ron as well?"

"No! You misunderstand me. I know there's no way for us to break up your friendship with any of our children, and I honestly wouldn't want to. You're good for them, and I can see that they're good for you. I just want to be certain that she's . . .um. . .safe."

"What do you want me to do, then?" Harry was flummoxed.

Arthur sighed. He loved Harry very much and didn't want to be saying these things, but he had to. Being a father wasn't much fun sometimes. *Hmm, that might be a good way to get into it*, he thought. "Harry, being a father isn't much fun sometimes," he began. "Sometimes we have to say and do things we'd rather not have to say or do. This is one of those times."

Harry shook his head, completely confused. "Sorry?"

Arthur took a deep breath. *Right, then. Just get into it,* he thought."Ron tells me you and he have compared notes on what he called the 'little wizards' talk."

Harry shifted his weight uneasily. *So that's where this is going. Great. Best to act normally; just follow the conversation where he leads it.* "That's what Sirius called it. Remus called it the 'little Harrys' talk." Harry laughed uneasily, trying to make the term seem as humorous as it had when Remus had said it. "Yeah, Ron and I compared notes."

"Having a baby in wartime, or while either of you is still in school, is a bad idea, Harry," Arthur said seriously. "I hope you two are being careful. Ron says you are, but as her father, I . . ."

"We haven't actually. . .erm. . .but yeah, we're being careful." Harry was blushing furiously. What an embarrassing conversation to have with your girlfriend's father!

Arthur was beet red as well. "After six sons, you'd think I'd be more comfortable having these talks, but I've only had them with my own sons," he said apologetically. "We do love you, Harry, honestly. We couldn't be happier about her choice of boyfriend. And if things do . . . develop . . . in the future, we'd be delighted to welcome you to the family." He stopped a moment, realizing how what he'd just said must have sounded. "I'm don't mean to be putting any pressure on you, lad, I just . . . ." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

Harry blushed even more. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I'm . . .honoured that you think I'm. . .that Ginny and I . . .that you'd welcome me to the family," he said uncomfortably. He took a deep breath, tried furiously to control his blushing and went on. "Erm . . . I'm taking life one day at a time right now, actually. I don't know that I really have a future to look forward to, you know?" He shook his head in frustration, searching for the right words. "I don't want to endanger Ginny's future in any way, but she simply refuses to be pushed away. I've tried loads of times, believe me. I don't want to break her heart or get her hurt or anything. After what happened to Casey. . . ." He stopped, his face bereft for a moment.

Arthur quietly studied the trees around them as Harry regained his composure.

When he could speak calmly again, Harry said, "Just after the battle, when Ginny and I were sitting with Buckbeak, I thought of Casey and the fact that she and her family probably died because of me. I don't want that to happen to Ginny or any of your family, but I just can't seem to get her out of my life." He paused, sighing heavily. "And honestly, I don't really want to." He looked at Arthur with heartbroken eyes despite the remnants of the Cheering Charm. His face grew resolute, his shoulders held stiffly, braced for what he feared was coming, but he said what he felt had to be said. "If you tell me you want me to leave her alone, I will."

"No, Harry," Arthur said fondly, putting his hand warmly on Harry's shoulder, "Molly and I don't want you to leave Ginny alone. For one thing, Ginny would never put up with such a thing. She's her mother's daughter, all fiery temper combined with a sweet, loving spirit. Ginny's good for you, and you're good for her. I trust you to look after her the best you can. We can't ask for more than that."

"I will," Harry promised, his face just as resolute as before.

"Thank you, lad." Arthur looked around and breathed deeply, smiling as he stretched a bit. "I'm so glad that's over with!"

Harry heart lifted, realizing what a difficult situation he'd just survived, and with his romance not only intact, but approved by his girlfriend's parents! He laughed in relief. "Me, too!"

"Molly would skin me alive if I hadn't talked with you. Now I can honestly say I did my duty as a father. I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable, Harry. Thanks for taking it so well, and for making things easy for me."

"I should be saying those things to you," Harry replied sincerely. "Thanks for being so understanding."

Arthur looked at Harry for a moment, studying his face, those brilliant, intelligent, haunted green eyes, the wild shock of black hair, and currently, that pirate's beard Ginny so loved, with the narrow white stripes down either side of his chin. The exhaustion and emotional upheaval he was still working through made the boy look quite different than usual – older, battle-weary, worn. But the eyes – they spoke of a strong spirit that knew how to appreciate joy and love, as well as how to deal manfully with sorrow and heavy burdens. Harry didn't look at all like a Weasley, but Arthur couldn't imagine life without this extraordinary young man involved in the family somehow. He reached out and drew the boy into a hug.

"I'm so proud of you," he said, giving the boy a fatherly pat on the back before releasing him. As they walked back toward camp, Arthur put his arm companionably around Harry's shoulders, then said, "My goodness, Harry, what kind of exercises are you doing to build up your shoulders this way?"

"Well, it's supposed to be a secret, but I don't think there's any reason not to tell you," Harry said, then began telling him about his Animagus transformations.

After Harry had told him about the variety of animals he could become, Arthur stopped and stared at him. "How many can you do?"

"I've lost count. I think seven or eight now."

"Tell me what they are," Arthur said, greatly intrigued.

"Let's see. Cat, Labrador, thestral, phoenix, damselfly, wolf, raven. . .I did a partial transformation when I went after Ginny in that lake, giving myself gills and finned hands and feet – it wasn't exactly a frog or a fish. I don't know what it was, actually. I remembered how the gillyweed worked during the Second Task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and just did that. I think that's all."

"Harry, that's remarkable! I don't think anyone since Merlin has done so many!"

"Actually, Dumbledore can do a lot, but he won't say how many. I think it's the Refiner's Fire that makes it possible, but I'm not sure. It could just be that I have a knack for it, I don't know. Once I managed the first few, the rest of them came fairly easily."

They talked animatedly about his transformations the rest of the way to camp, Arthur laughing in excited amazement at Harry's stories.

"Whew," Ginny said in quiet relief to her brother as she saw them approach. "Whatever it was, it must have gone well,"

"Yeah. That's pretty amazing. Actually, I think Dad took Harry off to talk to him about you."

"That's what I was afraid of," Ginny replied, still a bit nervous.

"He and I were talking about it earlier. . ." Ron began.

"You were talking to Dad about me and my boyfriend?" she demanded, her temper flaring instantly.

"Easy! Calm down! I told him you and Harry knew how to be careful – that's what he wanted to know. He said he didn't think it would be long before – well, you know – if you hadn't already. I couldn't believe he was so understanding about it."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Don't expect Mum to be like that, though. I have the feeling he talked to Harry because Mum would expect him to. At least it looks like they worked everything out OK."

"Yeah," Ginny said, a smile crossing her face as she gazed at Harry. He was still talking to her dad, his face lively, excited, telling a funny story, waving his hands around wildly in some kind of explanation. Her dad looked astounded, laughing along with Harry as the boy talked, apparently asking a question once in a while. They were having a really good time together. Her heart lifted, glad they were getting on so well, especially after the talk Ron suspected they'd just had.

When Arthur and Harry reached Ron and Ginny, Arthur leaned in to speak to his children confidentially. "You both knew about Harry's Animagus forms and managed to keep them secret? I'm amazed! I can't wait to see him change into something! Do you know how rare a talent he has?" He was so excited, he was nearly trembling.

Ron and Ginny laughed. "Yeah, Dad, we're pretty good at keeping secrets, especially Harry's," Ron said with a cocky grin.

"It's simply remarkable! And the stories he has to tell! The raven bringing more ravens to chase Draco Malfoy and his gang away? What a fantastic story! Someday, you'll have to write a book about your adventures, Harry. And a 'how to' on the Animagus transformation, as well."

"Me, write a book? I dunno. Maybe I can talk Hermione into that job," Harry said with a smile.

"You'll get your own chapter in 'Hogwarts: A History,'" Ron chortled.

Harry snorted with laughter. "Then nobody will ever read it!"

"Oy! You lot!" Tonks called from across the clearing. "Hot food coming up! Pull up a rock or something." Remus had been busy preparing dinner from supplies Dumbledore had brought,

with Tonks doing her best to help, but mostly making Remus laugh at her silliness. She wasn't terribly domestic, but she was a lot of fun.

The group tucked in eagerly, chatting casually about anything but the battle they'd had the day before. Harry seemed to be doing well, but there seemed to be an unspoken agreement in the group to be cheerful and upbeat. Before long, they turned in for the night.

"I'll take the first watch," Remus offered.

"Wake me in a few hours," Tonks said.

"No, I won't. You still don't have your full strength back," Remus replied.

"I can take second watch," Ron offered.

"And I'll take third – and that should get us through the night," Arthur said, putting a quelling hand on Harry's shoulder just as Harry opened his mouth to volunteer. "Good night, everyone!"

The camp soon quieted. Ginny had put her bedding next to Harry's and Ron's. Both Weasley children wanted to know what Arthur had talked to Harry about.

"Well?" Ginny said nervously as she performed a Cushioning Charm under her bedding. "What did Dad want?"

"He wanted to tell me how much he loves and admires me," Harry said, grinning, as he finished arranging his bedding and added a Cushioning Charm.

"Really?" she replied, certain that he was teasing. It wouldn't make sense for her dad to take Harry somewhere private to say something like that. She sat down cross-legged and stared at him in the darkness. The moonlight reflected on Harry's glasses and made her and Ron's hair shimmer. Ron sat quietly on the other side of Harry, listening to the conversation avidly.

"And he said if I ever wanted to talk to someone besides Remus about anything, he would be happy to help me in any way." Harry smiled, sitting up and pulling his knees up toward his chest, wrapping his arms around his legs comfortably. "I thought that was very kind of him."

"Yes, it was," Ginny replied, not certain if she was being teased or not. He sounded sincere enough.

Ron was beginning to chuckle. He had the feeling Harry was winding Ginny up.

"Was that all?" she pressed.

"Well, no. He wanted to know if I'm going to make an honest woman of you," he said mischievously.

"WHAT?" she exploded, then put both hands over her mouth as the adults all murmured "quiet down" or "go to sleep."

Harry burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, but I've had a rather difficult day. I just needed to play a bit."

"Play what?"

"Tease you. I'm sorry." Harry sighed. "You aren't going to give up until I tell you, are you?"

"No!"

"He wanted to know if we were . . . being careful. He said he can see we're 'getting close' and he felt it his fatherly duty to speak to me."

"Oh no!" Ginny said, horrified. "How awful! What did he say? What did you say?"

Harry told Ginny and Ron all about his and Arthur's conversation.

"Satisfied?" Harry asked when he was done.

"Yes. Wow. I never thought he'd be so understanding about that – not with me, anyway."

"Yeah, I was rather relieved he didn't try to thump me or something," Harry said with a wry grin. "C'mon, I'm tired. Ron's got second watch and needs his rest. Let's go to sleep."

The three of them lay down, gazing up at the stars a while before their eyelids grew heavy. Just as Harry was nearly asleep, Ginny wiggled into his arms, put her head on his shoulder and her arms around him tightly. She looked up at him and said rather nervously, "You would have given me up if he'd asked you to, wouldn't you?"

"I did offer. I thought it was the right thing to do."

She sat up and looked at him in shock. "You could just . . . give me up?"

"No, sweetheart. It would have ripped the soul out of me, faster than a Dementor's kiss. But if he thought it was best for you. . .well, you are only fifteen. I would have to respect his wishes, at least until you're an adult."

She relaxed into his embrace again. "I'm glad he didn't want you to do that," she said, her eyes shining in the moonlight.

"Me too." He kissed her softly, then whispered, "I love you, Ginny."

"I love you too." They sighed contentedly and fell asleep.

"Charlie! Good to see you, son," Arthur called as they landed.

"Wait a second," Harry said. "Charlie, I'm sorry to do this, but I need you to tell me something only you and I would know, so we're certain it's you. Or you can tell Ron or your dad something. But we need a password."

"A password? What's something only you and I would know? I can't think," Charlie said, scratching his head as he thought. "Oh, I know. Norbert."

"That'll do," Harry said with a grin. "Good to see you, mate."

"You, too. You'll have to fill me in on what happened on your trip. Your Adfero was a bit brief."

"That's the best I could do at the time. I thought Dumbledore might have explained everything to you."

"No. He sent a brief message to find out if I was here or had gone to meet you, and told me a little bit, but honestly, there has to be a lot more to the story." Charlie looked around expectantly at the group, his eyes finally landing on his father.

"We'll tell you everything, but we can't stay long," Arthur said, trying to keep Harry from having to tell the story again. He'd seen the young man wince when Charlie said he wanted to hear more. "Albus said he wants us home as soon as possible. I'm sorry, lad. I know Ron and Harry were really looking forward to their visit, and once I ended up on the trip, I was hoping to spend a little more time with you as well."

"Can we see Beaky's herd?" Harry said hopefully. A change in topic would suit him just fine.

"Yeah, come on. He looks a bit battered. . ." Charlie began.

"He was injured when the boys were attacked," Arthur said in a tone that clearly said, *Drop it for now. I'll tell you more later.*

Charlie went over the hippogriff carefully. "Somebody did a good job of patching him up."

"That was Harry," Ron said.

Charlie smiled approvingly at Harry. "Well done, mate! You'd be good at caring for magical creatures. Ever consider studying dragons?"

"Not really, although I do think they're interesting. I've grown rather fond of Beaky, and I like phoenixes a lot, as well. I'm planning to be an Auror, though."

"I'm sure you'll do well at that too. What about professional Quidditch? You and Ron will both probably be scouted next year."

"That sounds very tempting," Harry said with a grin. "If an offer came along, I just might take it."

"Yeah," Ron added, his face alight with rapturous dreams. "Imagine. Us on professional Quidditch teams – or on the same one! That would be brilliant!"

Still talking about Quidditch, the group walked with Charlie as he put Buckbeak in a roomy paddock with every comfort a hippogriff could want: a pile of dead ferrets, a soft deep bed of straw under a shelter, several shady trees as well as bright open patches, plenty of room to

play and a big trough of clear, fresh water. Beaky trotted around the paddock, inspecting the accommodation and enjoying himself immensely.

Harry's heart lifted to see his delight. No more dark bedrooms or caves for Buckbeak! And he'd have a herd, mates, days full of sunshine and fresh air. What a great life. "Charlie, thanks for this. Beaky deserves it."

"He's a wonderful hippogriff, well built, good attitude, good manners. He'll be a great addition to the gene pool we have here," Charlie said, smiling as he watched the hippogriff cavort around his paddock. "C'mon, I'll show you his herd. We'll let him settle in here for a day or two, see that his injuries are completely healed, and then introduce him to a few new friends at a time, rather than all at once, to make certain nobody gets hurt." The group walked over a ridge, and stopped on top of it. In a lush green valley below was a herd of about twenty hippogriffs lazing in the sunlight or munching on the piles of dead ferrets and other small animals scattered across the field. Bay, dun, palomino, chestnut, roan, black and other coat colours glistened with health. A few raised their heads to look at the intruders. "These are all females. We have a couple of other herds elsewhere with other breeding males. We don't want the males to fight, so we picked these out to be the start of Buckbeak's herd."

"They're beautiful!" Ginny exclaimed.

Ron elbowed Harry. "Wouldn't Hagrid love to see this?" Harry nodded.

"Charlie, may we see the dragons while we're here?" Ginny said.

"Sure, sis, follow me," Charlie said cheerfully. As they walked to the dragon enclosure, Arthur put his arm around Charlie's shoulders and walked with him a little ahead of the others, so he could tell him what they'd been through. Charlie's normally happy countenance grew more and more grave as Arthur talked. He glanced once over his shoulder at Harry and Ginny, who were walking holding hands. Harry was keeping his eyes down, knowing what Arthur was telling Charlie.

Suddenly a man stepped up beside Harry and said, "As I live and breathe, aren't you Harry Potter?"

Startled, Harry had to stop himself from reflexively throwing up a shield against the man, who was one of Charlie's co-workers and staring at him avidly. "Erm. Yeah."

"Rufus Mallory, Mr. Potter, so very pleased to make your acquaintance," the man said, sketching half a bow and offering his hand excitedly. Harry shook it, wondering what the man wanted. "I knew you were a friend of Charlie's family, but I never thought we'd be honoured with a visit from you in person! I'm that flustered. Wait'll my wife hears I met you today. My kids have your Famous Wizard cards and your Quidditch posters. Would you mind signing an autograph for them?"

"Rufus, leave Harry alone," Charlie chided the man.

"I was just trying to make his acquaintance," the man said defensively. "My apologies if I bothered you, Mr. Potter. I have the greatest admiration for you, always have. What a treat to meet you!"

Harry just stood there smiling politely, unsure what to do next. Being polite but distant was the safest thing to do most of the time with these fan types.

"About that autograph, Mr. Potter?" the man said, pulling out a dirty scrap of parchment and a quill. "Would you mind?"

Harry looked at Charlie, trying his Legilimens skills to see what Charlie thought of the man. Charlie seemed to understand Harry was asking for his opinion of the man and stared steadily back at him, leaving his mind completely open to the boy's inspection.

Studying Charlie's impressions of the man using Legimency, Harry decided that Charlie thought the man was harmless, a normal bloke who was star-struck by Quidditch players, famous wizards and celebrities. Harry was all three of these things rolled up into one, without even trying. No wonder the man was being so silly. Harry sighed, then dropped his bag off of his shoulder, opened it and began rummaging around inside. "I have some clean parchment here. What are your children's names?"

"Harry," Ginny interrupted, "I have an extra one of your Famous Wizard cards – would you like to sign that instead?"

"Oh, that would be lovely!" the man enthused.

"OK," Harry agreed, then signed the card as requested, "To Declan and Donovan – Magic rocks! Harry Potter"

"Thank you, Mr. Potter! This will mean so much to them. Thank you!" Mallory said, bowing several times as he backed away.

Harry's friends watched the scene in amusement. Every one of them knew how much such things bothered him, but they had to admire the way he held his temper and was kind to people like this Mallory fellow who were Harry's ardent admirers.

"We should get moving," Arthur said. "We need to start back soon."

"C'mon, then," Charlie said. "The dragons are just over there."

As they topped the rise, Harry immediately saw the huge black dragon he'd faced in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. "That's my Hungarian Horntail, isn't it?" he asked Charlie.

"Yes, that's her. She's got a new clutch of eggs. The babies from the clutch she had with her then are now almost a year old. We keep the yearlings over there," he said, pointing with his chin toward another enclosure farther down the valley. "Want to see her up close?" he teased Harry.

"I saw plenty of her up close two years ago, thanks," he said with a grin.

"That's what I thought. She doesn't like company anyway," Charlie said, his eyes twinkling as he teased Harry.

"Charlie," Remus said, "do you have any idea who might have used Polyjuice to impersonate you?"

"We had a recent Hogwarts graduate here as a temp for a while – fellow named Warrington," Charlie replied. "I knew he was a Slytherin when we accepted him as an intern, but we don't get that many applicants, and Dumbledore doesn't want us to hold someone's House against them, so we let him in. He left us a week or so ago."

"Wasn't Warrington's body on the battlefield?" Remus asked Ron.

"Yeah," Ron replied.

"He's dead?" Charlie exclaimed.

"Yeah. He was one of the Death Eaters attacking us," Ron growled.

"He must have got hold of some of your hairs somehow and passed them along to whoever Polyjuiced himself into you, Charlie," Remus speculated. "Did he ever have visitors here?"

"No, but he got quite a few letters. A couple of eagle owls came here regularly."

"The Malfoys use eagle owls," Harry muttered darkly, his face grim.

"Well," Remus sighed. "Whoever impersonated you may be a mystery we never solve. There were no remains to be identified at the scene."

"There were no remains at all where those three attacked the boys?" Charlie asked, astonished.

"Just a bleedin' great hole in the ground," Tonks replied. "Most amazing thing I've seen in a while, other than watching these kids fight. Cor, you should've seen them!"

Charlie beamed at his sister and brother, and turned an admiring gaze on Harry as well, but the light in his eyes dimmed when he saw how every comment Harry heard seemed to be dragging him down further and further into depression. His body was actually sagging. "Harry? You all right?"

"Yeah," Harry replied in a low voice. "I'll be fine."

"I imagine you will, eventually. Thanks for saving my sister and brother, mate," Charlie said, clasping Harry warmly on the shoulder. "Oh, and take good care of my baby sister, while you're at it, although you seem to be doing that already," he teased. "Looks like you two are becoming an item."

Harry blushed and smiled shyly, very much appreciating Charlie's introducing more pleasant topics into the conversation. "Yeah, she keeps hanging around . . .OW!" Ginny had punched him none too gently on the arm.

"Who's hanging around who?" she demanded defiantly.

"Oh yeah. I do follow you around a bit, don't I?" he said, smiling down at her fondly. "That hurt, by the way!" He spent a few moments rubbing his arm, acting as if he were mortally wounded, leaning to the side, hobbling around, moaning.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" she said lightly, then rubbed the spot where she'd hit him, hoping he was just playing with her. "That was a brother punch, taught to me by the twins years ago. I should've pulled it a bit. Sorry about that!"

"I'll remember not to cross you in the future!" he said with a laugh, drawing her into a hug. His friends all smiled. Once again, Ginny had managed to pull him back before depression got a firm hold on him.

Before they knew it, it was time to leave. Rufus Mallory had gathered some other Harry Potter fans who stood and waved a long time after the group took off, Harry and Ginny riding double on the Firebolt. Once they were out of sight of the dragon study camp, they landed again and Harry changed into a raven, while the others did Disillusionment Charms on each other. Charlie was the only one in the camp who knew why such a large group had come to deliver the hippogriff, or why Buckbeak was injured. Remus, Tonks and Arthur thought leaving in a "normal" fashion would make this trip look like a family and friends vacation, rather than a rescue mission for the two boys who were originally going to deliver the animal.

The raven flew between Ginny's and Ron's brooms, sometimes landing on their broom handles and riding a while to rest. They were nearly to the Channel when the raven screeched horribly and fell out of the sky, tumbling limply over and over, completely out of control. Like twin red-haired flashes, Ginny and Ron zoomed after him. Ginny caught him with the classic Seeker three finger catch, then pulled him to her chest and held him there as she slowed the Firebolt. Ron was cursing fluently by the time he caught up with her.

"Damned slow Cleansweep! Nothing can catch that Firebolt! That was some brilliant flying, Gin," he said, pushing her cloak aside so he could see the bird she held tightly to her chest. "How is he?"

"I can barely hold him," Ginny squealed. "He's fighting so hard. . . ."

Remus had reached them by this time. "Let me have him, Ginny. I can hold him. Your hands are just too small to hold that large a bird in one hand," he said kindly, stretching out his hand for the raven that was his godson.

Ginny held on to the struggling bird as well as she could while Remus tried to untangle its claws from her cloak, then he took it from her hand. "What do you suppose happened? Is he injured?" Ginny said, finally past the adrenalin rush of racing to catch the falling bird. Reaction was setting in, making tears stream down her face.

"I don't know. We need to land right away," Remus replied.

"There's a clearing over there," Tonks said, leading the way to the landing spot she'd found. Under the trees was a family of Muggles picnicking. The Muggles looked up when they landed, for, despite their Disillusionment Charms, the edges of their brooms and the bright Weasley hair reflected a bit of the bright sunlight.

"Bloody hell, Barney," the stout woman said. "What in blazes was that?"

"Dunno," said Barney. He shushed his children and pushed past the brush between their picnic spot and the area where the glittery whatever-it-was had landed. They hadn't heard any sound when it landed – no crash or thud. But there was something there.

"UFO! UFO!" cried their eight-year-old son, dancing around their picnic spread.

"Hush, Michael," his mother said. "What do you see, Barney?"

Barney laughed. "A bleedin' great chunk o' blue ice. Must have fallen out of a plane, although I didn't hear one go over."

"Blue ice? What's blue ice, Da?" Michael cried excitedly. "Is it good to eat?"

"Nah, it's nasty. It's some sorta rubbish from an aeroplane," his dad answered dismissively, coming back to their picnic. "They usually dump it in the Channel, I suspect. We're only a couple of miles from the coast, so I reckon they missed."

"Whew, that was quick thinking, Arthur!" Tonks said breathlessly. "Blue ice?"

"I've read about it in the Muggle press. It's something that falls out of their aeroplanes sometimes. I thought we might get away with that," he murmured, glad he was able to think of and conjure it so quickly. "Let's move farther away from the Muggles. It's a shame we didn't notice them there until we were nearly on the ground! Good thing we were all Disillusioned."

"How's Harry?" Ginny asked, standing on tiptoes to peek inside Remus's pocket where he'd tucked the still-struggling bird.

"I don't know what could be wrong with him. We're just lucky he didn't transform while he was falling or you would've never caught him, and none of our brooms are as fast as that Firebolt," Remus replied, his face creased in a worried frown. The group moved quietly deeper into the woods, away from the shoreline and the British Muggles on holiday in France. When they found a small open area that was densely surrounded by trees, they stopped and Remus took the raven from his pocket. "All right, Harry, you can transform now," he said as he set the bird on the ground. The bird continued to struggle, going through spasm after spasm of what looked like great pain.

"Harry? Can you transform?" The bird looked at him for a second, then its eye rolled wildly away as more spasms racked its body. "All right, I'm going to put a *Silencio* on you so you won't attract the Muggles' attention, and then I'm going to transform you. Ready?" The bird glanced at him quickly again before its eyes rolled wildly once more. Remus performed the charm, then transformed the bird back into Harry, a Harry who was writhing on the ground in agony, clutching his scar, tears streaming down his cheeks, his face contorted in pain.

"That's the longest I've seen him go through a scar pain," Ron commented, his face white with fright. "He usually only has them for a few minutes at the most."

"He needs something cold on his scar – that usually makes him feel better," Ginny said, then followed her words with action. She impatiently tore a strip off the bottom of her blouse, grabbed a water jug and poured the cool water on the cloth, then pressed it to Harry's scar. She had to fight to hold it in place, he was thrashing about so much. Remus and Ron tried to hold him still so she could hold the cloth on his scar, the only way they knew to help him. Harry's eyes rolled frantically, his arms and legs flailing when Ron and Remus released them even for a moment. They could feel continual vibrations coming from him, showing he was groaning, but the Silencio spell was keeping him quiet. Finally, his movements slowed and he put shaking hands over Ginny's, pressing the cloth to his forehead. Ginny carefully removed his glasses and pocketed them so she could wash the sweat off of his face as Remus removed the Silencio spell.

"Thanks," he whispered hoarsely. He closed his eyes and lay there panting, sweat pouring off his body.

"Are you going to be sick, mate?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded weakly.

"Back up, Gin. When he chucks. . ." he warned, just as Harry rolled over on his side and vomited. Ron had already grabbed Ginny and pulled her out of the way. Tonks cleaned up the sick with a wave of her wand. Remus finally had a chance to do a Cushioning Charm so Harry would be more comfortable. Ginny cleaned Harry's face with her damp cloth, rewetting it to get it cool again.

"I'll watch out for the Muggles," Arthur said, walking away from the huddled group.

"I'll help you," Tonks said. "It looks like things here are under control for now." The two of them split up so they could monitor a larger area.

"Harry? What can we do for you?" Ginny asked, still wiping sweat off his face, then opening his shirt and wiping down his chest. Sweat poured off of him in rivulets. He lay gasping for breath, as if he'd run a marathon. His head rocked back and forth, his expression anxious. He was still in the grip of pain, although it seemed, finally, to be receding.

At long last, he relaxed. He lay on his back, his eyes closed, still breathing hard, but his face and body were at ease, no longer knotted up with tension and pain. Remus put his cloak over Harry, whose clothes were soaked through from sweat and Ginny's ministrations with the damp cloth.

"What happened, Harry?" Remus asked gently. "Can you tell us?"

"Volde. . ." Harry began in a raspy whisper. "Volde . . .Voldemort." He lay there panting. "Scar." He rested a few moments, everyone around him silent, waiting for him to speak again. Finally, he opened his eyes and looked around.

Ginny put his glasses back on his face for him.

"Thanks," Harry said with a fleeting smile.

"That was a rough one, mate," Ron said, leaning over and looking Harry in the eye. "You back yet?"

"Back?"

"From whatever happened to you, wherever you went. That seemed like a lot more than scar pain and a vision," Ron said.

"It was." Harry lay quietly another moment, then his eyes flew open and he grabbed Remus's arm. "Snape!"

"What?" Remus asked, startled.

"Snape! He was torturing him over and over. It was horrible!" Harry's eyes were wild, seeing things the others couldn't see.

"Is Severus dead?" Remus asked, frowning.

"No. At least, he wasn't when I came out of the vision," Harry said a little more calmly. "And he didn't reveal anything that I heard, either."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. "Tell us everything you can, Harry. Start at the beginning," Remus said. He glanced up and saw that Tonks and Arthur had come closer to them, still watching the perimeter, but wanting to hear what Harry had to say.

"Do you need a drink of water?" Ginny asked Harry. He nodded and gratefully sipped from the cup she held for him. Remus held Harry up enough that he could drink easily, then laid him back down when he was finished.

Harry took a few deep breaths, then rubbed his hands over his face, pushing his glasses up into his hair as he rubbed his eyes. He pulled his glasses back down and looked in disgust at the smears on the lenses from his sweaty hair. Ginny saw the problem and took his glasses and cleaned them for him. As she handed them back, he said, "Thanks," and looked from her to Remus and Ron. "Where are the others?"

"Guarding our perimeter. There are Muggles nearby," Remus answered. "They're close enough they may be able to hear you. I'll pass along what you say in case they can't hear," Remus replied.

"'K. Voldemort had a small group of Death Eaters gathered. There were some old faces, and some I didn't recognize and some students from Hogwarts – Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, some girl whose name I don't know. The Slytherins received their Death Eater brands while I was watching – that made Voldemort happy. I think what pulled me into the vision was that he was absolutely furious at first, then got happier when he had those kids to brand, then got furious again." He stopped a moment, thinking. "I'm sorry. I'm telling it out of order. I'm still a bit confused."

"Take your time, Harry. It's all right," Remus assured him.

"Voldemort. . .at the beginning, he had them stand in the circle as they did when they captured me in the graveyard, when he got his body back. He went around the circle and named those who weren't there, and blamed me for all their deaths. The names he said that weren't on our list were . . . um . . . McCoy, Williams, something like treacle? I didn't understand that one. Um . . . McKinney, O'Banyon, and Brosnan. I think that's all of them. He was in a rage, snarling and cursing. He named the ones who were imprisoned, and vowed to release them. He did a lot more cursing. Then he turned on the old Death Eaters who remained and asked them why they let all this happen, why they didn't stop it, why they didn't train the new people better so more would have survived our battle, why had nobody managed to kill me. He was especially angry with Snape, asking why he provided the antidote when I was poisoned earlier this term. Snape said it was expected of him as a Hogwarts' professor and he was trying to not blow his cover. Voldemort said Bellatrix had all these elegant schemes in place to kill me, each one set to be triggered if the previous one didn't work. He said she was a tremendous loss to him, and that she still had a few more tricks up her sleeve despite being dead." He stopped and rested a moment, his eyes travelling worriedly from Remus's to Ron's, to Ginny's face. "I think that means she has more assassins lined up for me."

"You may be right," Remus acknowledged.

"Then he started doing the Cruciatus Curse on Snape, doing it over and over and over again, demanding to know why Snape hadn't killed me himself. When he let up the curse, Snape said it was his understanding that Voldemort had not wanted Bellatrix's plans interfered with, that she had a blood feud with me and she wanted to prove herself to him, so he'd given her some amount of time to get me killed. Voldemort went around the circle, doing the Cruciatus Curse on all the old Death Eaters. Then he taught the new ones, the Slytherins, how to do it and had them do it on all the old Death Eaters. Snape got the most of it. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle ganged up on him, all of them doing it at once. They *laughed* about it, the gits! I don't know how he survived." Harry looked ill. Remembering the scene was like reliving it, and it was a horrible thing to witness. "The torture went on a long, long time. I think that's why I was in pain so long – it felt like I was one of those being tortured." He shuddered at the memory.

"And Snape survived all this?" Remus asked cautiously.

"Yes, he was still alive and still seemed to be in his right mind when I left," Harry replied. "They were stopping the torture when I left."

"When did you leave? I mean, you were fighting us here on the ground for a long time after you fell," Remus said.

"Just before Ron asked if I was going to be sick. He knows how these things go for me. He's seen enough of them." Harry started shivering. The air this close to the sea was damp and cool.

"Ron, get into Harry's bag and find his extra clothes. These are soaked through," Remus said.

"There's nothing there. We packed really lightly, mostly just food and stuff in our bags. We wore most of our layers for flying. He tore up most of his layers to bandage me," Ron said. "He can have my sweater," he added, pulling it off as he spoke.

"OK. Ginny, can you do a drying charm and a warming spell on the clothes he has on? Once they're dry, we'll add a few extra layers of clothes to keep him nice and warm. I'm going to look through the other things we brought with us and see what other clothing I can find for him." Remus moved off to dig through everyone's packs, coming back with a couple of extra sweaters. Ron was already busy getting his sweater on Harry. Harry was trying to help, but was still weak.

"Harry, I'm sending Dumbledore an Adfero about all this – he will want to know so he can try to rescue Severus. Did you recognize where this happened?" Remus asked.

"On a hill. Mountains off to the west. A river with three bends that I could see in the valley. A small stone house with moss on the roof – something green, anyway, not ivy, something growing. The house has two chimneys. Um. . .there were sheep in the valley. A big oak tree hangs over a low stone garden wall. That's all I can think of."

"Well done. That's a lot of information. Thanks," Remus replied with a smile, tugging one of the sweaters he'd found over Harry's head and pulling his arms through them, as if he were dressing a baby. He chuckled suddenly.

"What?" Ginny asked.

"I just remembered one time when Lily let me get Harry dressed to go outside when he was a baby. I reached through the sleeves exactly this way to pull his little hands through them," he said, a sad smile on his face. He sighed, then turned away to concentrate on the message he had to send.

Moments later, Remus walked over to Arthur and then to Tonks, telling them what Harry had said and what Dumbledore had replied in his message. He came back to where Harry was still resting, Ginny and Ron sitting beside him. "I contacted Albus," Remus began.

"What did he say?" Harry asked.

"He said he was very glad you were able to give him this information. He will do something about rescuing Severus. In the meantime, he wants us to get you home as soon as possible."

"Home where? Hogwarts?"

"Headquarters. Molly and Hermione are waiting for us there. He suggested it might be easiest if you were a cat. The fur will help keep you warm, and you can hold on with your claws and not be too large for someone to hold inside their robes. And since you're registered as a cat, if someone sees us coming in, which may very well happen since our Ministry and the French are at odds with each other and will be watching for us, your secret will be safe."

"OK," Harry said, struggling to sit up. "When do we leave?"

"Bless you, you're still so weak. I hate to make you fly in this condition," Remus said, his heart aching for the boy.

"I'll be all right. I'm tough," he said with a hint of his cheeky grin.

Remus sighed. *Yes, you are tough,* he thought. "Then if you can transform, we can leave right away. Or would you rather I transform you?"

"I can do it," Harry replied wearily. "Just give me a minute."

Remus called Arthur and Tonks over and they reorganized their gear, watching Ron magically pinning a blanket around himself under his cloak to make up for giving Harry his sweater. They all watched as Harry lay there gathering his strength, then changed into the black cat with green eyes and the faintest trace of a lightning bolt marking over its right eye.

"Remarkable," Arthur said in awe, as he'd done when Harry had changed into the raven earlier. "I always wished I could do that."

"Once I get the hang of it, I'll teach you, Dad," Ron offered confidently, picking up his pack and his broom.

"Can you transform too? You never told me!" Arthur said as he mounted his broom.

"I'm working on doing a sable collie, like our old neighbour had, remember? Harry's turned me into one a few times. I really liked it once I got over the shock. I can do a paw and the ruff," Ron said proudly. "I'm going to keep working at it until I can do the whole thing!"

"Good for you! That's more than I could ever do," Arthur said admiringly.

Ginny leaned down and picked up the cat, tucking it inside her robes.

"Ginny, I don't think that's safe," Remus cautioned.

"Why not?"

"If he transforms back into Harry while you're in flight. . ."

"Oh, all right," she grumbled, then handed the cat over to Remus.

The cat was limp, not fighting being handled at all. Before putting it inside his robes, Remus looked it in the face. "Harry? Are you all right?" The cat blinked, not moving otherwise. "Does that mean yes?" Another blink. "Or are you just grumpy that I took you away from Ginny?" he teased gently. The cat's eyes widened a bit and it purred. "You're safer with me, you know," Remus said as he carefully put the cat inside his robes, doing a spell to keep the robes from flapping open and allowing the cat to fall. "Comfy?" he asked. The cat just purred, then closed its eyes and went to sleep.

"Disillusionment Charm, everyone," Tonks called, Disillusioning Remus and the cat and their broom, then herself, while Arthur Disillusioned himself, Ron and Ginny. They took off as the sun was setting the crests of the waves on the channel alight with evening colours.

Chapter 29 – Diplomacy

Molly Weasley ushered the group quickly into Number 12, Grimmauld Place when they arrived, an equally anxious Hermione hovering behind her. Molly grabbed Ron desperately and held onto him for a long time as the rest of the group moved into the sitting room so they wouldn't set off Mrs. Black's portrait.

"I'm OK, Mum, honest," he protested mildly, not really upset about receiving such a warm welcome.

Molly pulled back, tears in her eyes. "When I saw on the clock at home that you were in mortal peril. . . ." She stifled a sob. Reaching high above her head, she put her hands on Ron's cheeks and just gazed at her youngest son's beloved face.

"I'm all right. No wounds, no worries. OK?" he said, bending down to give her a warm hug, and then guiding her into the living room with the others. Ron closed the door behind them so Mrs. Black wouldn't start screaming, then enveloped Hermione in his arms.

"I was so scared when I heard," she murmured against his shoulder.

"I'm fine, sweetie," he said, lifting her chin and kissing her gently. "It's good to see you."

"You too," Hermione replied, wiping the tears from her eyes. Where's Harry?"

"Remus has him," Ron whispered, bending down to her ear. "He's a cat at the moment."

She looked up at him anxiously, knowing from his expression that something was very wrong, but afraid to ask what.

As Ron and Hermione had this quiet conversation near the door, Molly, still sniffling, looked frantically around the room at the others gathered there. "Where's Ginny? Is she all right?"

"Right here, Mum," Ginny said, waving from behind Tonks. Ginny was trying to keep her distance from her mum. She knew she was in serious trouble, but as long as her mum was distracted enough, she might not notice Ginny, and once she'd heard the entire story, she might even forget about punishing her. At least, that was Ginny's hope.

"You are grounded, young lady," Molly said fiercely. "Flying off who knows where without a word and leaving me to worry about you. . .and where's your broom? That's Harry's, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mum, it's Harry's Firebolt. My broom's gone."

"Gone? *What?* That's a brand new broom! Fred and George. . ."

"Mum!" Ginny interrupted. "I know. I'm *very* upset that it's gone. I had to ride Harry's to get home. Please, let us tell you what happened. Then you'll understand everything. But first, we need to take care of Harry."

"Where is Harry?" Molly asked anxiously. "What happened to him? I only heard that Ron was hurt."

"He's here," Remus said, pulling the cat out of his robes.

"That's a cat, Remus," Molly said totally confused.

"It's Harry. He's an Animagus," Remus explained calmly.

"No! Really?" She leaned over the cat to look at him. "This is Harry? Well, he looks a bit peaky to me," she said as she petted the handsome black cat lying limply in Remus's arms. It arched its neck and purred a bit in response to her touch, then went back to sleep. "What's wrong with him?"

"Long story. He should be fine soon. He just needs some rest," Remus said. "I imagine one of my mineral salt baths will do wonders for his sore muscles. . ." he mused to himself.

"Sore muscles?" Molly asked, bewildered.

Snapped out of his reverie by Molly's comment, Remus explained, "He fell a long way before Ginny caught him. He's got to be sore all over."

"Ginny caught him? What?" Molly said, her eyes wide. "Little Ginny caught *Harry*, big as he is? Or was he a cat? What did he fall off?"

"Sweetheart, it's a very long and involved story," Arthur said, pulling her into his arms. "I promise we'll tell you everything, but first, we need to take care of Harry, and we're all a bit knackered." He leaned down and kissed her. "Oh, Charlie sends his love, by the way."

"I wish I could have seen him," she fretted. "Oh, Arthur, I've been so worried, and then Ginny left, and the clock said all three of you, and Harry, were in mortal danger, and . . . ." She buried her face in her husband's shoulder for a moment, relieved to have her family back and whole once more. "Are you all right, luv?"

"Yes, sweet Molly, I'm fine," Arthur assured her, tucking her head into his shoulder and rocking her in his arms. "I'm sorry we worried you so."

"If you lot are all right, I'd better pop over to the Ministry and file a report," Tonks said. "I'll see you later."

"Bye, Tonks! Thanks for everything!" the others called quietly from the living room as she left.

"Harry Potter, sir!" a voice called brightly from the hallway. "Is you here? I heard your name, sir!" Dobby knocked briefly, then opened the door and raced into the living room when his voice made Mrs. Black scream. He stood quivering in fright.

"Blood traitors! Half-blood filth! Mudbloods! In the house of my fathers! And why is the Malfoy's house elf in my house? Where's Kreacher?" she shrieked.

Dobby's ears drooped and his shoulders sagged. "Dobby is sorry. He is not used to Mrs. Black's portrait yet," he muttered, bowing himself out of the room and forcing the curtains closed across the portrait.

"Dobby!" Ron called. "Harry's in here. Come back."

"Where is my master?" Dobby said, trotting into the room and looking around.

"You'll see," Ron said with a grin. He glanced down at Hermione, wondering how much she knew about why Dobby was in Harry's house. From her stormy expression, he suspected she knew at least enough to make her furious.

Remus had put the cat on the couch, where it stretched and yawned, then slowly blinked its large bright green eyes.

"Oh, it has Harry's eyes!" Molly said as she sat next to the cat, stroking his lustrous fur.

"And a trace of his scar, see above his right eye?" Ginny pointed out.

"I didn't know he was an Animagus," Molly murmured, still petting the cat. "That's simply brilliant!"

"We have loads to tell you, Mum," Ron said, "but you'll need to move. When Harry transforms, he'll take up the whole couch."

"Oh, that's right!" Molly said with a chuckle, standing up and giving the cat a final pat. "Well, let's see then."

The cat rapidly grew longer and heavier, its paws developing the shapes of hands and feet as the fur receded. Suddenly, there was Harry lying on the couch, wearing three sweaters of varying sizes, all of which were too small through the shoulders and chest for him, and dirty, ragged jeans and trainers. His face was pale, his eyes weary, his hair messier than usual.

"You do look peaky," Molly commented, running her hand gently over his forehead to check for fever. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I could eat," Harry said with a weary smile as he sat up. "Hi, Mrs. Weasley, Hermione. I'm sorry we upset you."

"Don't you worry about that, Harry, dear. It wasn't your fault, I'm sure," she said as she started toward the kitchen.

"Dobby will be happy to bring food to Master and his friends," the house elf said.

Molly stopped moving when the elf spoke up. She and Dobby were still trying to sort out kitchen duties.

"Hi, Dobby!" Harry said, grinning tiredly at the elf. "Good to see you."

"Dobby is thanking Master for giving Dobby the chance to serve him," Dobby said with a bow so low, his nose touched the floor. "Dobby is honoured to serve the noble House of Potter."

"All right, Dobby, stop that," Harry ordered, but his tone was affectionate, not gruff.

Dobby looked up, wringing his hands, looking distressed. "Stop what, Master?"

"Here are the house rules, Dobby. You will not call me 'Master.' You won't call anyone 'Master' or 'Mistress,' for that matter. We're your friends, Dobby. This enslavement thing is in name only. I only agreed to let you work for me to keep you out of jail. I'll give you clothes, wages, holidays, whatever you want, whatever will keep you happy," he said, leaning down to look the house elf in the eye. "You did me a great service, Dobby. You did what you could to protect me. Thank you."

Dobby burst into tears, pulling up the hem of the tea towel he was wearing to cover his face as he sobbed. "Oh, Master is too kind to Dobby. . ."

"What did I say about calling me 'Master'? That's an order, Dobby. You will not call me or anyone else 'Master.' Got it?"

Dobby looked at Harry with shining eyes. "Yes, sir. What would you like to be called, sir?"

"My name is Harry. That seems to work just fine, doesn't it?" Harry said with a smile.

"Harry Potter is too kind, too just, too wonderful. . ." Dobby cried, skipping a little in delight.

"I do have my moments, I suppose," Harry said, laughing at the elf's antics. "We're friends, Dobby. I will appreciate your keeping the house in order and cooking – you can earn your keep the way you always have. We'll sort out wages and holidays later. And I don't want you wearing tea towels. What would you like to wear?"

"What would Dobby like?" he asked in amazement. Dobby looked at the group around Harry. "Harry Potter asked Dobby what he would like to wear!"

"Yes, I did. You don't have to answer me right now, but if you want to wear what you wore at Hogwarts, that's fine with me."

"Thank you! Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby was beside himself with excitement. "Dobby can wear socks?"

"Yes, socks are fine," Harry said with a grin.

Dobby stood still a moment, his face wreathed in smiles, relishing his good fortune. Suddenly, he shook his head, his large bat-like ears flapping. "Oh, Dobby is a bad house elf! Harry Potter said he was hungry!" He started to bang his head on the table.

"Dobby! No punishing yourself, either! That's an order!" Harry said seriously.

Dobby straightened up uncertainly. "No?"

"No."

Dobby wrung his hands anxiously for a moment, then straightened and looked at Harry earnestly. "Dobby needs to get food for Mas-. . .for Harry Potter. What would you like to eat, Harry Potter, sir?"

Harry smiled. "Well done, Dobby. You'll get used to not calling people 'Master' before too long. And I'll eat anything you put in front of me."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby called as he ran back toward the kitchen.

"Well done, Harry," Remus said, patting his godson on the shoulder. "You handled that beautifully."

Harry shrugged. "I just tried to do the right thing," he murmured. "I don't want Dobby to be my slave."

"You did do the right thing, Harry," Hermione said, tears in her eyes. "Dobby is so lucky to have you. If he's got to be a slave, at least you won't treat him like one."

"I don't want him as a slave, but there wasn't any way around it," Harry said with a shrug.

"Thanks for being you, Harry," Hermione said, leaning over the back of the couch and hugging him, then kissing him on the cheek. Harry just blushed, not certain what to say.

"Did you get much studying done?" Ron asked her as she straightened up.

"Not really. Professor Dumbledore told me about the attack when you were in France, and let me come here to wait for your return," she said, the strain of the last few days plain on her face. "Mrs. Weasley and I have been driving each other and Dobby mad with worry."

"Everything's OK now, sweetie," Ron said, his eyes shining with love for her. He pulled her into an embrace and rested his cheek on her curly hair, glad to have her back in his arms.

"Mrs. Weasley, have you heard anything about Professor Snape?" Harry asked, a worry line appearing between his eyebrows.

"No, dear. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing," Harry replied, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his head dropped low.

"Was he at school when you left?" Ron asked Hermione.

"No. What's going on?" she replied.

"What's wrong?" Molly asked her husband.

"Harry had a vision. Snape was being tortured by You-Know-Who," Arthur replied.

"USE HIS NAME!" Harry snapped, sitting up suddenly, his eyes flashing with rage. The glass in the windows rattled in reaction to the waves of anger coming off of him.

"All right, Harry. V-voldemort," Arthur said with a shudder.

"Dumbledore says fear of the name increases fear of the thing itself. Use his name. It will help you get over your fear," Harry barked, manfully doing his best to master his temper.

"I've seen him in person for the first time now, Harry," Arthur said, tense but quiet. "I don't know that anything will help my fear of him." He and Harry stared at each other for a while, then both relaxed.

"You did fine up there, Mr. Weasley. As long as you can function, fear isn't necessarily a bad thing. But please, use his name. If he becomes ordinary to you, he'll be easier to fight."

"Is he ordinary to you, Harry?" Arthur asked earnestly.

"He's been a part of my life forever. Even before I knew I was a wizard, I had dreams of green light and people screaming. That was my parents dying. He's an evil git and needs to be destroyed. I will kill him if it's the last thing I do," Harry said with grim determination. "But you're welcome to kill him if you get to him first," he added with an attempt at a wry smile.

"Erm. . .thank you, I think," Arthur replied, trying to smile at the grim-faced boy.

Molly had stood in stunned silence during this whole exchange. Timidly, she asked, "What are you two talking about?"

"Sweet Molly, I promise to tell you everything later. Harry has been through enough. He doesn't need to relive it again. I'll tell you while he's resting," Arthur assured her.

Dawning awareness crossed Molly's face, closely followed by horror. "You. . .saw. . .?"

"Yes."

"Were my children there?"

"Yes."

Molly sat down with a 'thump' in a nearby chair. Arthur, Ron, Ginny and Hermione surrounded her, trying to comfort her. She wasn't crying. She was beyond crying. Her expression was vacant, yet shocked beyond belief. "You lot. . .you all. . .saw him?"

"Yes," Arthur replied quietly. "Dumbledore didn't tell you anything?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "You fought him?"

"Harry fought him. We were fighting Death Eaters."

"Actually, Ginny fought him too, hand to hand, and she insulted him, too, right to his face. She was brilliant! Wish I'd seen it," Ron commented with a grin.

"*WHAT?*" Molly cried. Hermione stood in stunned silence, her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide as she looked from Ron to Ginny.

"Ron, be quiet. This isn't the time," Ginny snapped. She put her arm around her mother's back and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Mum, please. Look at Harry."

Molly looked over at the boy, who had his hands locked tightly in his hair and was rocking in misery, his body shuddering in spasms of grief. Remus was doing his best to comfort him.

"We can't do this in front of Harry, Mum," Ginny said quietly. "We're all fine. He needs to rest. Please, don't do this here."

Molly nodded mutely. "You will tell me everything. Every single bleeding thing," she said in a low urgent voice.

"Yes. Everything," Ginny promised.

"All right then," Molly agreed. She took several deep, calming breaths, then moved to sit beside Harry, putting her hand gently on his back. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should have behaved better."

"Not your fault. My fault," Harry muttered, not raising his head.

"Harry, we've been through this before. None of this is your fault," Remus reminded him.

Harry looked up at him, and the sight of his face broke the hearts of his friends. He was bereft, heartbroken, anguished, guilt-ridden. He'd just started to heal a bit, and now he was back to where he'd been when they were still in France.

Remus pulled the boy's head down to his shoulder and rocked him, rubbing his back gently. "It's all right, Harry. We're all fine. You were magnificent out there. You did nothing wrong. It's Voldemort's fault, not yours. Remember that."

Harry was still a moment, then nodded. "Voldemort's fault," he said in a hard voice.

"Yes, Harry. Voldemort's fault," Remus said as Harry sat up and looked at him.

Harry scrubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, lad," Remus said kindly.

Harry gazed into his godfather's eyes a long moment, then said, "Thanks."

"Always happy to help you, Harry," Remus said.

Hermione was still speechless. She moved into Ron's arms and held him tightly, too stunned to bother with crying. When she caught her breath, she turned her head and watched the others from the comfort of his embrace.

Molly sat wringing her hands, not knowing what to do to make things better. She was rarely at such a loss. She looked up quickly when Harry turned to her.

"I'm sorry for getting your family in danger, Mrs. Weasley. I honestly didn't mean to," Harry said quietly.

"I'm not blaming you, dear. It was just a shock. I'm sorry I reacted so badly," she said, trying hard not to start crying again. She touched Harry's cheek softly. "You're such a dear boy. I wish your life was easier. You deserve better."

"Thank you," he said with a slight blush.

Molly slipped her arms around him and pulled him into a hug. "Anything you need, anything at all, you let me know," she said as she released him. "You need food and rest and that hot bath Remus was talking about," she added briskly, forcing herself back in "Mum" mode again. "And your clothes look a fright! Do you have some more clothes upstairs?"

"Yes."

"If you need other things, I'm sure Ron or the twins have extra clothing in the house somewhere, or I can pop over to The Burrow to bring some things for you," she offered earnestly.

"I'm fine. I have extra things upstairs. Thank you."

Dobby arrived just then with enough food for everyone, and they sat and talked about inconsequential things as they ate. When they were done, Remus asked Dobby to draw a hot bath for Harry.

"Yes, Professor Lupin," Dobby replied, and started to leave the room.

"And Dobby," Remus added, "in my room, you'll find a small blue jar on the shelf near the door. It has mineral salts in it. Put two pinches in the tub under the tap while the water is running. Those salts should help Harry's aching muscles."

"Yes, sir," Dobby said, then ran up the stairs to do what he'd been told.

"A hot bath sounds awfully good," Harry said, rolling his shoulders to loosen his muscles. Ginny walked behind him and started massaging his shoulders. "Oooooooh, that feels so good," he moaned, relaxing into her hands, his eyes closed in pleasure.

"You're all tied up in knots," Ginny muttered. "No wonder you're sore."

"I suspect it had to do with tumbling several hundred feet with his wings being pulled in all directions by the wind," Arthur said, gazing in awe at Harry.

"Wings?" Molly said, her eyes wide in shock.

"We do have a lot to tell you," Arthur said. "Come into the kitchen and I'll get started," he said, extending a hand to his wife. "You lot," he told his children, "when Harry goes up for his bath, you join us to make certain I don't leave anything out. Your mother has a right to know what happened."

"OK, Dad," Ron and Ginny agreed.

Upstairs, Remus helped Harry fight his way out of the too-small sweaters and his ripped, dirty jeans and get into a dressing gown. Harry rummaged around in his wardrobe and came up with a clean shirt, sweater, underwear, socks and jeans to put on after his bath, shoved his bare feet into his filthy trainers, then went into the bathroom, which was steamy from the hot water. Dobby was laying out fresh towels when they entered.

"Oh, that smells good," Harry commented as he breathed in the steam. "What is it?" he asked his godfather.

"I use these mineral salts to soak my sore muscles after the full moon," he commented quietly. "With all the running I do then if I'm not confined, well . . . you can imagine how sore I am the next day. The scent is sandalwood. You can get these salts with various scents. This is the one I prefer."

"I like it a lot," Harry said, kicking off his trainers. Dobby quickly grabbed Harry's shoes and put them outside the door.

"Why'd you do that, Dobby?" Harry asked, curious.

"Dobby will clean them for you, sir. They'll be ready when you finish your bath."

Harry smiled. "Thanks!"

"It is Dobby's honour, sir," the elf said, bowing so low his nose touched the ground.

"Dobby, here's another house rule. No bowing!" Harry said with a laugh.

"Yes, sir," Dobby said, starting to bow, then straightening up and smiling at Harry. "Thank you, sir!"

"Will you need help getting into the tub, Harry?" Remus asked.

Harry thought a moment, moving around, trying his muscles to see how stiff he really was, then said, "I think I can manage, thanks."

"Call me if you need help getting out," Remus said as he and Dobby left the bathroom.

"I will," Harry replied. He closed the door and took off his dressing gown, hanging it neatly on the hook behind the door. He slipped off his underwear, dropped it on the floor, laid his glasses on the shelf above the toilet, then stepped carefully into the hot, fragrant water. Every muscle in his body felt sore, so he eased his body down until even his ear lobes and chin were underwater. He sat quietly, thinking of nothing, letting the mineral salts do their work, feeling his muscles relax one by one. With his head resting against the back of the tub, Harry watched his hands float and then made them sink with the least effort of his muscles. Then he watched his long skinny toes poke out of the water a moment, wiggling at him, then sink out of sight again. His knobbly knees rose out of the water from time to time as he moved around, extending and bending his legs to work out the kinks in his muscles. Flapping his hands gently, he made ripples that flashed softly when they caught the light. He hadn't spent such a

luxurious time in a bath since he'd used the Prefect's bathroom to work out his golden egg clue in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. It was a wonderful thing, relaxing in a bath. He didn't know why he didn't do it more often.

Finally, he ducked his head under the water, feeling bubbles rolling around in his ears, and his hair floating around his head in a soft black cloud. He sat up and grabbed the shampoo, soap and a flannel and set about actually bathing rather than just soaking. He made his beard go away so he could scrub his face really well. When he was rinsed, towelled dry and dressed in clean clothes, he almost felt like a new man. Feeling more cheerful and relaxed than he had in days, he pulled on his well-cleaned trainers and bounded down the stairs, remembering halfway down to grow his beard to keep Ginny happy. He found the others in the kitchen.

"Wow, you look great!" Ginny said, running to hug him. "Umm, you smell good too," she murmured against his chest.

"Sandalwood. It's in the bath salts Remus let me use. Nice, huh?" Harry grinned and hugged her happily.

"Yeah."

"Looks like those salts did you a world of good, Harry," Remus said.

"Thank you for letting me use them. I feel wonderful now!" Harry said, plopping into a chair next to Ron and pulling Ginny into his lap. "What do we have to eat?"

"Are you hungry again?" Molly teased. "Growing boys, I tell you. They'll eat all the time if you let them." She chuckled and started to get up to get him some food, but Dobby had beaten her to it. A heavily laden tray seemed to be coming toward the table under its own power. They had to look beneath it to see Dobby's feet hurrying along.

"Here you is, sir. What else can Dobby bring you?"

"This looks fantastic, Dobby, thanks! I'm starved." Ginny got off Harry's lap and sat in the chair beside him so he could eat more easily. "And thanks for cleaning my trainers, mate. They look great. They even feel better!"

"They had sand and stones and weeds in them, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby cleaned them inside and out."

Harry smiled warmly at the earnest house elf. "Thanks. You did a good job, Dobby."

Dobby glowed under Harry's praise, then went back to work at the sink.

Hermione sat beside Ron, her fingers twining in his hair when he sat still long enough, or gently caressing his back. She seemed to need to be in constant contact with him. He accepted her attention with pleasure.

"Feels good, sweetie," he said as he leaned over and kissed her temple.

Tears sparkled on her eyelashes. "I was so worried. . ." she murmured. "I wish I could have been there to help you."

"I'm glad I didn't have to worry about you," he whispered back, "but I could have done with some of those excellent hexes of yours, come to think of it." He smiled at her tenderly, then took another bite of his food and sighed contentedly.

As Harry and Ron tucked into the food Dobby had provided, Dumbledore strode into the kitchen. "Ah, Harry! You look better than I expected. I was worried when I got Remus's message." Dumbledore sat down across from Harry and inspected him over his half-moon spectacles.

"I'm fine," Harry replied, taking another bite of his sandwich. "Have you heard anything about Professor Snape?"

"He's recovering. Some of our operatives went undercover and brought him back to Hogwarts. Your vision about him being tortured came in good time. Voldemort hadn't quite finished with him, but our operatives found a way to distract him and remove Professor Snape before he could do more damage to him."

"Will he be all right?" Harry asked, his face very concerned.

"Yes, Harry, he'll be fine."

Harry leaned back in his chair looking relieved. "Good."

"Molly, Miss Granger, have they told you everything?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, I think so," Molly replied as Hermione nodded. "It must have been horrible for them."

"It was," Dumbledore replied. "Dobby? How are you doing working for Harry?"

"Brilliantly, sir! Dobby is very happy, very honoured to serve the noble House of Potter."

Harry snorted with laughter. "Dobby, the House of Potter only includes one person! That's just silly, saying 'House of Potter.'"

"Whether it's one person or many, Dobby is honoured to serve it," the elf said with dignity.

Harry looked at Dobby fondly. "And I'm glad you're here. Sorry for giving you a hard time. It's going to take me a while to get used to you working for me, I suppose." He smiled at the elf, who looked at Harry with tremendous devotion.

Dobby's face glowed. "Harry Potter treats Dobby ever so well. Dobby is very happy here. Shall Dobby bring tea for your guest?"

"My guest?"

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Oh! Right." Harry chuckled. "I've never had to think of myself as a host before. Sorry, Professor. Would you like some tea?"

"That would be lovely, Harry," Dumbledore said, chuckling. "It looks as if you and Dobby are working things out well between you."

"I think it will work out fine, once I get used to him wanting to wait on me all the time. That's a bit odd for me. But it's nice, too."

"Yes, it is. I'm so glad this situation worked out." Dumbledore smiled as he watched the house elf working busily at the stove. "Now, Harry, we need to talk."

"Do you want us to leave?" Arthur offered.

"No, no, you're fine. I do need to ask Dobby something, though," Dumbledore replied.

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore?" Dobby said as he set the tea things down in front of the old wizard.

"Dobby, I believe you are very loyal to Harry, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Right. I need you to promise me that you'll protect Harry's secrets and other secrets you will hear in this house and other places you may go with Harry. It is of the utmost importance that you do this. Will you promise?"

Dobby stood straight and as tall as he could manage. "Dobby will die to defend the honour of the House of Potter. Dobby will die before revealing secrets of Harry Potter or his friends."

"Promising is good enough, Dobby, but that will do admirably. Thank you." Dumbledore turned to Harry. "The Ministries of Britain and France are on the brink of war over this incident. I need you to come with me to a meeting."

"And do what?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Answer questions, present evidence, that kind of thing. You are not in any kind of trouble, nor are any of your friends. I don't want you to worry about that. The problem is political. I will do my best to resolve those issues with both Ministries, but having your testimony will go a long way to resolving the problems."

"When do you need me to go to this meeting?"

"Right now. I'm glad to see you looking so refreshed." He glanced around at the others, all of whom were still in their torn, dirty travelling clothes. "I see they gave you the first turn in the bathroom, eh?" he said, laughing.

"Yeah, I was pretty grubby," Harry replied.

"And he was sore. Remus's mineral salts and a hot bath did wonders for him," Molly offered. "The boy has been through so many awful things at once. Can't he rest a day or two, Albus? And why are they meeting so late in the day? It's nearly tea-time."

"They've been meeting all day, simply going in circles and fighting, getting nothing accomplished. They need to hear Harry's story, directly from him, to resolve some issues. That's why we have to go right now – we need to avert an international crisis. Harry, when you've finished eating, we'll go, all right?"

"OK," Harry said, taking a last swig of butterbeer and swallowing his last bite of food. "Dobby, that was great. Thanks!"

"Dobby is happy to please you, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said, starting to bow, and then remembering Harry's rules just in time. He and Harry grinned at each other.

"You're learning," Harry complimented him.

As Harry and Dumbledore prepared to Apparate to the Ministry, Harry turned serious eyes on his headmaster. "Professor, I need to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"I did Unforgiveable Curses during the battle. Remus told me I shouldn't be in trouble for it, that if you didn't want me to learn those things, you would have taken the books away. He thinks you can keep me out of trouble, but we're going to meet both of the Minstries now. Am I in trouble?"

"No, dear boy, you're not in trouble," Dumbledore assured him.

"How can that be? It's not legal for underage wizards – "

"Were you the only one casting them?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"No, of course not. It seems to be the favourite spell of many of the Death Eaters," Harry replied seriously.

"And there were so many spells flying up there, Remus told me they overlapped, making walls of spell fire at time, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then neither government has any idea who cast which particular spells, although they could tell that underage wizards were doing magic outside of school. You're safe. Don't worry about it anymore. And if anyone were ever to try to press charges against you – well, you leave that to me."

"What can you do about it?" Harry asked, still concerned.

"I wrote a great many of our laws myself," Dumbledore replied quietly, "and I built in loopholes for just such contingencies. And I know how to use those loopholes. So stop

worrying, Harry. You have enough grey hair for now," he teased, chuckling softly. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Speaking of that. . .that beard is very becoming, Harry, and I know Miss Weasley likes it, but for this hearing, clean-shaven is best. They need to understand how young you are, as well as the facts of the case. With that beard, you look far older than your years."

"No problem, Professor," Harry agreed, then grinned as his beard disappeared.

"Well done," the headmaster said. "You may bring it back when we return. I imagine Miss Weasley will insist on it."

"I'm sure she will," Harry said with a smile.

At the Ministry of Magic, Harry and Dumbledore entered a room full of heated arguments flying in every direction. They stopped and stood inside the door, Dumbledore with a sad expression, Harry looking nervous. Amelia Bones, the new Minister of Magic, noticed them. Fudge had been summarily dismissed after Voldemort's return, due to Fudge's insistence that Dumbledore and Harry were crazy and Voldemort couldn't possibly be back, when he'd been back for a year. Fudge had left the country in disgrace.

"Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, at last! Please come in and sit down," she said kindly. She adjusted her monocle and smiled at him, then got the attention of the rest of the attendees by shooting purple stars out of her wand. "Please, delegates, settle down. Our witness has just joined us. I'm sure we'd all like to hear from him." She gestured toward Harry.

Dumbledore whispered, "Stand up," to Harry as Madam Bones introduced him.

"I'm certain all of you have heard of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. This is Mr. Potter in the flesh. Everything you've heard about him is true. He did defeat You-Know-Who when he was just a year old. He has faced this evil wizard and his Death Eaters numerous times since then, and he's just a schoolboy. How old are you now, Mr. Potter?"

"Erm. . ." Nervous, Harry had to stop and clear his throat. "Sixteen."

"Sixteen!" she cried. "And what year are you at Hogwarts?"

"Sixth year."

Madam Bones gazed at him with admiration. "Look at this young man," she said. "Look at him. Not even finished with Hogwarts, but he's faced more battles than most of us will ever see in our lifetimes! He truly is a hero of the wizarding world. He has recently been recommended for the Order of Merlin, Second Class. From what I've seen of the recommendation, it should fly through the approval process with no problem whatsoever. He will be the youngest recipient of the Order of Merlin in British history." She looked at the French delegation, almost daring them to disparage Harry's reputation. They glared back at her but remained silent.

"Sit down, now, Harry," Dumbledore whispered. Harry sat, grateful to be allowed to do so.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said, "Would you please tell us about the events leading up to and including the recent battle you were in which took place in France?"

"Uh. . ." Harry looked around nervously, then noticed a pitcher of water and some goblets on the table in front of him. "May I have a drink of water, please?"

"Certainly," Madam Bones said graciously.

"Thanks." Harry gulped down an entire glass of water, then steeled himself for what he had to do. "Professor Dumbledore was in touch with Charlie Weasley and learned they needed some new bloodlines for their hippogriffs in Rumania," he began. "The hippogriffs over there are an endangered species and their gene pool is too small, so they're becoming inbred. I get on well with hippogriffs and love to fly, so Professor Dumbledore asked me to fly a male hippogriff from the Hogwarts herd over to Rumania for him. I asked my friend Ron Weasley to go along, since Charlie's his brother and we thought it would be fun to visit him." Harry went on to tell about the attack on them at their first landing site, Ron's injuries and Harry's response. "I didn't mean to blow things up," he said apologetically. "I wasn't thinking of a specific spell, because Ron was hurt and falling off the hippogriff, and the hippogriff was injured and I was trying to keep all of us in the air safely while stopping the attack. So I shot a big spell at them, not really concentrating on it because of all the other things I was dealing with, and I blew a hole in the ground."

"And what happened to the three wizards who attacked you?" Madam Bones prompted.

"I suppose they're dead. Someone checked the site later and found no human remains, so either they escaped or they got blown up. I just don't know which."

"See? See? Zis 'arry Pottaire, 'e is a careless wizard!" one of the French delegates shouted, pounding his fist on the table. "'e did not check to see if any French citizens were injured. 'e damaged valuable woodlands wiz 'is 'ole in the ground. 'e is irresponsible, careless, a menace! 'e attacked Frenchmen!"

Harry's jaw dropped. He attacked Frenchmen? Where? "Sorry? What Frenchmen?" he asked as politely as he could manage.

"You do not know who you attacked, zerefore you probably attacked Frenchmen!" the man cried.

"They were speaking English, with British accents, and I didn't hear any French accents at all," Harry snapped, suddenly quite irritated with this officious, odious little man.

"Still, you do not know who it was you attacked," the man blustered.

"They attacked us first! What were we supposed to do? They attacked with no warning, no questions, nothing! They just tried to shoot us out of the sky!" Harry retorted, his temper flaring. Dumbledore put a calming hand on Harry's arm, and the boy subsided.

Madam Bones shot purple stars out of her wand again to restore order. "That's enough. There will be no more outbursts," she declared. "We will hear Mr. Potter's testimony in full, and then we will ask him questions in a civilized manner." She glared around at the delegates to

the meeting. There was no response except for returned glares. "Mr. Potter, if you would, please continue your story."

Harry took a deep breath and started telling about having to take care of Ron and the hippogriff, and sending word home that they needed help.

"How did you send word that you needed help, Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones asked.

"Professor Dumbledore taught me how to send Adfero messages earlier this year. That's what I did," he replied honestly.

"You sent an Adfero across the entire country of France, across the English Channel and all the way up to Hogwarts?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Harry replied, surprised at her reaction. He looked at Dumbledore uncertainly. Had he said something wrong?

"You're doing fine, dear boy," Dumbledore encouraged him quietly. "Go on."

Before he could say another word, Madam Bones addressed the delegates. "I happen to know that this young wizard is possessed of remarkable powers," she began. Harry looked at Dumbledore nervously – what was she going to say? "When he was thirteen, he could do a corporeal Patronus. I asked him about sending an Adfero over such a distance because I know most wizards cannot send them that far. But most adult wizards cannot produce a corporeal Patronus at all, which he was doing at the age of thirteen. I believe he's just become a registered Animagus, as well. Is this correct, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes."

"What is your Animagus form?"

"A cat."

"Could you show us, please?"

Harry glanced at Dumbledore, saw him nod, and then changed into the cat, making certain not to do it too quickly. He was supposed to keep the level of his Animagus skills somewhat secret, after all. The cat jumped from the chair to the table top so everyone could see him, then jumped back to the chair and changed into Harry again.

"Well done, Mr. Potter!" Madam Bones said approvingly. "You are now the eighth registered Animagus in this century. Congratulations. This Animagus ability and the Adfero skill are just more testaments to Mr. Potter's abilities. I don't know about you, but I'm glad he's on our side." She smiled at Harry and said, "Forgive my interruption. Please, go ahead with your story."

Harry nodded, then told them about the battle. He didn't leave anything out. His voice shook when he talked about Ginny being shot down in the first place, then thrown over the cliff twice. During this part, he heard a gasp from the corner. There was Percy Weasley, acting as

Madam Bones's clerk. He was the one who gasped to hear about Ginny being attacked, and then thrown off the cliff.

"Did she survive?"

"Yes."

"How did she manage to survive?"

"I sent her broom to her the first time, then jumped in after her the second time."

"Sorry? Tell me in detail how you saved her. I don't quite understand," Madam Bones asked.

"Which time?"

"Both."

"Oh. Um. The first time, I did a Banishing charm on her broom and sent it down to her. She caught it and flew back up, I tossed her wand up to her and she rejoined the battle until her broom was shot out from under her. The second time, I jumped off the cliff after her. Her broom was destroyed, so I couldn't send it after her."

"She caught a flying broom while she was falling off a cliff?" Madam Bones looked sceptical.

"She played Seeker on Gryffindor's Quidditch team last year, and this year she's playing Chaser. She's good at catching things."

"And you jumped off the cliff yourself? How high was it?"

"I don't know, maybe a hundred and fifty feet or so," he said with a shrug.

"You jumped off a cliff that high and survived? How did you manage that?"

"It's a deep lake. And I did an Aresto Momentum Charm as I was falling to soften my landing. I put a shield above me because of spells and rocks that were coming down at me. I did a partial transfiguration to grow gills and fins so I could swim down to her safely. That was all." He shrugged again. "Apparently she did an Aresto Momentum as she fell, because she wasn't badly injured by the fall. She also managed a partial Bubblehead Charm, but it didn't cover her mouth."

Madam Bones's monocle fell from her eye as she raised her eyebrows in amazement. "How was she when you found her?"

"She wasn't breathing. She was blue. . .and . . . so still." Harry had to stop and rein in his feelings. "I worked on her for quite a while before she started breathing again."

"Worked on her how?"

"Muggle methods of getting someone to breathe again after drowning. I learned it in school when I was little."

Madam Bones could see Harry was fighting to control his emotions. "How is she now, Mr. Potter?" she said in a kind voice.

"She's fine. She's home now."

"I'm glad to hear that. After that, you went back to the battle again?"

"Yes. It wasn't over, you see. Ginny fought again as well, and when we got back to the top of the cliff, Ron had come up and joined the fight too."

"How did you get to the top of the cliff?"

"Madam Bones," Dumbledore interrupted, "as you can well imagine, this experience is still very fresh and painful for Harry. Could we please allow him to summarize the battle and let him go home and rest? He's been through a tremendous ordeal."

"Yes, of course, you're right, Albus. My apologies. All right, Mr. Potter, tell us the rest of the story."

Harry finished his tale and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been honest, but managed to keep his other Animagus forms secret, thanks to Dumbledore's timely intervention when Madam Bones was trying to find out how he scaled a huge cliff with enough energy left over to fight again. He didn't think there had been other slips during his testimony.

"So, Mr. Potter. Were there French wizards among those you identified?" Madam Bones asked.

"Not to my knowledge, no. I didn't complete the list of the dead, though. Ron and his dad, Arthur Weasley, finished the job for me. I didn't look at the list again once I handed it to them. None of those who went to Azkaban were French."

"We have a copy of that list here, correct?" Madam Bones said, looking at Percy. Harry smiled uncertainly at Percy, hoping for a friendly response. Percy kept his eyes on his parchment, never looking at Harry once, never making a sound except the gasp when he heard about Ginny's life being endangered. Harry sighed, sad that Percy was still distant from his family and old friends.

"Yes, we have a copy, and I've made enough copies for all the delegates. They were passed around just before the witnesses arrived," Percy said pompously.

"Very good, Mr. Weasley." She turned her attention to the delegates. "I will now entertain questions from the floor – questions, not diatribes or personal accusations of any kind. This young man is not on trial and has done nothing wrong according to a great many reputable witnesses."

The delegates from each country conferred among themselves for a while, then a British delegate raised his hand. Madam Bones called on him.

"Yes. I would like to know what Mr. Potter did to earn the nomination for the Order of Merlin, Second Class," he said importantly. He smiled broadly at Harry then sat down.

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's arm. "Since I'm the one who nominated him, I will answer. You've heard Harry's story. He was truthful but modest. His return to the battle after saving Miss Weasley is what turned the battle in our favour. Until that point, from what I'm told by two trained Aurors who were there, our people were badly outnumbered and were being defeated. Harry's return, along with Miss Ginny Weasley and Mr. Ron Weasley joining the battle at that moment, made the battle a decisive victory. Four adults and three students fought off a tremendous enemy force as well as Voldemort himself."

Dumbledore looked at the assembled bureaucrats. "How long has it been since any of you have done actual battle with a dark wizard? Were any of you in the previous war with Voldemort? Harry has risen to the occasion whenever he's had to, and he's always put the safety of others before his own safety. He saved Miss Weasley's life twice that day, and from what I've heard, he also saved the life of Ron Weasley during the battle, as well as during the attack when the boys were flying the hippogriff. Harry saved the life of Auror Nymphadora Tonks, who was falling while being attacked by three Death Eaters. He saved the life of Remus Lupin, as well, when he was overpowered by the enemy. Harry also gave medical care to Ron Weasley and the hippogriff, as well as helping to care for others who were injured, without stopping to care for his own injuries, and while refusing to have his own injuries treated. He put everyone before himself. Harry has earned this nomination for the Order of Merlin, Second Class, and the others involved have undeniably earned their nominations for medals. I stand behind my nominations."

"Who trained these students to fight this way?" someone shouted angrily.

"Order! Order!" Madam Bones cried, standing and glaring angrily around, her wand at the ready. "If you have a question, raise your hand and be called on."

That person raised his hand and was called on, and then he repeated his question.

"These students are among our best Defence Against the Dark Arts students at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said proudly. "Harry, here, has the highest marks in that class that Hogwarts has ever seen. He has remarkable skills and a tremendous natural talent for defence spells. We also have a Defence Against the Dark Arts club, which Harry and Professor Lupin lead. Those students with a serious interest in defensive spells can polish their skills and learn more spells in this club. Both Ron and Ginny Weasley are part of that club. They help Harry lead it."

"Doesn't 'D.A.' stand for Dumbledore's Army?" that same man asked aggressively. "Aren't you creating your own armed forces to take over the Ministry?"

"Ah, you've been listening to Dolores Umbridge, I see, or possibly Cornelius Fudge," Dumbledore said with a beatific smile. "Yes, the club is called 'Dumbledore's Army,' and I'm quite proud of them. This next generation of wizards will not be as easily overtaken as the previous one, mainly because of the extra effort they are putting into learning how to fight, and fight well." His face hardened and he leaned forward as he spoke in decisive tones. "We are at war, ladies and gentlemen. These children have accepted that fact and are doing what they can to protect their homes and families. What are you doing to win this war? This hearing is a waste of precious time, and of Harry's energy. If you don't have more pertinent questions, I'm taking him back home so he can rest. He's earned it."

"Wait!" a Frenchman called. "We 'ave not 'ad a chance to ask ze questions."

Madam Bones inclined her head to the man. "What is your question?"

"Mr. Potter – 'ow did you know zeeze were Deaz Eatairs before you attacked zem?"

Harry's temper snapped. "Were you listening at all? I didn't attack them! They shot at Ron and me when we were on the hippogriff. The next day, another group of them shot my girlfriend out of the air, and then they attacked me and my friends. I knew that lot were Death Eaters because I've seen them before and know who they are and what they look like. If you read the articles in *The Quibbler* and *The Daily Prophet* last year where I talked about Voldemort's coming back – get used to the name, I'm sick of people gasping when they hear it! – then you read a list of those whose voices I recognized or who I heard named. These same wizards were at the Department of Mysteries last year when we fought them and Voldemort there. And they were in France this time, along with some new recruits. It was one of the new people who shot Ginny down in the first place, but the rest of them were going to help him hurt her. All of them were coming after her." He paused a moment, glaring at the complacent, corpulent faces around him, knowing most of them had probably never faced an enemy in combat.

"What would you do if someone you loved was being attacked by Death Eaters? Would you try to fight them, to protect her? Or would you turn and run? I chose to fight, and I'd do it again! And it doesn't matter to me if they were British or French wizards – they attacked us with no provocation at all. They started it. I finished it."

He was standing up by now, panting as he tried to control his rage. The image of Ginny being shot down was seared in his mind, and it was replaying over and over as he spoke.

"What is wrong with you people? We should be banding together to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters, not having turf wars like this. Who cares if somebody faced Voldemort in France, or Rumania or Iceland or wherever? At least they faced him! And if they defeated him, or at least hurt him enough to make him leave, I would think you'd be happy about that, not angry that they fought on your land!" He slammed himself back into his chair, crossing his arms tightly across his chest, fighting to control his anger.

The room was deathly still for several moments. Then one pair of hands started clapping. Another joined it. Soon many hands were clapping, some voices raised in cheers, while others sat and glared around disapprovingly. Dumbledore smiled benignly at Harry. "Well done, lad. Ready to go home?"

"Yes! Can we go now?"

"I think so." Dumbledore turned to Madam Bones. "May we be excused now, Madam Bones? Harry is still quite tired from all his experiences. His Easter holiday is nearly over. It would be nice if he could enjoy at least a little rest and relaxation before having to return to school."

Madam Bones smiled. "Of course. Thank you both for taking so much time with us. And Mr. Potter? I will support your nomination for the Order of Merlin, Second Class, myself. Thank you for your courage in facing the evil forces of our world, and for coming here today and answering our questions. You may go."

"Thank you," Harry replied, rising to leave. He followed Dumbledore out the door, glancing back once to look at Percy again. Percy gave him a look of loathing. Harry looked back at him sadly. He couldn't understand why someone would throw away the love of a family like the Weasleys, or old friends.

"Professor?" he asked as they walked down the corridor. "Why is Percy. . .I don't even know what to ask."

"And I can't answer you, either. I don't know what Percy's after. Power, perhaps. I think in part, he's embarrassed that he's strongly backed the wrong person twice, first Barty Crouch and then Cornelius Fudge. He's quite lucky he hasn't lost his position. Madam Bones was willing to overlook his mistakes, saying he was young and still had a lot to learn. She's giving him a chance to succeed. If he follows her example, he may go somewhere yet. Percy has always been a very proud boy, and his pride has been hurt by these mistakes. Maybe he doesn't understand that other people are willing to forgive him. Maybe he hasn't forgiven himself. Or maybe he doesn't think there's anything he needs to be forgiven for. I just don't know, Harry. It's a sad thing."

Harry walked along quietly for a while, then asked, "What should I tell Mrs. Weasley if she asks about him?"

"Just tell her the truth. You saw him, but didn't get to speak to him. Tell her he looked fine. That should satisfy her."

"OK."

Dinner at Grimmauld Place that night would have been a quiet affair if Fred and George hadn't arrived to liven things up. When they left and the laughter died away, the group sat silently around the kitchen table. Dumbledore had filled everyone in on the hearing earlier. Harry stayed quiet most of the evening, just laughing when the twins did or said something outrageous, but otherwise, keeping to himself. Since the twins had left, he'd simply stared at the walls most of the time.

"All right there, Harry?" Molly asked kindly.

"Yeah, just tired," he said with a shrug. Ginny was leaning her head on his shoulder, holding his hand in both of hers. Harry glanced down at her, then up at her mother. "Mrs Weasley?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Could I ask you a favour?"

"Of course! What is it?"

Harry chuckled. "I learned the hard way not to agree to do favours before I knew what they were. You should hear me out before agreeing." He sent a teasing glance at Hermione, who blushed, remembering that he no longer did favours without knowing what they were because of what she'd done while under the Black Widow curse.

Molly smiled and sat down opposite him, leaning her arms on the table and giving him all her attention. "All right. Fire away, and then I'll give you my decision!"

Harry smiled at her, his eyes thoughtful. "This is my house now, right?"

"Of course. Sirius left it to you." The adults in the group glanced uneasily at each other. Was Harry going to ask the Order to find new headquarters? Or what?

"I know Dobby would do this for me," he began quietly, then leaned in and whispered across the table, "but his taste and mine aren't exactly alike."

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I would like all the portraits removed and put away somewhere. I know they should be treated respectfully, but I don't know how to deal with them. I don't want them on the walls. Oh, Professor," he said, looking over at Dumbledore, "if you want Phineas Nigellus to stay as a messenger, or any of the others, that's fine, but I don't want them in my room. And Mrs. Black has to go!"

"You'll get no argument from me there!" Molly said with a laugh. The others were all laughing as well. Harry's idea appealed to all of them. Those Slytherin portraits had been giving them disapproving glares far too long.

"I'd like the house to be repainted inside in cheerful colours. I'd like light coloured curtains so the sun can brighten the house. I think it can be an attractive house once we get all the Slytherin stuff out of it. I want all the snake door knobs, candelabras and so on replaced with Gryffindor lion door knobs or whatever – or plain ones, if lion ones are too costly. I have no idea how much any of this will cost." He looked around hopefully. All the faces around him were bright with interest. "Do you think this is a good idea? I mean, if I'm going to wind up living here, it can't be a Slytherin house, y'know? And I can't stand how dark and dreary it is. I grew up in a dark cupboard. I don't ever want to live anywhere dark like that again. When Ginny put those posters up in Ron's and my room when I was sick, I couldn't believe what a difference it made in the feeling of the room, to have that amount of colour in there." He smiled at Ginny, and she beamed back at him.

"So what do you want me to do, Harry?" Molly prompted.

"I'm going to ask Dobby to remove the portraits, except for those Professor Dumbledore wants kept as messengers – those we'll move to rooms that aren't used often. I'll need your help in working out what to do with the portraits, and I'll want you, Ginny and Hermione, if they're willing to help, to pick out colours for the walls and curtains. Would you mind doing that for me? Dobby can change the door knobs and so on – I suppose he knows how to trade them in or sell them or whatever so we can have new ones. Do any of you know about that kind of thing?" he asked, looking around the group.

"Actually, Harry, I do know something about those matters," Arthur said. "I have a contact at the Ministry who deals in old household hardware. He'll know how to handle it, and how to make certain you get your money's worth. Those door knobs are valuable, so you will get a good bit of money for them."

"Cool," Harry said with a grin.

"Harry," Molly said, "do you want to move to the master suite, since it's your house? We can start the redecorating there."

"No, you and Mr. Weasley usually stay there when you're here. You may as well keep it. I'm happy sharing with Ron – unless Ron is tired of sharing with me?" he said, looking at his best friend.

"No way! You and me are mates, mate! It's cool sharing a room with you," Ron grinned.

"This house has so many rooms, we can probably each have one if we want to, once we have them all cleaned out and so on," Harry mused. "We can deal with that later. Oh, and in case you're worried – the Order can use the house as long as they want, as far as I'm concerned. I'll join as soon as Professor Dumbledore will let me, so at least it will be easy for me to attend meetings," he said with a laugh.

Ginny clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, this will be fun! Mum, when can we start looking at colours?"

"I'll want new pictures on the walls to replace the portraits," Harry reminded her, "so be on the lookout for good posters and so forth when you're shopping."

"Aren't you going with us?" Ginny said, confused.

"Dunno. I trust you," he replied. "If I can go, I will." He looked over at Molly again. "That's the favour. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will, Harry! It sounds like fun!"

"It sounds brilliant, Harry!" Hermione enthused. "What a great idea!"

"Dobby will be here to help, and I think Winky will be here soon, too, won't she, Professor?" he asked, looking at Dumbledore again.

"Yes, she'll be here tomorrow, actually."

"Great. She and Dobby can do the cleaning and painting, then, and you and Ginny can concentrate on the decorating, so it won't be so much work for you. How's that?" Harry said.

"Lovely! I can't wait! Maybe we can go to Diagon Alley tomorrow and get some ideas. Harry, you should come along so we'll know what you like."

"Anything you ladies pick will suit me fine. I've never had anywhere nice to live besides Hogwarts, so I'm looking forward to this place becoming a cheerful, warm place to be. I think your house is brilliant, so I'm sure you'll do fine with this one."

Molly blushed at his compliment. "Thanks for trusting me with your house, Harry. But I'd still prefer it if you came as well."

"Me, too!" Ginny piped up.

"Yeah, that was a big surprise," Ron chortled.

"We'll see," he said noncommittally. "A lot depends on how I feel in the morning." He rolled his shoulders, reminding then he was still sore from his fall, as well as the battle.

Molly and Ginny exchanged a look and stopped trying to talk him into it. Morning would be soon enough to deal with his reluctance to join their shopping trip.

The conversation went back to general topics. While the adults were discussing something to do with the economy, Hermione leaned over and spoke to Harry.

"When you feel like it, would you answer some questions for me about wandless magic?"

"Like what?" he asked warily.

"You don't have to do this now," she said, seeing his caution.

"May as well get it over with," he said stoically. "What is it?"

"Well. . .when Ron and Ginny were telling about the battle, Ginny said she had your wand for a lot of the battle, yet you were casting big spells, even the Killing Curse, with no wand. Wands concentrate the magic and help us control it. How could you cast such big spells and focus them properly without a wand?" She looked genuinely puzzled.

Harry's face grew tense and he seemed to draw within himself.

Hermione put her hand on his arm, hoping to calm him. "I'm sorry. It's too soon to ask you this. I should have waited," she said apologetically.

"Yeah," he said, then rose and started to leave the room. "Ask me later, OK? I just can't. . .not right now." He turned and walked slowly out of the door.

"This is still very hard for him," Remus said, starting to get up to go after Harry. The adults' conversation had stilled when they noticed Harry's increasing tension.

"No, I'll go," Ginny offered. She went looking for Harry and found him in the library, sitting in a huge overstuffed chair, slumped down so far, his neck was bent at an awful angle. "You're going to get a stiff neck sitting that way."

"Then it will match the rest of me," he grumbled.

"Couldn't take it, huh?"

"I've heard or told the story too many times, and it's all still so fresh in my mind . . . ."

"May I sit with you?" she asked quietly.

He looked up at her, really looking at her for the first time that evening, noting the tired circles under her eyes. "How are you doing?"

"I'm holding up pretty well," she said. "It gets to me once in a while. I think I'll probably have nightmares about falling for a long time."

"Yeah, me too – about you falling, I mean," he said, pulling her into his lap. He nuzzled her neck, burying his face in her hair, then pushed her hair aside so he could nibble her ear lobe. "I've missed you."

"I've been right here," she protested mildly, teasing him.

"Yeah, me too," he agreed, then kissed her gently. The gentle kiss quickly turned more serious. As it deepened, his hand started explorations of her very interesting topography. She giggled as he tickled her, then gasped when he touched her more seriously. He straightened suddenly, his head cocked. "Someone's coming," he said, helping her straighten her clothes.

"We have to find a better place to do this," she complained. "We keep getting interrupted!"

Harry laughed, his face alight with the happiness she brought him. "You little monkey! What am I going to do with you?"

"I was hoping you'd know by now!" she teased, then giggled at his shocked expression.

Someone had the good grace to knock on the door. "Harry? Ginny?" came Molly's voice.

"In here, Mum," Ginny replied.

Molly entered the room. "I'm sorry to bother you. Professor Dumbledore has to leave, and he wanted a word with you, Harry."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance. *More than likely, Mum was on snog patrol*, Ginny thought, and Harry seemed to read her mind. He burst out laughing, stifling it quickly.

"What's so funny?" Molly asked cautiously.

"Ginny was making faces at me, that's all. I've told her over and over her face will freeze like that if she keeps it up," he teased. Ginny stuck her tongue out at him saucily, then hopped off his lap and followed her mother back toward the kitchen, swaying her hips suggestively at Harry, turning to glance over her shoulder and make impish faces at him from time to time. He just grinned, delighted to have such a cheerful person in his life.

"Harry! I was hoping to see you again before I left. Are you feeling quite well now?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. But you will be," Dumbledore assured him. "You said something about wanting to join the Order."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Yes, sir, I want to join as soon as you'll let me. But Remus told me last summer that I have to be out of school before I can join the Order."

"That's normally the case, but I think you and Ron have earned a place in the Order. Ron's already seventeen, so he's of age. You will be seventeen soon, but with your experience, you're more qualified than many of our adult members. Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, boys," Dumbledore said with a smile, holding out his hand to shake Harry's and glancing at Ron.

"Really? Wow! Ron, did you know about this?" Harry cried, looking over at his best friend.

"This is the first I've heard of it! Thanks, Professor!" Ron exclaimed.

Molly Weasley looked distraught. "It's not enough that you have both Arthur and I and Bill, Charlie and the twins in the Order – you have to take Ron, too?" she said, tears brimming in her eyes as she stared, heartbroken, at Dumbledore.

"Dear Molly, these boys have already fought alongside Order members and acquitted themselves admirably. They will join the fight whether we allow them in the Order or not. Wouldn't they be better equipped if they had the information we have, rather than stumbling around in the dark?" Dumbledore said kindly.

She sniffled, still staring at him, then dropped her eyes and slowly nodded.

"What about me?" Ginny demanded. "I fought along with Harry and Ron!"

"Yes, you did, my dear, and I'm very proud of you. However, you're only fifteen, and if I invite you to join the Order this young," he said, leaning closer to her, "your mother will hex me so badly, I won't be able to move for weeks! I've seen her hexes – I know whereof I speak!" He smiled kindly at the girl.

"And me?" Hermione cried. "I'm older than the boys!"

"Yes, you are." He sighed, then smiled. "I didn't invite you to join when you turned seventeen because we normally require members to be finished with school. However, you have done so much extra study, I suppose you're as qualified as the boys are. You're welcome to join, as well, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled in delight, while Ginny looked surly.

"Miss Weasley, I'm sure you will know all the information, since I'm certain your brother and your friends will share what they learn in Order meetings with you." He placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "Please don't think unkindly of me for this decision. It won't be long before you can join the Order. I'd simply prefer not to have explosive boils on my bum, which I've know was one of your mother's favourite hexes when she was in Hogwarts." He'd made Ginny smile with that comment.

"Well, that's done. Remus or Arthur can tell you whatever you need to know about the workings of the Order, boys, and Miss Granger. I have a great many things to do elsewhere, so I'd best be off. Good night!" Dumbledore called as he swept out the door and disappeared.

Chapter 30 – Back in the Real World Again

It was nearly bedtime. The four friends sat in the library, finally having a bit of time without adults around so they could talk freely.

"Harry, are you all right now?" Hermione asked in concern.

"I'm fine," he said quietly. He and Ginny were sitting side by side on the couch while Ron held Hermione in his lap in the big armchair. Harry's face was guarded, but he sighed and said, "So what did you want to know about the wandless magic? I've already forgotten your question."

"I've got questions too, mate, but if it's too soon, just tell us," Ron said, looking earnestly at Harry.

"Go on, then," Harry said cautiously.

"You did a lot of very difficult spells with no wand. How did you do that?" Ron watched Harry's face carefully. "I've always heard the Killing Curse was unblockable, yet you blocked it, and wandless. How is that possible?"

"The blocking or the wandless part?" Harry said, his eyes wary.

"Either. Both."

He sighed. "OK. The wandless bit is probably easier to explain," Harry said, taking a deep breath, sitting up straighter and doing his best to go into his "teaching D.A. mode." "Wandless magic has a different . . . erm . . . *feel* than magic using a wand." He took his arm from around Ginny's shoulders and leaned forward, elbows on knees, using his hands expressively as he spoke. "For a difficult or big spell, you have to use a lot more power than you would with a wand, since the magic is concentrated differently. For simple things, once you learn how to do it, it's easy, like flipping a light switch," he said, looking at Hermione, who nodded. Ron's and Ginny's confused expressions told him they didn't really understand his reference. "Flipping a light switch in a Muggle house turns the light on. It takes no effort to speak of on the person's part, just flip," he demonstrated with a finger, "and the lights are on. Wandless magic for simple spells is like that, just 'flip' and the spell is done. It's easier than doing a Lumos with your wand, once you are competent with it. Learning how to do it is quite tricky, though. Wandless magic is like. . . um. . . . It's like energy flowing out of your fingers. Each finger has a. . .a stream of power flowing out of it. You can point each finger in a different direction for some spells – sort of like casting a net or web type of thing – or curl your hand to create a. . .a vortex of power in your hand, I guess you'd say." He was moving his hands as he spoke, demonstrating the positions he was discussing. "Ron, you've seen the balls of energy I've cast."

Ron nodded. Harry had done that when he was in a rage at Hogwarts and created a pond behind Hagrid's hut. The same spell had vaporized the three assailants at their first landing spot in France over Easter break and melted Voldemort's feet at the top of the cliff.

"Those are created with this vortex of pure power I make when I curl my hand this way." He held his hand like a claw, all the fingers pointed toward his palm. "The power from my

fingers feels like it . . . um. . .whirls around in the palm of my hand and gets stronger. It's more powerful if I'm really angry or scared." He looked at his friends, seeing puzzled faces but nods as each of them struggled to understand his explanation. "I have to build up a certain amount of rage to cast the big spells wandlessly – I can't do them 'cold.' I have to be in an absolute flaming rage. But without the wand, the control is vastly different, as is the feeling of the magic."

He paused, trying to think of a better way to explain. "Erm. . .OK, you know when I'm furious and things shake?" They all nodded. "If my anger gets past that, to the point where things just break on their own, I don't have control of my magic. But if I can capture the power of that rage just before it gets away from me, everything has a. . .a sharp focus, a crystal clarity, I guess you could say, so I can focus the magic with my hand and don't need the wand. I can gather the power into a . . .a surge? Something like that. And then I can focus it through my fingers and cast it in a . . .a wide 'net' if my fingers are spread," he demonstrated with a gesture of his hand, "or focus it to a fine point if I hold my hand differently." He held his hand with the fingers curled toward his palm again, the palm pointed away from him. "If I use both hands together, with them cupped like this, I can cast and hold a huge spell between them." He shrugged. "I don't know how else to explain it. And that vortex of power thing – I can't do that as well with a wand as I can without one. I honestly don't know why."

"I've never managed anything wandless," Hermione said with a sigh. "This vortex – it's *more* powerful than anything you can do with a wand? I don't understand. I just can't see it."

"Hold your hand out, Hermione," Harry suggested, reaching toward her. "Ron, you and Ginny put your hands next to Hermione's."

They all looked at him in confusion. "What are you going to do, mate?" Ron asked quietly.

"I'm going to build up power and let you feel its vibration. It isn't a particular spell and doesn't require an incantation – it's just power. Maybe doing this will help you understand how different wandless magic feels from what we normally do. Hold your hands next to each other." When they complied, he grunted, his face seriously concentrated, then began to pant a bit. A moment later, his face red with exertion, he quickly passed his claw-like hand over their grouped hands. They drew their hands back quickly with exclamations of pain, shaking their hands as if they'd been burned. Harry instantly dropped the spell.

"I'm sorry! Did I hurt you?" he asked in alarm. "I didn't think it would be painful, or I wouldn't have done it!"

"No, but it *stung*," Hermione said, staring at her palm. "It was weird, as if my hand had been hit by . . . I don't know, a hard smack with a strap or something, not like an electrical shock. It was very powerful. Does it sting you, Harry?"

Harry was busy kissing the palm of Ginny's hand in apology. When he looked up, he said, "No. I feel a. . .what? Um. . .a kind of rhythmic vibration. It seems to match my heartbeat." He cupped his hand and passed it over his other hand, shaking his head, his expression mystified. "It doesn't hurt my hand. I don't understand it."

"That rhythmic thing makes sense, since magic is in our blood," Ginny commented.

"Maybe it doesn't hurt *you* because it's part of you," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"It seemed to be hard for you to do that, Harry," Ron said, his face confused. "When I saw you do those spells before, I didn't think it required such an effort. It certainly didn't look like it did."

"The effort was partly because I did it without being angry or scared, and partly because I was working hard to hold back the power so it wouldn't hurt you," Harry said quietly. "That was a taste of it, just a taste. If I poured on the power to create that vortex and didn't hold it back the way I did just now, I don't know what it would have done to your hands. I just wanted to push your hands a bit, that's all – that's what I was trying to do, just a little push. That's why I passed my hand over yours so quickly, so it would be a little push, not a big one. I don't know why it stung."

Ron stood up and walked across the room. "Maybe the problem was just that we were too close to you. Send that 'little push' to me over here, mate. I want to see how strong it really is."

"It may knock you down, Ron. Are you sure?" Harry warned. He stood up and faced his best friend.

"I know you won't hurt me," Ron said confidently, spreading his feet wide in a braced stance. "Let's go."

"OK," Harry said. "Just don't stand so close to the fireplace. I don't want you to bang your head or anything." After Ron moved, Harry built up his power and held his hand toward Ron for no longer than a heartbeat, knocking him back several feet. Ron landed in a heap on a pouf, just barely managing to stay on it without hitting the floor.

"Bloody hell! It felt as if Hagrid shoved me!" Ron said, grinning.

"Are you OK?" Harry asked, crossing to help Ron to his feet.

"Yeah! That's wicked, Harry. We're going to have to work on that one!"

"Yes, please, Harry, teach us how to do wandless spells!" Hermione asked fervently.

"OK, if you want. No problem," Harry said.

"What about those shields that stopped the Killing Curse," Ron urged, glad Harry was willing to talk about how he did what he did without getting too upset.

"Those Dark Arts books belonged to Voldemort, you know," Harry replied, and saw his friends nod in reply. "I found a shield charm in it that was very strong, but it wasn't strong enough to block the major curses. I've been working on it myself, trying to make it stronger, and apparently it's working. There's a Sphere Shield Charm that's even better. You cast it around yourself when you need protection from all sides. It's not solid enough to withstand the Killing Curse either, but I've been working on that one as well. It's terribly difficult to do, a very fiddly charm. If you waver the least bit, it dissolves, but if you hold it correctly, it's brilliant."

"If those charms aren't strong enough to withstand the Killing Curse, how did you block it, then?" Ron pressed.

Harry shrugged. "I think it was mostly luck, and the timing and angle of the spell that deflected the Killing Curse. Those spells shouldn't be strong enough to block it yet, but I'm still working on them."

"How are you making these shields stronger?" Hermione asked, fascinated that Harry was developing existing charms into something far more effective.

"I can't explain it. It's more of a 'feel' thing than anything else, but I've been doing research on spell creation, spell improvement, that kind of thing, as well. To improve those spells, I've done a little bit of this and a little bit of that," he said, shrugging, "and then testing the spells on conjured rats. Dumbledore showed me how to test spells without using actual Killing Curses so we wouldn't hurt each other when we're working together, but I've been working on these particular shields by myself. Basically, I've just worked on concentrating the magic more, putting more power behind it, trying different incantations with them to help them last longer and be more impervious to spells."

"And they worked?" Hermione said, clearly impressed.

"Yeah," he said with a shrug.

"Amazing," Hermione breathed.

"Yeah, you should have seen him, 'Mione! He was incredible!" Ron enthused.

"Ron?" Harry said, his face suddenly very weary.

"Yeah?"

"Theory of magic is fine, but discussing the battle itself? I just can't deal with it right now, OK?"

"Yeah, Harry, sorry," Ron said, instantly abashed.

"It's late, and you're all exhausted," Hermione said, "Let's go upstairs. We can talk more another time."

"Sounds good to me," Ginny said, getting up and stretching. "I'm knackered."

"Nope, you're beautiful," Harry murmured as he wrapped his arms around her. He bent his head down next to hers and whispered, "I love you, sweetheart." It was still their secret, something he wasn't ready to share even with his best friends.

"I love you, too," she replied equally quietly, turning her face for his kiss and holding on to him for a long moment.

Hermione noticed a new glow on Ginny's face, a truly surprising thing given what she'd been through and her state of exhaustion. And Harry – in spite of everything he'd been through, his

weariness, his heartache, the horrible memories of what he'd been through, he was holding Ginny so tenderly, and seemed truly content in her arms, his depression and weariness apparently lifting while he was in her embrace. Hermione watched the two of them a moment more, then looked up at Ron. "Something's changed," she whispered.

"Yeah, I've noticed," Ron agreed quietly. "We can talk about that later too."

"Harry, why won't you go with us?" Ginny pleaded at breakfast the next morning. "There won't be anyone here but Dobby while we're gone."

"That's OK," he said, staring down into his bowl of porridge. He was very withdrawn this morning.

"What are you going to do while we're gone?" Ron asked, tilting his head to see under Harry's fringe.

"Dunno. Study, maybe," Harry replied. "N.E.W.T.'s wait for no wizard, right, Hermione?" he said with an attempt at a grin.

"Harry," she said adamantly. "All work and no play makes Harry a dull boy. If I'm willing to take a day off from studying to go shopping for your house – might I remind you, it's for *your* house? – then you certainly can take the time off as well."

Harry bent his head, his clutching fingers tangled in his hair, his body tense. "You don't understand."

"What don't we understand, mate?" Ron asked quietly.

"I just. . .I can't. . . . I just want to be alone." He finally raised his head and looked at his friends. His eyes were dark green pools of misery. He hadn't slept well and he'd been gloomy ever since he got up.

"To do what? Brood? Be depressed? Come on, you need some ice cream and sunshine!" Ginny said, tugging on his arm. When he ignored her, she squirmed her way under his arm and got in his lap, pulling his head down until he was nose to nose with her. "You're coming with us, and that's final!" She wiggled defiantly in his lap, nibbling on the end of his nose and his chin as she did so.

"You're going to get your hair in my porridge," Harry said, the faintest hint of a smile starting to tickle the corner of his mouth as he lifted her long hair and pulled it in front of her shoulder, away from his porridge.

Ginny noticed his smile and kissed that corner of his mouth. "Ah, I'm beginning to get through to you!" she said, moving the kiss to the centre of his mouth and getting more serious for a moment, then taking his lower lip in her teeth and pulling on it.

"Ow!" he said in mild protest. "You're wounding me, woman!"

"Come shopping with us or I'll do worse, and you know I can," she threatened, her eyes twinkling as she rubbed noses with him and then very deliberately smeared his glasses with the tip of her nose.

"Well, that was simply uncalled for," he said mildly, but that hint of a smile was growing.

"Oh, you haven't seen anything yet, Mr. Potter," she vowed, tangling her fingers in his hair and rocking his head from side to side. "Are you going to come quietly, or am I going to have to get rough with you?"

"Oh, please, get rough with me, it sounds like fun," he said, finally chuckling at her antics.

"Yeah, it does, actually," she said, leaning in for another kiss. "Sorry about your glasses."

"They'll clean," he said with a shrug.

"Please, Harry? Come with us?" she said sweetly, all aggression forgotten for the moment.

He was quiet for a long moment, gazing steadily into her charming brown eyes. He finally signed and capitulated. "All right, I'll come."

"Good," she said in satisfaction. "I would have hated to have to hurt you." She kissed him resoundingly, making him laugh again, then got out of his lap so he could finish his breakfast. And she had, indeed, got her hair in the porridge and had to remove it with a Cleansing Charm, much to Harry's amusement.

A couple of hours later, Molly, Ginny, Harry, Hermione and Ron were on Diagon Alley, going from shop to shop looking for ways to brighten up the Grimmauld Place house. The first thing they did upon reaching Diagon Alley was to buy Ginny a new wand, since hers had been lost in the lake. Then they went to a shop selling paint, wallpaper and curtain fabric, where they'd picked a soft buttercream colour for the walls and a beautiful rich burgundy fabric with a design worked in gold thread for the curtains. They also chose golden sheer curtains to hang behind the heavy curtains so that, when the curtains were open, the rooms would be bright but the sunlight would be softened. With those hard decisions out of the way, they were off to find decorative items such as pictures, paintings, posters, tapestries, anything bright and cheerful to hang on the walls of Harry's house. The boys favoured Quidditch posters, the girls favoured paintings of flowers and animals, and Molly favoured country scenes. Harry bought some of each, to have a variety of things in his house.

"I never knew shopping could be so much fun," he said as he paid for the last paintings they were planning to buy on this trip. His mood had brightened considerably once they started finding things he liked for the house. "Who's ready for some ice cream?"

"Me!" everyone cried.

"Next stop, Florian Fortescue's!" Harry cried, acting like a train conductor. His friends were being determinedly jolly, trying to draw him into a lighter mood. He knew Ron and Ginny had bad memories to overcome just as he did, so for their sakes he was doing his best to be upbeat and cheerful.

Harry had noticed people staring and pointing at him at various times during the day, but he'd done his best to ignore it, concentrating instead on his friends and their shopping discoveries. Once they were seated in Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, however, he could clearly hear what strangers were saying.

"Killed fifty men with his bare hands! Read it in the paper, I did!" one old woman seated at a nearby table said, pointing with her warty chin at Harry.

"Melted You-Know-Who's feet, he did," her friend replied. "Ain't it amazing? And he's right fair to look at too."

The two old women stared lasciviously at Harry, their eyes running up and down his frame, obviously inspecting every inch of him that they could see, and speculating raucously about the rest of him.

"Lookit the shoulders on 'im! And wouldn't you love to have him hold you against that chest of his? Oooo!" At this, the woman stopped speaking and fanned herself dramatically, laughing raucously as she did so.

"Tall, dark and handsome, that's the way heroes should be made!" the other woman said merrily. "Wonder if he'd stand up and turn around so we could see his bum? Don't ya love it when they wear them Muggle blue jeans instead of robes? Especially if they're tight! His could stand to be a bit tighter, but they're not too bad as they are!"

They cackled and elbowed each other, whispering – and none to quietly – more things about his anatomy that made Harry's cheeks flame.

"Lookit the size of his feet! You know what they say about THAT!" the first old crone guffawed. "Whoooo! What I wouldn't give to be forty years younger! HA!"

"Forty?" her friend retorted with a snort of laughter. "Try fifty! HA!"

By this time, all of Harry's friends had heard enough of the conversation to know why he was blushing so badly and squirming so miserably. Molly got up and stormed over to the old women's table.

"Do you have any idea how uncomfortable you're making that boy?" she demanded.

"So what? He can take it."

"He's a person with feelings. You should be ashamed of yourselves! Don't you have children?"

"Nope, never had any," the first old woman said.

"Me neither," said the second. "Never wanted none either. I'd take that 'un, though!" she said, cackling toothlessly.

"Well, I have several, and you've insulted their best friend. He's a good and decent boy and you have no right to say such awful things about him. Now stop it!" Molly demanded, and then whirled around, heading back for her own table.

"Mrs. Weasley, look out!" "Mum!" cried Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Ron as the crones both raised their wands to hex Molly. Harry threw a shield behind Molly and the spells bounced back on the old women. Both of them leaped screaming to their feet, cursing loudly as their own jinxes were joined by Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex. A spell from Hermione caused their ears to sprout rhubarb. Ron's jinx had them tap-dancing down the street, still cursing loudly. Harry and his friends collapsed in laughter.

"Well!" Molly said, laughing as she sat down. "Those old biddies deserved that! Well done, you lot!"

"But, Mum, they were talking about what happened as if they knew," Ginny said uneasily. "I mean, none of us who were there have talked to anyone but you, Dumbledore, Hermione and Dobby. How do they know?"

"I know how they found out," Hermione said, her expression gloomy. "I was trying to keep it from you so it wouldn't spoil your day, Harry."

"What is it?" he snapped, preparing himself for the worst.

"The *Daily Prophet* ran a word-for-word transcription of your testimony yesterday in today's paper," she said, pulling the paper out of her bag and handing it to him.

"Oh no," Harry said, his heart sinking while his stomach boiled nervously. His eyes raced down the page, picking up titbits here and there, Ginny reading over his shoulder. "That explains why we've been stared at so much today," he said glumly, handing the paper to Ron.

"How did they get this information, though?" Ron asked as he looked through the article.

"It sounds like something Rita Skeeter would write," Hermione grumbled. "I thought I'd taken care of that problem."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

Hermione looked cautiously at Harry. Seeing only curiosity there, not anger, she took a deep breath and explained. "When her articles came out about Harry and, um," she glanced uneasily at Harry again, "and Casey, I contacted Professor Dumbledore and told him she's an illegal Animagus."

"What did he do about it?" Harry asked.

"He turned her in to the Ministry. I don't know what happened after that," Hermione said, "except that we haven't seen any articles by her since then."

"You lot haven't heard what happened to that woman?" Molly asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"After those stories she did on Harry and Casey last summer? The Ministry decided that she hadn't broken any laws except for being an illegal Animagus," Molly explained.

"Casey and her family and a lot of other people *died* because of what she wrote, and she didn't break any other laws?" Harry growled in sudden rage.

"Harry, dear, please – calm down. That's the way the law is written. I didn't say I agreed with it, or that it was right," Molly said in a placating voice. "She's being punished for being an unregistered Animagus. That's all they could charge her with."

"What's her punishment?" Hermione asked.

"She was sent to Azkaban for several months, and then she has to do a year of community service, teaching reading to handicapped Muggles. And she's had a spell put on her to keep her from ever transforming again," Molly replied.

"That's not enough," Ron snapped, glancing at Harry's stony face. "Mate, you all right?"

"Yeah," Harry replied in a low voice. "It's not fair. So many innocent people died. . . ." His voice broke and he stopped speaking.

Ginny wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly. Ron put a companionable hand on his friend's shoulder, and Hermione reached across the table and held his hand, hoping to comfort him. Molly looked at Harry with her heart in her eyes.

"I know it doesn't seem just," Molly said, "but it's more punishment than she would normally have received. Tutoring the Muggles was added on because of all the harm her articles have done."

"Why didn't you tell us about this earlier?" Ron asked.

"I didn't want to bring up bad memories," she said, shrugging her shoulders helplessly. "I knew Harry was trying to put all those things behind him, and I didn't want to . . . ." She quieted, seemingly at a loss for words.

Harry looked up at her, then sighed. "It's OK, Mrs. Weasley," he told her. "I've been thinking about how to stop her for quite a while. I suppose the Ministry's punishment is probably as good as I could hope for. . .although I was hoping she'd get a lifetime in Azkaban." He shrugged, kissed Ginny on top of her head as he hugged her, and glanced around at his friends. "At least she's out of business now. That's a relief."

"Why didn't the paper run a story on her capture and punishment?" Hermione asked. "I've been reading it every day looking for information on what happened to her."

"The paper wouldn't want such information to get out, would they?" Ginny said wisely.

"That's right, dear. I suspect they worked hard to keep that story quiet. I only know about it because Arthur told me." Molly replied. "Word did get round the Ministry about it. I thought Professor Dumbledore would have told you lot before now."

"Maybe he thought it would upset Harry to be reminded about all that," Hermione suggested. "So how did the paper get this article, if she didn't do it?"

"I don't know," Harry replied, but in his heart he said, *Percy*.

No sooner had he thought it than Ron said, "Percy!"

"What?" Molly said.

"Percy is the leak. It says this is the 'transcript by Minister Bones' Clerk, Percival Weasley.'"

Molly gasped. "Percy wouldn't do anything like that. . . ."

"Wouldn't he?" Ron snapped. "Harry, you said you saw him there, right?"

Harry nodded, hoping he wouldn't have to say much more.

"How did he act?"

"He, um, he acted very, um, professional," Harry said lamely.

"Did he smile or wave or even act as if he knew you?" Ron pressed.

"Erm. . .no."

Ron turned to his mum. "There. See? What a prat!"

It was a much less joyful group that arrived back at Number 12 Grimmauld Place later that afternoon. Winky answered the door.

"Hello, Winky," Harry said, fighting his bad mood so he could welcome her kindly. "How are you?"

"Winky isn't quite certain, Master," the house elf said nervously.

"Why is that?" Harry said, leading her into the living room and dropping his packages on the couch. He sighed and tried to clear his mind of the messy situation the article in the paper was causing, so he could deal with Winky and her problems. The others followed him in, finding seats around the room.

"Professor Dumbledore told Winky she would be working here now, and that Harry Potter was Winky's new master," she said. "Is I in service again? Or is I free?"

"You're free, Winky. I don't want any slaves," Harry said, sitting down so he was on her eye level.

"But Dobby is a slave now. Winky wants to belong to someone too!" she wailed.

"Winky, don't you want to be free?" Harry asked gravely.

"No! Winky has never wanted to be free. Winky wants a home!"

"You have a home here now. Don't you like it here? You can go back to Hogwarts if you'd rather be there," he replied, not certain how to respond. "Professor Dumbledore and I thought you might enjoy working here with Dobby, but you don't have to stay if you don't want to. I want you to be happy."

"Winky doesn't belong at Hogwarts! Winky doesn't belong anywhere!" she wailed, pulling her skirt up over her face and bawling so hard her tiny shoulders shook.

Harry glanced around at his friends. He saw sympathy but no help there. Even Hermione was sitting in shocked silence. "Hermione? Do you have any ideas?"

"No. I've talked to her about how wonderful it is to be free many times. So has Dobby. It hasn't helped at all," Hermione said sadly.

"Will you understand, then, if I do something you don't believe in?" Harry asked in a quiet voice, looking at her quite seriously. She grasped his meaning and, after a moment's hesitation, nodded slowly. "Thanks," he replied. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for something he honestly did not want to do. "Winky? Do you want to work here?"

"No, sir."

"What do you want?"

"Winky wants to belong to somebody."

"You mean to be married to somebody? To belong that way?"

"No, sir. To belong, as Winky did to the Crouch household."

"To be someone's slave."

"Yes sir. That is a house elf's place."

Harry sighed and was silent a few minutes. Finally, he looked around at his friends and saw no disapproval in their eyes. "OK, Winky. Do you want to be my slave, and work for me along with Dobby? You'll work wherever I live, or wherever I tell you, either here, or at Hogwarts, or at my aunt and uncle's place on Privet Drive in Surrey, or other places I may live, for the rest of your life. Is that what you want?"

"You is willing to take a disgraced house elf into your household?" Winky asked slowly, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"I don't see you as a disgraced house elf, but yes, I'm willing to take you into my household," Harry agreed.

"YES! Oh, YES, Master! Winky will work hard! Winky is a good cook! Winky does laundry ever so well! Winky will clean this house until it shines!" Her face was happy for the first

time that any of them had ever seen. Her eyes gleamed with delight, her posture straightened and suddenly, she was a very pretty house elf.

"Great. I'm glad that's settled. Now, I do have a few house rules," Harry said in a serious tone.

"Yes, Master. Winky is listening. Winky will remember." She stared at him earnestly.

"First, you will not call me or anyone else 'Master' or 'Mistress.' You will not bow to anyone. I will give you wages, clothes and days off – don't start crying, Winky, the clothes won't mean you're not part of my household!" he exclaimed as she burst into tears. He waited until she was calm again and then went on. "I don't want you wearing tea towels or pillow cases. I want you in comfortable clothes that make you happy. I consider you and Dobby to be my friends, not my slaves, but you both belong to my household now. I will take good care of you. In return, I'd like you to keep my house clean, and do whatever else house elves normally do." He watched her take in this information and begin to understand it. "And there's something else. You must keep my secrets, and the secrets of anyone I allow in this house. This is my house, but there are meetings of a group here, and that group and what goes on here must remain secret. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course! It is a house elf's duty to keep her master's secrets! Winky will do as Master. . ."

"Ah-ah-ah – no 'master,'" Harry reminded her, shaking his head at her but smiling.

"What shall Winky call M. . .erm. . .sir?"

"My name is Harry Potter. Dobby calls me that. It works just fine. Call everyone here by their name. If you don't know their names, you can call them 'sir' or 'ma'am' until you find out their names. OK?"

"Yes, Harry Potter sir! Thank you, Harry Potter sir!" Winky was beaming.

Harry glanced up and noticed Hermione was smiling too. *Whew, I'm glad she's taking this situation so well. She could've made my life miserable, and I never asked to have house elves in the first place!,* Harry thought as he gave her a small smile in return.

"All right, Winky. First order of business. I want all the portraits off the walls, including the ones that are stuck to the wall with Permanent Sticking Charms, like the one of Mrs. Black. Can you and Dobby undo that charm?"

Winky nodded, her eyes bright. "Oh yes, Ma. . . Harry Potter, that is a house elf charm, we knows how to undo it."

He grinned. "That's great! Remove Mrs. Black's portrait straightaway, OK? That's the one in the front hall that has curtains across it. She'll scream at you a lot, but just ignore her."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Does Harry Potter want her to be quiet?"

"Absolutely! Can you do that?" he said in pleased surprise.

"I believe so. There are certain charms house elves use on portraits that are to be stored so the people in the paintings don't get upset by being in the dark. One of those spells should take care of it. Dobby and Winky will work on it," she promised.

"That would be brilliant!" Harry said sincerely. "I'd like you and Dobby to make taking the portraits down your first job, other than cooking and basic cleaning. We're going to repaint the inside of this house and do some renovations, and hang different pictures and curtains. There's a portrait of a wizard named Phineas Nigellus in the room Ron and I use. That portrait needs to be put in. . .um. . .which room?" he asked his friends, looking up at them.

"How about the formal dining room? We don't use it often, but he'll be close at hand for messages if we need him," Molly suggested.

"That's a good idea. Thanks." He turned back to Winky. "OK, that's where to put him. The others need to be wrapped up for storage and put in the basement or attic, unless Professor Dumbledore tells you to save some others to keep on the walls. If he says anything like that, then don't put those paintings away. We'll just find some room that isn't used much to hang them in." He glanced at his friends. "I don't know about you lot, but I'm tired of all those Slytherins glaring at me."

"Too right!" Ron agreed.

Harry turned back to Winky. "The Black Family Tree that's upstairs? Get that off the wall, roll it up and put it in the attic, too. When the walls are clear, they'll need to be cleaned so we can paint them. That should keep you two busy for a while, right?" Harry smiled at the house elf.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir! Winky and Dobby will get to work right away!"

"Fantastic! Thank you."

Winky stood waiting for something.

"What is it, Winky? That's all I had to tell you," Harry said, perplexed.

"Winky is waiting to be dismissed," she said simply.

"Oh, OK. You're dismissed," he said with a shrug. When she was gone, he smiled ruefully. "I had no idea it would be so hard to manage house elves!"

"You did wonderfully, Harry. And although you know how I feel about house elf slavery, you did Winky a kindness by taking her into your household. I've never seen her so happy," Hermione said.

"Thanks," Harry replied. "I was most worried about your reaction, honestly. I knew what I needed to do with her and with Dobby, given Dobby's situation, but I didn't know how you'd react."

"Well done, mate!" Ron said, clapping Harry on the shoulder as he headed for the kitchen. "I'm off to see what kind of goodies they've whipped up for us! Coming, Hermione?" He

reached for her hand and she took it, then pulled it around her shoulders. They walked with their arms around each other to the kitchen.

"Harry, Ginny, why don't we take these pictures to the rooms we bought them for and see how they look?" Molly said as she poked through their purchases.

"You two go ahead," Harry said, his eyes hardening for some reason. "I have some other things to do."

"Can I help?" Ginny said eagerly.

"No, thanks. You and your mum can have fun decorating the house," he said, kissing her briefly on the forehead and leaving the room.

Ginny could see his shoulders slumping as he left the room. "Something's wrong with him," she worried aloud as he walked away.

"Yes, but I think right now he wants to be alone, or he wouldn't have sent you off with me," Molly said wisely. "He really didn't want to go with us today, either. He has something on his mind. He probably needs time to sort it out."

Harry went into the library, closed the door behind him, and plopped down in a big leather chair with wide arms. He pulled his feet up onto the seat, resting his chin on his upraised knees, his face growing sadder by the minute. Before long, he'd placed his glasses on the table by his chair, and pressed his face against his knees, his body shaking with suppressed sorrow. *I can't go back to Hogwarts*, he thought. *I can't go back to Hogwarts. I can't go back to Hogwarts.* He felt as though his heart were breaking in a million pieces. His world was collapsing around him. He could not go back to school.

Passing the library door on her way upstairs with another armload of pictures, Ginny heard a small, odd sound in the room. She set the pictures down and knocked hesitantly on the door.

"Who's in there? Are you all right?" she murmured. When she got no answer, she timidly cracked open the door. There with its back to her was a large leather chair. Just past the edge of its back, she could see a shock of tousled black hair shaking with Harry's anguish. "Oh, baby, what's wrong?" she cried, running to him. She sat on the wide arm of the chair and wrapped her arms around him, leaning her head on the back of his, her long red hair trailing down his back and across his shoulder.

He didn't react to her presence at first, but then he glanced up at her and pulled her into his lap, not crying, but trembling all over.

"Harry, what happened? What's wrong?"

"I can't go back to school," he said in a dark, low voice.

"Why not?"

"Everybody. . .all those kids. . .they know I . . . killed their parents now. The paper listed all of the names. Everybody knows. I can't face that," he said miserably.

She could think of nothing to say. She held him close and stroked his hair and back, comforting him the only way she could think of. After a while, she said, "You know, Ron's and my names were in that article too. They'll be treating us the same way. You aren't alone in this."

"You didn't kill anyone. I did."

"But because of Ron and me and the others who were there, some of these kids' parents are in Azkaban. They'll be furious with us for that, too," Ginny said, getting a bit tense about returning to Hogwarts herself. She took a deep, steadying breath. "But you know what? Dumbledore will find some way to fix it. He always does."

"He doesn't see everything that goes on. You know that."

"He sees nearly everything, and the rest we'll tell him. It will work out. It may be a bit rough at first, but we'll get through it," she assured him.

"Ginny? Ginny?" Molly's voice called in the hall. "Where are you?"

"In here, Mum," she replied.

Harry's shoulders tensed up. Ginny remembered her mum saying he wanted to be by himself. "I'm sorry, Harry. I guess I should leave," she said, realizing why he'd suddenly become tense.

"No, it's OK," he muttered, straightening up and composing his face as well as he could. "Hi," he said, attempting his normal cheerful voice and failing miserably.

"Oh dear. What's wrong? Or shall I just leave you alone?" Molly said uncomfortably.

"Harry says he can't go back to Hogwarts and I just realized he's right – Ron and I are going to have problems there too," Ginny said, growing more nervous about the situation the longer she thought about it.

"What are you talking about?"

"The paper named all three of us. The kids at school will know their parents are in jail or dead because of us. We have enough trouble with the Slytherins as it is. Now it will be really dangerous for us to be at Hogwarts," Ginny said.

"Don't you worry about it, either of you. Albus and Minerva are already making plans for dealing with the situation. I had an owl from them just a few minutes ago," Molly assured them.

"Really? What did they say?" Ginny asked, her eyes lighting with hope. Trust Dumbledore to know how to fix things!

"They said they knew the three of you, and Remus, as well, would have that very worry, and with good reason. But Harry saved Severus Snape's life with his vision – did you know that, Harry? And Severus has already spoken with Professor Dumbledore about the little talk he's

going to have with the Slytherins. He knows he has several in his house who have already become Death Eaters. He's going to find a way to deal with them and protect you, as well."

"But won't that blow his cover with Voldemort, if he's suddenly protecting Harry?" Ginny asked, confused.

"They're working it out. Don't you worry about it. That's exactly what Albus said, as well – he said to tell you three not to worry about it, that that's his job, and he's doing a masterful job of it – that's exactly what he said, too," she said with a smile.

Harry rubbed Ginny's back comfortingly. "Yeah," he said. "Dumbledore can take care of things. Let's get this house cleaned up and decorated, OK?" He was doing his best to act cheerful again.

"Staying busy is usually best in such situations," Molly said with an encouraging smile. "Come on, then. Let's see where you want your pictures, Harry, shall we?"

Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Molly, Winky and Dobby had worked hard all day on re-organizing the house, moving furniture, deciding what would be sold, what would go into storage, and what could be left to deal with another time. Phineas Nigellus and the other portraits in the bedrooms had all been removed, Phineas Nigellis being rehung in the dining room. Harry didn't like having portraits in his bedroom – it made him feel as though they were spying on him, especially Phineas Nigellis. He thought everyone else probably felt the same way, so he had all the sleeping quarters cleared of portraits, to be replaced by posters or paintings of animals or country scenes – anything that couldn't talk back to the occupants. By tea time, everyone was tired but happy with the progress they'd made. Dinner was fun, with Remus and Tonks joining them. The kitchen was full of the smell of good food and the sound of laughter and friendly banter.

"I'm knackered," Ron said, stretching and yawning hugely. "I'm off to bed. Good night, all."

"Me, too," Harry and Ginny said at the same time, then laughed. Hermione stood up when they did, saying she still had some studying to do before bed.

After everyone exchanged good nights and Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione had worked out a schedule of who got the shower first, since they'd become rather dirty working in the house, they all headed upstairs. After a while, Harry, who'd insisted on being last one to shower, came into his and Ron's room and plopped on his bed.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron said with a grin as Harry threw back his covers, climbed into bed and settled down to sleep.

"Yeah. Thanks for the help, Ron. The house is going to look so much better soon," he said. A jaw-cracking yawn escaped him. "Good night."

"Yeah," Ron said, a chuckle in his voice for some reason as he settled into bed. "Good night."

Harry was soon sound asleep. He was fighting his way through bad dreams about being back at Hogwarts and being called a murderer over and over when something started tickling his nose. He brushed at it, thinking there must be a moth in the room. "G'way," he muttered

grumpily, keeping his eyes closed and staying asleep as well as possible while rubbing his itchy nose. He relaxed again, his breathing deepening, his muscles slack and comfortable as he searched for a pleasant dream. There was that maddening itch on his nose again. "Stupid moth. G'way!" he grumbled, rubbing at his nose again. He turned over on his side, hoping his nose being buried in the pillow would discourage the annoying insect. Nope. Now it was after his ear. With the swiftness of his Seeker's skills, he grabbed at the moth, only to discover a giggling girl attached to it. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw Ginny sitting on the edge of his bed, tickling him with a strand of her long hair.

"Ginny! What are you doing here?" he asked in panicked confusion, rolling onto his back and rubbing his eyes to make certain he was actually awake now.

She just giggled, tickling his nose with her hair, then rubbing the ends of that glossy red strand tantalizingly all over his face, around and in his ear and then down his neck, tracing the strong V at his collarbone, then circling his Adam's apple as she trailed her ticklish lock back up the other side of his neck to his other ear.

As she was doing these very enticing things to him, Harry glanced over at Ron's bed. "Where's Ron?"

"Waking Hermione up in some similar fashion, I imagine," she said, giggling again.

"Huh?" Harry half sat up, propping himself up on one elbow and studying her face. "What's going on?"

"You, Mr. Potter, are the victim, erm, I mean 'lucky recipient,' of a Weasley Plot," she said, a huge grin on her face.

"A what?" Harry was feeling stupider by the minute.

"A Weasley Plot. You should feel honoured. We don't often spring Weasley Plots on non-family members, and certainly not plots as nice as this one is."

He lay back down, throwing his arm over his eyes. "I'm dreaming, that's what it is. It's just a weird dream. Yeah," he said, rolling back onto his side. "Nice dream, but a bit odd. Hmm," he sighed contentedly as he snuggled back into his pillow trying to get back to sleep. "I wouldn't mind having more like it."

"It's no dream, Potter," Ginny teased, poking him in the ribs. "Wake up!"

Harry turned onto his back and squinted up at her. "Password?"

"Cat in jumper. It's really me."

"So what's this plot, then?" he asked, a bemused smile on his face. The moonlight through the window haloed her in red-gold flame. She looked even more beautiful than usual.

"I've brought you a present," she teased, trying in vain to stifle her giggles.

"But it's not my birthday or anything," he said cautiously. He was finally awake enough to realize what was going on, but that didn't mean he believed it was really happening. It had to be a dream. These things just didn't happen in real life. Did they?

"That's OK. It's something you need, I think. I certainly hope you like it." She seemed to be getting nervous now.

"What is it?"

She hesitated, then blushed and said, "You have to unwrap it." She handed him the end of the belt of her tatty old dressing gown. "Pull here."

A dazed smile spread across Harry's face. "You're not. . .you don't mean. . .you. . ."

"Don't you ever follow directions, Potter?" she said in a dead-on impression of Snape.

A loud snort of laughter escaped Harry before he could stifle the sound. He looked at the door nervously.

"Don't worry – I've put a Colloportus charm on the door and a Silencio on the room."

Harry looked at her in amazement. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes." She sat nervously, almost humbly before him, waiting for him to make the next move. She'd made a brave offer. Now it was up to him to make a choice.

He tugged gently on the belt of her dressing gown and it fell open, revealing a Ginny he'd seen before only once – when Parvati showed up Polyjuiced to look like her. "Oh, baby. Are you certain?" he breathed. His heart was hammering in his chest. It seemed as if all the air had gone out of the room – it was hard to breathe. Harry felt his face flame in a blush and his body quiver with nerves – and an unbelievable excitement.

"Yes. And I'm ready. I told you, I have been for months. I took that potion back in October, so I'm fine until next October," she said seriously. She trembled a little, glancing shyly at Harry. "Um. . .do you like your present?"

Harry swallowed, his throat suddenly dry as a desert. "Do I like it?" he breathed, pulling her down into his arms on top of him. Her hair spilled around them in a glorious red curtain, the moonlight filtering through it making its gossamer strands glow with a soft inner fire. "I love it! I love *you*." He kissed her, feeling her sigh in relief and pleasure as his hands glided deliciously over her skin, sliding the dressing gown off her shoulders and tossing it on the floor. "*Lumos*," he muttered, and his wand on the bedside table lit softly.

"Why'd you do that?" she asked.

"I want to see you. Do you mind?" he asked, gazing seriously into her eyes.

"No. I want to see you too," she said, smiling as she slid her hands under the t-shirt he'd worn to bed and ran her hands over his muscular chest. "You're beautiful."

"I'm a bloke. I can't be beautiful," he protested mildly, nipping her neck playfully.

"You are, though. Inside and out. You're gorgeous. And I love you."

"You're the one who's gorgeous. Look at you," he said admiringly, laying her beside him and sitting up to study her from top to bottom. "Wait a second," he said suddenly.

She gasped, startled at his sudden change in attitude. "What?"

"Turn over. I have to see if it's real," he said earnestly. She gave him an odd look, but obediently rolled over onto her stomach. He sighed in delight. "It is real," he chuckled, then leaned down to kiss the tiny heart-shaped strawberry birthmark on the back of her hip just below her narrow waist. "Mmmm, I knew it would taste good," he murmured as he savoured the pretty little mark.

Ginny giggled. "That tickles."

"Serves you right for tickling me awake," he replied, rolling her onto her back and kissing her soundly.

"You have too many clothes on," she murmured between kisses as she started tugging at his t-shirt.

"That's easy enough to fix," he breathed as he kissed her more deeply. Her hands ran up his back, shoving the shirt out of the way, leaving tremors of pleasure on his skin. "Oh, sweetheart," he sighed. "I do love you so." He sat up and pulled the shirt off the rest of the way, then slid off his boxers self-consciously. He shivered a bit, nervous, but excited; scared, but filled with soaring courage. She loved him. She was giving him the best gift she could possibly give. He slowly smoothed her long hair off of her shoulders, exposing her lustrous white breasts to the soft glow of the wandlight. He'd touched their bare skin before, even kissed them through her clothes, but never seen them completely uncovered except when Parvati was posing as Ginny. There had never been the chance for such intimacy. He hesitantly touched the edge of her breast, cupping it as if weighing it, sliding his hand around to feel the contours. He watched the soft mound move in response to the gentle examination of his hand. As his hand continued to explore her breast, he sat quietly studying her in wonder for a while, then felt her eyes on him doing the same thing. "Do I pass inspection?" he asked nervously.

She smiled and nodded, raising her arms to pull him to her. The feeling of her skin against his was more delicious than anything he'd ever imagined. His hands and mouth took on a life of their own, exploring the lovely body next to his.

"I love you too," she whispered as she nibbled the shell of his ear and licked his neck while her hands slid down to investigate the shape of his well-muscled bum.

Across the hall, Ron was still rocking from foot to foot nervously. Yeah, he was sure Harry would welcome Ginny to his bed, but would Hermione welcome him? He'd never been so scared in his whole life, and that included facing all those Death Eaters in France. A board creaked under his foot as he wavered in indecision. He couldn't go back. He had nowhere to go but the loo if he left here. What should he do?

"Mmm," Hermione murmured in her sleep, moving around sensuously. She giggled a bit, "Yes, right there, sweetheart. Mmmm."

Ron's eyes widened in surprise. She was having an interesting dream, from the sound of it. Maybe that would be a help to him. He leaned over her as she lay sleeping, and blew gently in her ear. Her face furrowed a bit as the feeling bothered her, but she soon relaxed. He blew in her ear again, then slid her hair away from her neck and kissed her there, just under her ear, where he knew she liked it. She rolled over on her back and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him down into the bed with her.

"It's about time you made up your mind," she chuckled just before lacing her fingers in his hair and kissing him seriously.

"You were awake? You were pretending?" he said, surprised, when she let him up for air.

Hermione just giggled. "You can't sneak up on me, Ronnie. Your feet go 'clomp clomp' even when you tiptoe in slippers." She glanced across the room. "Where's Ginny?"

"Doing something similar with Harry," he replied as he nuzzled her neck, making her gasp with pleasure. "Erm, by the way? You have taken that potion, haven't you? Ginny said you had."

"Yes, ages ago. You boys are so slow," she said with a grin, pulling him down to kiss her again. Her hands slid inside his dressing gown and both of them gasped as she hit bare skin. "Are you naked under there?"

"I thought that was how you were supposed to dress for such things," he said, laughing and tossing his dressing gown aside. He was blushing all over his body, but he didn't care. She was welcoming him to her bed. Life just couldn't get much sweeter, could it?

"Hush! You'll get us caught!" she warned.

"Nah, I Colloportused the door and Silencioed the room," he replied, his hands busily undoing the buttons of her pyjama top.

"Mmmmm. Sounds like you planned this out rather carefully," she said, shivering with the delicious sensations he was arousing.

"Um-hmm. Now stop talking and kiss me," he said, sliding her top off her shoulders and revelling in the feeling of her skin against his. "By the way, Hermione?"

"I thought you said to stop talking," she protested with a laugh.

"I just wanted to say. . .I love you, baby."

"Oh, Ron! I love you, too!" she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him to her. They kissed deeply, breathing each others breath, their hands starting to explore. They stopped and giggled when they realized Ron was just too tall for Hermione's bed. She grabbed her wand and enlarged the bed with a simple spell. Hermione had to keep reminding Ron that

she was happy when she moaned "that way." He kept thinking he was hurting her. Ron finally got over being nervous and began enjoying himself, much to their mutual delight.

Harry was awakened by the chiming of Ginny's watch. "Whassat?" he said blearily. There was a warm, comfortable weight nestled against his side and partly spread over his body. His nose was tickled by her hair when he turned his head to the side. "Sweetheart? Your watch is going off." He slid his hand down her arm and lifted her hand from his flat belly, kissing her palm tenderly. His other hand relished the feel of the bare skin of her back and the side of her breast, gliding over the satiny surfaces with tremendous pleasure, her hair lying across his arm like a warm silken shawl.

"Mmmm?"

"Your watch. Did you set an alarm?" He kissed her palm again, then nibbled on her fingers, finally biting just hard enough to wake her up a bit more.

"That felt quite nice until you bit me," she grumbled, chewing on his shoulder a bit in retaliation, but stroking his chest and arm lovingly at the same time.

"The alarm?"

"Oh, yeah. Ron and I need to swap rooms before the house elves get up," she said sleepily, pushing herself up and sitting on the side of bed, looking around for her dressing gown on the floor.

He lay there watching her, the wandlight casting soft glowing highlights across the contours of her body. He leaned over and kissed her bum as she bent to retrieve her dressing gown. She giggled.

"What was that for?" she asked as she turned toward him.

"It just needed to be done," he replied, a goofy grin on his face.

"You look like that in the morning and everyone will know," she teased.

"And the same to you, m'lady." He grew more serious. "How are we going to hide this? And how are we going to manage this when we get back to Hogwarts?"

"We'll think of something, sweetheart," she assured him.

"By the way," he said as she did up her robe. "How did you know . . .?"

"*Teen Witch Weekly*," she said with a laugh. "They have a section in each issue on 'How to Get What You Want' and 'How to Please Your Wizard' and things like that. But you can't see that section unless you're a certain age and have the code. Parvati showed them to me and gave me the code so I could read them."

"As much grief as that stupid rag has caused me," Harry mused, "I never thought I'd find anything about it to appreciate." He laughed. "I guess I'll have to revise my opinion now."

Ginny smiled at him, her eyes soft and dreamy. "You look so cute with your hair standing up all over."

"That's pretty much normal for me, though, isn't it?" he said with a chuckle.

"And I've always thought you were as cute as a guy could be." She studied his face for a long moment. "And I was right. Cute and gorgeous and sexy, that's you."

"The feeling's mutual," he said with a smile, his eyes following the curves of her body, knowing now how beautiful she was underneath her tatty dressing gown, even more beautiful than he'd dreamed.

"Good night, sweetie. Sleep well," she said, leaning down to kiss him.

"You too, baby. I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, sliding her fingers through his hair and down his cheek, then taking the spells off the room and leaving.

In the hall, Ron was waiting nervously. "I was worried. You're late coming out," he began.

"Sorry," she said, not looking the least bit repentant. "How did it go with Hermione? Everything OK?"

Ron blushed crimson but grinned widely. "Brilliant, that's all. Simply brilliant! You?"

"Whatever is the very best there possibly could be – it wouldn't hold a candle to this," she said, her eyes dreamy. "Thanks for helping, Ron."

"Thank you! You come up with the best Weasley Plots," he murmured, giving her a quick squeeze around the shoulders and kissing her on top of her head. "You're such a brilliant little witch. Good night."

She chuckled at his comment. "'Night."

Each went into their rooms. Harry was still awake, having just put his t-shirt and boxers back on. "Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks, mate."

"Yeah."

"Did Hermione. . .um. . .was it. . .um," Harry began uncertainly. "Never mind."

"She was glad to see me. It was brilliant," Ron said, a huge grin on his face as he pulled on his pyjamas and settled into bed. "You?"

"Yeah. Brilliant." Harry sighed happily as he lay back, his hands behind his head, remembering the night's events.

Hermione was sitting up when Ginny entered the room. "Well?"

"Well what?" Ginny replied, confused.

"How was it?"

"How was it for you?" Ginny countered with a grin.

"Amazing. Brilliant. Wonderful," Hermione said, smiling so hard she was glowing.

"Yeah, same here," Ginny agreed.

"Ginny – thanks. I mean that. What a fantastic plan," Hermione said earnestly.

"No problem. We definitely will have to do this again!" Ginny giggled, then fell over in her bed laughing. When she settled down, she got up and pulled on her pyjamas then crawled into bed, yawning hugely. "What an excellent way to lose sleep," she murmured.

"Right," Hermione agreed with a chuckle.

The next morning, the four teenagers met in the hall and went downstairs in pairs, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny. They did their best not to look too goofy, which resulted in them playing like little children, poking each other and giggling a lot. The adults noticed the change in atmosphere but decided to take it at face value – the kids had found some way to laugh in the face of all the problems waiting for them at Hogwarts.

Let them have their fun, Molly thought, smiling at their bright, happy faces. *They have enough trouble ahead, they should enjoy themselves while they can.*

Dobby and Winky had created a breakfast worthy of Hogwarts, with a huge variety of food in large quantities. Harry tipped some bacon onto his plate, then reached for the scrambled eggs at the same time Ginny was reaching for the toast. Their arms brushed and they both blushed hugely, smiling and saying "Sorry" in the same breath. Ron and Hermione had a similar incident over the sausage platter. Molly, Arthur and Remus looked on in amusement as the kids exchanged blushing glances and sudden smiles.

"Why are you four so happy this morning?" Molly asked innocently. "It's a pleasure to see all of you smiling so much."

"Erm. . ." Ron began, then looked to Hermione, Harry and Ginny for help.

"Well. . .," Hermione said, "um, we uh. . ."

Harry took a deep breath. "We decided not to let all this stuff mess up our lives," he said brightly. "Life is too short not to enjoy yourself as much as you can, right?" He looked around for support. His three schoolmates and Remus all nodded, Remus with a knowing twinkle in his eye. "So. . .we made a pact. We're going to have as much fun as we can and if we're the

only friends we have, that's OK. We'll be fine." He blew his breath out sharply, hoping he'd settled things in the adults' minds. Remus caught his eye and winked, and Harry gulped, doing his best to stop the blush he could feel starting to flare on his face.

"I think that's a grand idea," Molly said serenely, smiling at Winky as she poured tea in Molly's cup. "Winky, Dobby, this is a wonderful breakfast!"

All the others chorused their agreement. Winky ducked her head in embarrassment, mumbling her thanks as she curtsied.

Harry smiled. "Winky, didn't I say no bowing?"

"Winky did not bow, Harry Potter, sir. She curtsied," the elf said with great dignity.

Harry stifled a laugh. "As long as there are no bows involved."

"No, Harry Potter, sir, no bows!" she said brightly.

The rest of the day was spent by Molly, Dobby and Winky continuing the cleaning and rearranging of the house, while the four students sat in the library, their noses buried in books, catching up on studying they should have done over the holiday, but hadn't had time to get to. Despite having to dig through many huge books and write long essays with quills and ink bottles, each couple managed to find a way to hold hands, rub knees, tickle each other's ankles with their toes, and otherwise distract each other. Despite all the distractions, when they finally stopped working in order to eat their evening meal and pack for the trip back to school the next day, all their homework was done, which amazed all four of them. By the time everyone gathered for the evening meal, Mrs. Black's portrait and the Black Family Tree were off the walls and stored, as were the majority of the other portraits in the house, and the massive job of scrubbing the walls clean was well in hand.

"Mrs. Weasley, Dobby, Winky, the house looks so much better. Thank you!" Harry said with a smile as the elves set dinner on the table, Molly following them around trying to help. She simply wasn't used to having other people do the work in the kitchen.

"We will have the walls painted and the curtains made and hung very soon, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said with a huge smile. "It makes Dobby very happy to serve Harry Potter, sir. What else can Dobby do for Harry Potter and his friends?"

"I don't know right now, Dobby," Harry replied. "This meal looks fantastic. I don't know how you managed it with all the work you were doing in the house."

"House elves is very efficient, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said as he finished serving the meal. As he backed away, he almost bowed, but stopped himself just in time.

Harry grinned at him. "Well done, Dobby."

Harry wandered back into the library, running his fingers over the backs of the books there, then turned and surveyed the room. They hadn't done much with it beyond basic cleaning since the Order had started using the house, but Harry found it to be a very comfortable room. Hermione was seated in a corner reading some book that had caught her eye, Ron snoozing in

the chair beside her. Harry sat down at the library table in a straight wooden chair, his chin in his hand as he considered how they were going to brighten this room.

Ginny came bounding in, full of energy as usual, and, pushing him back from the table, sat on his lap, her legs straddling his. "Got your conk!" she said as her tongue flicked out and barely dampened the tip of his nose.

"And so you do," he chuckled as he tightened his arms around her and nuzzled her nose in return. "You're silly."

"Last chance to be silly before going back to school," she said brightly. "What shall we do that's absolutely, utterly silly?"

"I have no idea. Silly seems to be your department," he said, resting his hands on her slim waist and smiling into her dancing brown eyes.

"Ron, I. . ." Molly said as she came into the room. "Ginevra Weasley! What do you think you're doing?" she snapped.

"Nothing," Ginny said innocently.

"Get off him this instant," her mother ordered.

"Why? I sit on his lap all the time," Ginny protested. Seeing the steely glint in her mother's eye, she got off Harry's lap and stood next to him, her hand on his shoulder, his still on her waist.

"*Ladies* do *not* straddle men's laps," Molly barked. "Come with me." She turned on her heel and stormed out of the library, Ginny following slowly behind her. "Hurry up!" her mother commanded.

Ginny turned and looked nervously at her friends and brother one last time before quietly closing the door.

"She's in for it now," Ron said ominously.

"D'you suppose your mum. . ." Hermione said, her eyes wide with horror.

"Found out about last night?" Ron finished for her. "Nah. If she had, she would have said something earlier. She just blew up because of the way Ginny was sitting on Harry's lap." He looked at Harry's face, which was beet red. "You OK, mate?"

"Yeah. I hate it that she has to deal with that alone," he said, gazing at the closed door.

"Ginny's tough. She'll be OK," Ron said bracingly.

"Yeah, but will 'we' be OK?" Harry muttered uneasily.

"I never thought I'd see the day my daughter was acting like a brazen hussy!" Molly snarled when she got Ginny alone in the sitting room. "What were you thinking?"

"I was just playing with Harry," Ginny said quietly. "You've seen me sit on his lap a lot."

"I've never seen you straddle him before. That's a compromising position, that is," Molly growled. "You mustn't get him all excited that way."

"He wasn't excited," Ginny replied. "He was just laughing because . . ."

Molly was fighting to control her temper. "I can see I didn't explain things to you thoroughly enough, my girl," she said. "Sit down."

"What things?"

"About men and women," Molly said uneasily. She sat down facing her daughter, then spent several minutes studying her hands as she gathered her thoughts. "Your dad said he had a talk with Harry."

"Yes. Harry told me about it."

"He said Harry and your brother compared notes on the 'little wizards' talk' Remus and Sirius had with him." Ginny nodded. "Do you remember the 'little witches' talk' I had with you?" Ginny nodded again. "Did you understand everything we discussed?" Another nod. "Then why would you put yourself in such a compromising position?"

"I didn't think . . ."

"That's right, you didn't think," Molly snapped.

"I'm sorry, Mum," Ginny said desperately. "I wasn't trying to upset Harry. Or you."

"What you were doing was arousing Harry. You mustn't do that," her mother warned seriously. "There are consequences to such things, you know."

Ginny sighed. "Mum, I work in the hospital wing with Madam Pomfrey whenever I can. I've heard her counsel girls about such things, and talked to her about it myself. I know how to take care of myself."

"You do, do you? And how is that?" Molly demanded.

Ginny looked her mother in the eye. "Number one, abstinence. Number two, the Anti-Fertility Potion."

"The what?"

"The Anti-Fertility Potion. Haven't you heard of it?"

Molly shook her head. "Never. What is it?"

"You take it once a year and it keeps you from having babies. It also protects you from sexually transmitted diseases," Ginny explained.

"How do you know about this?" Molly asked suspiciously.

"I told you! I work with Madam Pomfrey a lot. I've heard her counsel girls, and I've asked her questions myself."

"There really is a potion that keeps you from getting pregnant?" Molly asked a bit wistfully.

"Yes. I can't believe you hadn't heard about it. It's been around for ages, apparently."

"If I'd known. . ." Molly murmured.

"You didn't really want seven children, then?" Ginny asked in surprise.

Molly smiled fondly at her. "I love each and every one of you. I wouldn't send any of you back. . .well, at times I wouldn't mind sending Percy back." She sighed. "He was such a lovely boy, but he's turned into a right prat as a man."

Ginny smiled. "Yeah. But six out of seven isn't a bad average, is it?"

"No, not at all." She sat and studied her daughter's face for several long moments. Ginny was so bright, so beautiful, so level-headed and had such a sunny disposition. She had been a joy to rear and was a pleasure to be around now as a young woman. She'd always been a responsible child. Even when she played tricks worthy of the twins, she'd made certain that nobody was really hurt by them, which was a lot more than you could say about the twins and their pranks.

"There are things a woman can do that drives a man mad, makes it impossible for him to. . .to maintain his control," Molly said seriously. "Sitting on his lap that way is one of them."

"I'll be more careful in the future, Mum," Ginny replied, equally serious.

"It's not fair to lead a man on, make him think you're interested in having sexual relations with him when you're not. There are some forms of play that are just not appropriate. Do you understand me?" Ginny nodded, her eyes on her mother's. "You mustn't lead him on, letting him think you're offering things you're not."

"I know."

Molly sighed, accepting the fact that she was going to have to trust her daughter to make wise choices since she was away from home so many months of the year.

"I just want you to be safe. We had all of our babies during the last war, and it wasn't the best idea we ever had, but there you lot were, just popping out of me without even asking!" she said with a laugh, throwing her hands in the air. Her expression grew serious again. "I don't want you to have a baby during the war, or during school, or before you've been married over a year or two," she told her daughter, her heart in her eyes. "Once you have children, your time is no longer your own. Once you get married, you should have a few years together first to build your marriage before the babies start popping out. That's important, Ginny. You'll regret that lost time if you start having babies too soon."

"Do you regret it, Mum?" Ginny asked quietly, knowing that Bill had been born just a year and a half after her parents had married.

"No, I don't regret it, but I wish your father and I had been allowed more time alone. Still, with you and Ron nearly grown, we'll be alone again soon." She sighed and looked a bit sad.

"You won't be lonely, though, Mum. We'll all come and see you loads," Ginny assured her.

"Oh, I know you will, dear," Molly said, smoothing her daughter's fiery red hair away from her face. "Are you and Harry serious, then?"

"I think so," Ginny said, her face glowing with pleasure before she could stifle it.

"Just remember how young you both are. It could be a first love, you know," Molly cautioned her.

"I'll remember. But Mum, I've had loads of boyfriends. None of them made me feel the way Harry does." She was reluctant to tell her mother they'd already declared their love for each other. That was still too private to share with anyone.

"You make him happy, and he certainly deserves that. And anyone can see that he makes you happy as well. Just be careful, all right?"

"We will," Ginny promised.

Molly hesitated. There was still one more issue to address, and it was a delicate one. "Ginny. . .your body is your own. You mustn't give it away lightly. The first time should be special, and with a very special man. Promise me you'll be careful in your choices, all right?"

"I promise," Ginny said sincerely, knowing in her heart that she'd made the right choice.

"What happened?" Ron asked as soon as Ginny rejoined them in the library.

"She had the 'little witches' talk' with me," Ginny said, blushing as she sat down determinedly next to Harry rather than on his lap.

"Bloody hell!" Ron said. "What did you say?"

"We talked it through. Turns out she didn't know there was an Anti-Fertility Potion. I suppose if she'd known about it, there might be fewer Weasleys," she said with a shrug, "although she did say the only one she's ever really wanted to send back was Percy." She smiled and snuggled next to Harry. "She said I was tormenting you, sitting on you that way. Were you tormented, Harry?"

"If you'd wiggled there much longer, yeah, I would've been," he admitted with a grin.

"I honestly didn't think it would be a problem, but I won't do that again," she said solemnly. Then a wicked gleam appeared in her eye as she continued, "at least when we might get caught!" She and her friends all blushed and laughed at her cheek.

After the house quieted, Ron and Ginny switched rooms as they had the night before. A Colloportus and Silencio later, each room was filled with quiet laughter, sighs and moans of pleasure.

"You make me so happy," Harry murmured, holding Ginny close. "I wish we never had to leave this room."

"Mmm, me too," she sighed happily. "Harry?"

"Mmm?"

"Take your beard off for me?"

"I thought you liked it?" he teased, already starting to remove it.

"I love it, but it tickles and scratches. Sometimes that's good! Sometimes I'd rather it wasn't doing that," she said apologetically.

"You tell me when you want it back, and it's there," he said good-naturedly. "How's this?" he murmured, rolling her onto her back and kissing her soundly, then trailing kisses down her neck.

"Oh, much better," she sighed. She giggled as Harry rolled her onto her stomach and planted soft, warm kisses all down her spine, ending with a loving examination of her heart-shaped birthmark. She turned over and pulled him to her, whispering "I love you, I love you, I love you" as they revelled in the joy of being alive and in love.

Tired but very happy, the four students set off the next morning for Hogwarts via Portkey. The boys and Hermione could have Apparated, but they didn't want to leave Ginny behind. As they walked through the dragon-guarded gates to Hogwarts, the boys looked over the heads of their girlfriends and both broke into huge grins.

"I have to say, mate, this has been the worst and the best holiday ever," Ron mused, tightening his arm around Hermione's shoulders and kissing the top of her curly head.

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Harry said with a laugh, pulling a strand of Ginny's hair up onto his upper lip. "Do you like my moustache, sweetie?" he teased.

"I like your black pirate's beard better," she said with a smile, pulling another lock of her hair up to his chin to create a goatee. "Hmm. Red's not your colour."

"Yes, it is!" Harry protested. "I'm quite fond of redheads!"

"And it's a good thing, too!" she said playfully.

Suddenly they passed a turn in the lane and there was Hogwarts spread out before them. Harry stopped, his face suddenly ashen.

"What is it?" Ginny asked. "Are you all right?"

"Erm. . .," was all Harry could say.

"Still worried about . . .?" she murmured.

"Uh. . .yeah."

"We'll take care of each other," Ron said stoutly. "What you said yesterday was true, mate. We've got each other and we can get along fine without anyone else."

Harry gulped. "Yeah." He took a deep breath and started moving again. *One step at a time, Potter,* he told himself.

Soon, the marble steps loomed before them. The four of them walked up the steps abreast, the couples holding tightly to each other. Hermione was the only one not facing condemnation from a lot of the students, since she hadn't been with them. Ron suddenly seemed to realize that.

"Um, 'Mione?"

"Yes?"

"If things get ugly – you weren't involved, you don't have to. . ."

She stopped, pulled away from him and turned to face him, her face livid. "If I had been allowed to go along, I would've fought right alongside you," she said sternly. "I'm standing with you now. Don't you dare try to push me away."

Ron looked abashed for a moment, then a grin split his face and he pulled her to him, kissing her quite thoroughly. "Thanks, luv. You're my girl."

"Don't you forget it, either!" she said, her voice serious but laughter in her eyes.

"Hey, Harry," Ron said over her head. "We're safe now."

"Yeah?" Harry replied, his eyebrows raised in amusement.

"Yeah. Nobody wants to mess with my 'Mione. She knows more hexes than anybody," Ron said proudly, rocking her in his arms.

When they walked into the Entrance Hall, they found it full of students who had arrived earlier since they had to ride the Hogwarts Express. A shout rang out – "They're back! Harry's back!" and students thronged around them, excitedly asking questions about their adventures. This was not the welcome Harry had expected, nor was it one he wanted. Ginny could feel the tension in his body. Ron was doing fine – he loved being the centre of this kind of attention. Harry honestly did not enjoy such interest and was getting more uncomfortable by the second.

"Tell Ron we're going up to the Common Room," Ginny whispered to Hermione, then turned to Harry and said loudly enough for many of the enthusiastic crowd to hear, "Can we go upstairs? I have a headache."

Harry bent over her solicitously. "Are you all right?" Then he saw her wink. "Oh. Yeah. Come on, then, let's get you some headache potion," he said, excusing the two of them, shaking hands and accepting pats on the back and congratulations as he made a path through the crowd, pulling Ginny by the hand along behind him. "See you later, guys!" Harry called to Ron and Hermione. When the crowd was well behind them, Ginny giggled. Harry stopped and turned her to face him. "You are quite the little actress, aren't you?"

"It worked, didn't it?" she said, acting quite pleased with herself.

"Yes, it did. Thanks!" he said sincerely, lifting her in his arms and kissing her soundly before setting her back on her feet.

Ginny's ruse in the Entrance Hall, combined with Ron's pleasure in story-telling, made the friends' transition back into the school much easier than anyone expected.

Dumbledore announced at the first evening's dinner that Harry, Ron and Ginny were not to be bothered in the halls, classrooms, school grounds or anywhere else to tell their story. It had been written up in the paper and answering questions would just make them relive it. He also would not tolerate anyone seeking vengeance of any kind on them or Professor Lupin. Such acts would result in instant expulsion and a possible stay in Azkaban. He made it clear the boys were attacked with no provocation, and they merely defended themselves, and quite admirably. Harry saw some burning looks cast his way from time to time, but the awful recriminations he'd expected didn't come, which was a huge relief to him.

In the first D.A. meeting after the holiday, the group was obviously bursting with questions, but doing their best to abide by Dumbledore's edict. Harry tried to teach them some new spells, but they were simply too distracted. He finally gave up.

"All right, you lot. Your minds are not on your work. Where are they?" he asked after getting the attention of both groups.

"We're not allowed to say," piped up Colin Creevey.

"So it's about our battle in France, is it?" Harry said with a sigh.

"Yeah," Colin replied. "I mean, we're here learning how to do this stuff, and you've just been in a battle where you *did* use this stuff and we want to know what worked, how it worked, and all that!"

Harry looked at Ron, then at Ginny. He saw agreement in their eyes. "All right. Sit down, get comfortable. What do you want to know? Raise your hands and wait to be called on so it isn't mayhem in here, OK?" Dozens of hands flew up in the air.

"Hermione, would you get Professor Lupin?" Harry asked. "He was there. He may as well handle some of these questions." She took off at a run to find Remus. They had an unspoken agreement to not use Adferos at Hogwarts unless absolutely necessary. The fewer people who saw the silvery spells flying between them, the better.

"Colin, you started this. What's your question?" Harry asked.

"Can you tell us which spells worked and which didn't?"

Harry looked at Ron and Ginny. "All of them worked for me. Ron? Ginny?"

"Yeah. I used a lot of different spells, and they all worked. Some had more effect than others, but a lot depended on how well-aimed the spell was," Ron replied.

"Same here," Ginny said.

Harry called on Ernie McMillian. "Ron, did you use any of the battle plans we've been working on? If so, how did they work?"

"That's an excellent question, Ernie," Ron said with satisfaction. "I wasn't able to use them because I was injured before the battle and got to it late. And there were so few of us against a much larger force, there was no way to divide into squads or anything, even if there had been time. There was absolutely no organization to the battle. Everyone was just fighting one to one, or three to one, or five to one or whatever, surviving the best they could. If we'd been able to use the strategies, I think the battle would have been over much sooner. I could see places where, if I'd had a squad I could've sent in to sweep in from behind a group, for instance, it would've turned the tide much sooner. I think the strategies will be a great help in winning battles."

"You still haven't said which spells you used," Colin called out.

"Oh, sorry, Colin," Harry replied. "I dunno. Let's see. I used Expelliarmus, Aresto Momentum, several spells we haven't taught you lot yet, Impedimenta, um. . .I can't think. Ron? Ginny?" Harry was trying to avoid admitting he'd used the Killing Curse and several other Dark spells.

"What good is Expelliarmus! You make them drop their wand, big deal," snapped Terry Boot.

Harry became very still, his face like stone. The group saw it and held their breath.

"Erm, Harry?" Ron began, "do you want me to. . ."

Harry shook himself a bit, as if coming out of a trance. "No, thanks, mate. I'll deal with it." He took a deep, calming breath and said, "I killed someone with it."

The gathered students gasped as one voice. The papers said Harry had killed a lot of people, but reading it wasn't the same as having him say it out loud, right to their faces.

Colin raised his hand hesitantly. "How. . .how did it kill him?"

"It was a woman, actually. Bellatrix Lestrange. If you cast the spell strongly enough, it doesn't just disarm your opponent. It can throw them back several feet, or more, depending on how strongly you cast the spell. When I did it, the spell threw Bellatrix back against a stone wall and cracked her skull open," he said tonelessly, his face still hard.

"So you didn't . . . mean. . .to kill her, then?" Colin said carefully.

"I had every intention of killing her. She killed my godfather. She tortured Neville's parents. She's been sending people to kill me repeatedly this year. I have no regrets about killing her. She deserved to die. I was ready to throw more spells at her, but she died with the Expelliarmus." When he finished speaking, he sat quietly, looking down at his shoes for a while.

No one spoke. The room was utterly silent, as if every person there was holding his breath. Finally, Harry lifted his head and looked around at them. "We are at war. I don't know how to get that idea through to you if you haven't got it already, but *We. Are. At. War.* They will kill you as soon as they see you, no questions asked, if they get the chance. They shot Ginny out of the air for no reason except that they thought it would be some kind of 'fun' in their sick minds. They shot at Ron and me and the hippogriff we were riding for no good reason, other than wanting to kill me. Ron didn't need to be hurt, it was me they were after. But they did their best to kill him anyway. They torture and kill Muggles for sport. They'll be doing that to wizard families before long, the way things are going – unless we stop them." He stopped and studied their faces a moment before going on.

"I'm not proud of a lot of things I did that day. I am glad I killed Bellatrix Lestrange. She needed to die. She was evil through and through. Voldemort is far worse than she was. There are many other Death Eaters who are as bad as she was. We have to be ready. We have to be determined. We have to kill them before they kill us if it comes to that. You can't say, 'Oh, I don't want to kill anyone.' I used to say that. Sometimes killing your enemy is the only way to survive." He was panting and angry by the time he finished speaking. He glared around at them, then dropped his eyes, studying his fingers picking at the laces on his trainers. "I don't mean to scare you," he said quietly, then lifted his head and looked at all of them seriously. "I want to equip you, so you'll be ready. That's why we're here."

Remus had arrived during Harry's tirade. He sat down next to him, clapped him gently on the back and said, "All right, Harry?"

He sighed. "Yeah," he said darkly. "Thanks for coming." He sighed, rolled his shoulders a bit and shook his head as if he was a dog shaking off water. "OK. More questions? I'll try not to sound off like that again. You have to understand, this just happened recently and we're still trying to . . . I don't know. . .understand it all, I guess."

The listening group breathed a bit easier, seeing Harry trying to be helpful and get past his anger. More hands were raised, more questions asked. Remus, Ron and Ginny took as many of them as they could. Finally, their hour was up and Harry dismissed the group.

"Wait," Neville said as the group started to get up.

"What is it, Neville?" Harry said, confused.

Quiet Neville, who was always helpful but never deliberately put himself in a position where he had to speak in front of a group, stood and faced the gathering. He wrung his hands nervously, then straightened his spine, a determined look on his face.

"Harry said Bellatrix Lestrange tortured my parents. Most of you know I was raised by my gran. My parents were. . ." he gulped, then went on determinedly, "tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange not long after Harry defeated V-V-Voldemort the first time." He looked

from face to face in the crowd. "I don't know how many of you have been affected by the Death Eaters or V-Voldemort, but I have to spend every holiday in St. Mungo's visiting parents who don't really know who I am. Yes, Harry killed people. That's a horrible thing, especially for him. But I, for one, am grateful he stood up to Voldemort and the Death Eaters. I, for one, am glad he killed Bellatrix Lestrange." He turned and faced Harry, his eyes earnest, his face quite serious. "I want to thank you, Harry, for what you've done for the wizarding world, but mostly, what you've done for me. Thank you, Harry."

A stunned silence met his words, then a tumult of "Hear, hear!" and applause rang through the crowd. Harry sat still, stunned. Some of those in the crowd who had sat listening with angry expressions from time to time were among those cheering him now. Somehow, Neville had touched a nerve that needed to be touched.

Harry stood up and shook Neville's hand. "Thanks, Neville. That means a lot to me."

"No more than you deserve, mate," Neville replied, shaking Harry's hand solemnly, then shaking Ron's, Ginny's and Remus's hand in turn, thanking each of them for their part in the battle. Soon a receiving line, of sorts, had formed, with D.A. members murmuring words of gratitude or admiration as they filed past the four battle survivors and filed out the door. Harry noticed there were some who held back and slid out of the door without speaking to him or the others. Their actions made Harry uneasy.

"That went well," Ron said, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

"You think?" Harry said in disbelief. "Some of them think we're mad murderers now."

"No, they don't," Ron insisted. "Honestly, Harry, you're too close to it. You can't see it. They finally understand how battle strategies can help win battles. They understand that they may have to kill people, but that you do what you have to do to win the war. They didn't get that before, not really. I think now they do understand it. They seemed a lot more serious, more committed by the end."

"Some of them sneaked out at the end," Harry retorted.

"It will take some of them more time to digest things, to understand, but they'll all come round to it eventually. Don't worry about it. These are the good guys, y'know?" Ron said with assurance. "They'll be all right. You'll see."

Harry stared at his friend. Seemingly overnight, Ron had gone from a goofy, gangly kid who was good at chess and Quidditch but didn't care about much else – except for his friends and girlfriend, of course – to a mature leader, a battle-tried warrior. His answers to the questions had been wise, concise, well-thought-out, well-explained, everything you could want from a leader.

"You think?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I think," Ron said, grinning.

Harry grinned back at him. "I hope you're right. I've been worried about this lot. They weren't taking things seriously enough. Maybe now they will."

Ron clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Yeah."

Chapter 31 – Gifts

The weather was warming, flowers budding, birds singing as spring covered Scotland's craggy hills with greenery and wildflowers. The giant squid could be seen sunning his tentacles and gently accepting bits of bread from students. The Gryffindors last Quidditch game was coming up in just over a month, and Ginny was valiantly trying to get school brooms to do what she needed them to. She tried broom after broom, and all of them had problems. They'd stall if you climbed too steeply, lose control in dives, shudder if you tried to fly them at maximum speed, and wobble so horribly if the rider did an evasive rollover move that the rider was very nearly unseated every time. After trying several brooms during one practice, she slammed the latest offending broom on the ground and collapsed in tears of frustration. Harry sat beside her, his arm around her back, trying to console her.

"Ruddy damned Voldemort! I'm glad you hurt him! Destroying my beautiful new broom! And making me lose my wand so my parents had to buy me a new one. No way can they afford a broom AND a wand. DAMN that monster, anyway!" she raged.

"That's my warrior princess," Harry said with a warm smile in his voice, squeezing her shoulders comfortingly. "How many brooms are left to try?"

"Three," she grumbled.

"Let's have a go, then," he said, hoping one of them would do the job for her, but knowing in his heart they wouldn't. As he'd feared, the last three were no better than the first seventeen, and these were the best of all the school brooms. All were worn out, messed up, shuddering, stuttering, slow monstrosities only good for teaching first years how to fly, not for serious Quidditch.

That evening after dinner, Harry caught Remus as he left the Great Hall. "Remus? May I have a word?"

"Certainly! How was your day, Harry?" Remus said with a smile.

"Fine until we got to Quidditch practice. Ginny really needs a new broom. None of the school brooms are worth using for Quidditch. Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would mind if I bought her a broom? I suggested to Fred and George that they buy her the one she lost – I don't want to ask them again. I think I can afford it, don't you?"

"Yes, you can afford it," Remus said with a smile. "You can afford to outfit the whole team if you want."

"I don't want to do anything Malfoy does," Harry said, his nose wrinkled in distaste. "His dad did that second year, and bought Malfoy onto the team that way."

"Well, I could point out that you're already on the team," Remus said with a chuckle, "but I suspect you've already noticed that."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, I noticed. I'd like to ask the Weasleys' permission to buy Ginny a good broom myself. Do you think they'd be offended?"

Remus considered Harry's question carefully. He knew how the Weasleys had to struggle financially, and any broom at all was a fairly large expense. "They love you, Harry, and have tremendous respect for you. I think they'll take it all right. I think you're wise in wanting to ask them, though."

"May I use your fireplace to contact them?"

"Go ahead. You know where the floo powder is. I have some work to do in the library, so you'll have privacy for a while, as well. Let me know how it turns out, all right?" Remus said with a smile.

"I will. Thanks a lot!" With that, Harry took off at a run for Remus's office. When he was there, had the door closed and Colloportused so he'd have privacy, he took a pinch of floo powder in his hand and held it hesitantly above the fire. He knew what to say. He thought it was the right thing to do. So why was his stomach so full of butterflies? Forcing the butterflies to at least fly in formation, he knelt on the hearth rug and tossed the powder into the fire. Green flames licked up and he stuck his head in the fire, calling "The Burrow" in a clear voice. He closed his eyes as the Floo Network made its dizzying connections. Soon he was looking into the Weasleys' cosy kitchen. "Mr. Weasley? Mrs. Weasley?" he called.

"Who's there?" Molly said as she bustled into the room, her hands full of knitting. "Oh, Harry! Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything's fine. I wondered if I could speak to you and Mr. Weasley for a moment?"

"Of course, dear!" She turned toward the archway to the living room. "Arthur? Harry's in the fire."

"Hello, Harry! Everything all right at school?" Arthur said, smiling as he came into the room. The Weasleys sat in kitchen chairs facing the fire, waiting to see what Harry wanted.

"Yes, thanks," he replied quickly. Then his mouth got dry and his throat closed up. He crossed his fingers behind his back, hoping he could get through this without offending or upsetting them. "Erm. . ." Harry stopped and cleared his throat. "I need to talk to you about something. Um. . .well. . .it's actually kind of my fault Ginny lost her broom. She's tried every broom the school has, and they're all horrible. I would like to buy her another broom, but I wanted to make sure it was all right with you first."

"Oh, Harry, that's very generous of you," Molly began, "but it's so expensive. And it isn't your fault her broom is gone. You shouldn't feel like that about it."

"Molly's right, lad," Arthur agreed. "It isn't your fault at all. And you do have your own expenses to take care of."

"I can afford to buy her a broom, honestly. It's important to me. She saved my life. If she hadn't been on my Firebolt when I fell, I'd be dead now." His earnest expression touched their hearts.

"But Harry, dear, you'll spoil her if you keep giving her expensive gifts," Molly warned. "She's still a young girl. You'll turn her head with such things."

Harry blushed, a slow smile crossing his face. "I like spoiling her," he said quietly. "And I want to protect her. Having her ride a good broom is one way to keep her safe."

Arthur and Molly were quiet for a few moments. Harry looked from one to the other hopefully. "What did you have in mind?" Arthur asked.

"I thought about a Cleansweep 7 like she had, or the new Cleansweep 11, but honestly, she handles my Firebolt as if it was made for her. The look on her face when she's flying it is . . . well, I know how that look feels. I feel the same way flying that broom. I'd really like to get her a Firebolt, if you don't mind."

Arthur looked at Harry's eager, nervous, hopeful face, then at his wife's. He understood Molly's anxiety. Growing up in a family where second-hand things were the norm, having a wealthy boyfriend was liable to affect Ginny's personality at some point, especially since he was so generous to her. He'd bought her beautiful jewellery with protective charms included, and now wanted to buy her an international quality racing broom? Arthur sighed, wanting to please Harry, yet wanting to make sure his daughter kept the values they'd tried to instil in her.

"Please, Mr. Weasley, Mrs. Weasley. It would mean so much to me to be able to do this for her," Harry said, his love for Ginny shining in his eyes.

Arthur looked at Molly and read her thoughts. They both loved Harry dearly. As grief-filled as the boy's life was, Ginny was a bright spot of joy for him. His life was so hard in many ways. He deserved to be happy as much as possible. And Ginny was quite a sensible girl most of the time. Seeing Molly's agreement, Arthur turned to Harry and smiled. "All right, lad. If that's what you want to do, then you have our approval."

Harry's face lit up, his grin huge, his eyes dancing. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"Thank you for asking before you did it, Harry. That was very kind of you. This gift to her is very kind, as well," Molly said, leaning forward and wishing she could hug him. "When will you give it to her?"

"I'll send Hedwig out with the order first thing in the morning. Ginny should have it in a day or two," Harry said excitedly. "Please don't tell her! It will be a great surprise!"

"I wish I could see her face when she opens it," Arthur said with a grin. "I know she'll be delighted."

"Thanks again. It's great to see you both. Bye!" Harry said, his face still alight with pleasure.

"Goodbye, lad. Take care," Arthur said fondly.

"Bye, Harry, dear. Give Ginny a hug from us, will you? And give Ron our love as well," Molly said.

A few minutes later, Harry was bounding up the stairs to his dormitory. He got out a piece of parchment and wrote out the order for a Firebolt to be delivered to Miss Ginny Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, as soon as possible. Dashing back out the portrait hole, he raced up to the Owlry.

"Hedwig! Come here, girl!" he called, holding out a hand with an owl treat in it for her. She landed on his arm and took her treat, then nuzzled his hair affectionately. "Take this to Quality Quidditch Supplies in Diagon Alley first thing in the morning, girl, all right?" Harry said, tying the parchment to her leg. She nuzzled his hair again and nibbled at his ear. He gave her another owl treat and she flew off to her perch to wait until morning to fly to London and deliver Harry's message.

As he pranced up the stairs to the dorm again, he passed Ron. "What's up, mate?" Ron asked. "You look awfully happy."

"Life's just good sometimes, you know?" Harry said with a laugh.

"OK, what's happened to make you so giddy?" Ron said, chuckling as Harry hung one-armed from a beam over a dormitory doorway and swung back and forth like a monkey at play.

"Can you keep a secret?" Harry asked, his eyes dancing. "Oh, I know you can! C'mon, I have something to tell you!" He raced up the stairs to their room and bounced on his bed.

Ron laughed as he followed him. Whatever the secret was, it had to be something rich. Harry wasn't often this silly anymore. He sat on a corner of Harry's bed, bouncing along with the motion created by Harry's excitement.

"So? Spill!" Ron urged, amused.

"I just talked to your mum and dad," Harry said, his eyes sparkling merrily. "They sent their love to you, by the way."

He talked with Mum and Dad? He didn't ask for Ginny's hand already, did he? She's just fifteen! Ron thought, aghast. Something of his feeling must have shown on his face, because Harry dropped his gleeful expression and looked concerned.

"What?" Harry said.

Ron shook his head, forcing himself to calm down. "Nothing. You were going to tell me something. Go on," he urged.

"I asked them for permission to buy Ginny a new broom," Harry said with a grin.

Ron heaved a silent sigh of relief. "Oh! That's great! What did they say?"

"They had to think about it a while. They said I was spoiling her, and that I'd turn her head, but I talked them into it. They agreed!"

"Cool! What are you getting her?" Ron said, thinking he'd like to try a Cleansweep 8 or 9 if Harry got her one of the newer models.

"A Firebolt like mine," Harry said, a look of great satisfaction on his face.

Ron's face fell before he could conceal his feelings. "A. . .a Firebolt?" Ron's heart constricted. He'd give anything for a Firebolt, and here his sister was being given one as a gift!

"Yeah. What's wrong?" Harry asked, his head and heart full of thoughts of Ginny, which prevented him from understanding Ron's reaction.

"Uh. . .nothing. That's great. She'll be thrilled," Ron said, putting a brave face on things. *If I ever have any money to speak of, I'm getting a Firebolt too,* he vowed. *Why couldn't Harry have just outfitted the whole team with Firebolts? That would've been nice. I'll bet he could afford it!* Realizing how unkind his thoughts were, Ron did his best to squelch them, but they niggled at the back of his mind.

"Yeah, I told your folks I thought she'd be safer on a fast broom, and it's my fault she lost hers, so I wanted to replace it," Harry said, still wrapped up in delight that the Weasleys had agreed, and envisioning Ginny's face when she opened her gift.

"Yeah, that's good," Ron said in a dull voice.

Harry finally noticed Ron's lack of genuine enthusiasm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Ron picked at his shoe laces disconsolately.

Harry leaned down to try to see Ron's eyes below his fringe of wavy red hair. "No, not nothing. Do you think I'm spoiling her?"

Ron sighed, then did his best to be upbeat. "No, I think she'll be fine. It's great. It's nice of you to do that for her."

"You're not upset about this, are you?" Harry said astutely. "You are. Oh, I'm sorry, mate! Remus said I could get new brooms for the whole team, but that's such a Malfoy thing to do. . . ." His voice trailed off awkwardly. He studied what little he could see of Ron's face for a moment, then went on uncomfortably. "When Malfoy tried to shoot me down and hit her instead, and she fell. . .the Firebolt saved her. When I was a raven and had that scar pain and fell, the Firebolt saved me. Ron, I . . . I love Ginny. I want to protect her. I want her to be safe. And the best way I can think of for her to be safe on a broom is to ride a Firebolt. I'm not buying it for her because it's a fancy, fast, exciting broom. I'm buying it because I love her and I'm trying to protect her. You can understand that, can't you?" He waited uneasily for some reaction from his best mate.

"You love her? For real?"

"Yeah," Harry said, blushing but glowing at the same time, his love for Ginny shining in his eyes.

"I thought so," Ron said quietly. "She told me you two loved each other when she came up with the Weasley Plot idea."

"We didn't want to tell anyone for a while. You're the first person I've told," Harry replied, then blushed, "besides Ginny, that is."

"I'm happy for you, mate," Ron said sincerely, then fell into silence. He studied his laces a while longer, pondering what Harry had said about the broom. Finally, after a painfully long time in which Harry got more and more nervous, Ron raised his head and said, "I think it's

brilliant, you buying her a Firebolt. Sorry I didn't react well at first. It was just. . .kind of. . .a shock, y'know?"

"Yeah, I guess I did kind of spring it on you," Harry said apologetically.

"Nah. I just have a short fuse in some areas. I wish I had the money to buy nice things for Hermione. I wish I had the money to buy myself a Firebolt. But wishing won't make it so."

"You'll have it someday, mate. I know you will. You'll make good money as an Auror," Harry assured him confidently.

"You think? I've never checked what they make, actually," Ron said, glad to have a somewhat different topic of conversation.

"I've read that they get combat pay," Harry replied.

"Even when we're not at war?" Ron was dumbfounded.

"Well, yeah. Aurors capture law breakers, y'know? They have to fight, to spy, to sneak around, to do lots of dangerous things. Didn't you know that?"

"Yeah, I did. I just never thought of it as a 'combat pay' kind of thing. Well, maybe I will make good money then!" he said with a grin. "So you've already got the Firebolt order set up, ready to go?"

"It's tied to Hedwig's leg now. She'll leave at first light and be there when they open."

"Wicked," Ron said with a sincere smile, finally happy about his sister's good fortune.

"It's a secret, though. I want her to be surprised, so don't let on, OK?" Harry said with a grin, glad his friend's mood had changed so quickly.

"Oh, no!" Hermione gasped the next morning as she read her *Daily Prophet* at breakfast.

"What?" Ron asked.

She looked up at him, then across the table at Harry and Ginny. "Lucius Malfoy has escaped."

"What?" Harry cried, snatching the paper from her hands. "*Escape from Azkaban!*" the headline read. "It says here five Death Eaters escaped before the Aurors were able to close up a hole that suddenly appeared in the wall," Harry said, skimming the article. "Sounds like Voldemort was there himself," he added grimly. "Sirius told me there are strong wards on the walls to protect them from spells. You can't just blast a hole in them with a Reductor curse, for instance. You'd have to remove the wards first, or use some very Dark magic to break through them." He looked up at his friends, then over at Draco Malfoy, who was no longer looking nervous and uncertain, as he'd done since his father's arrest. No, Malfoy was looking cocky and aggressive, back to his old bullying self. "He knew," Harry breathed. "He probably knew even before the breakout. Look at him. He knew."

"Yeah, his dad's probably already contacted him, the evil git," Ron rumbled darkly. "He'll be out for revenge now that his daddy's out of jail and can back him up."

Remus appeared at Harry's shoulder just then. "Good morning," he said with a warm smile.

"It was until we read this," Harry said, holding up the paper so Remus could see the headline.

"Ah, yes. That's what I came to talk to you about. Budge over." Harry and Ginny slid over to make room for Remus. "Be extra careful around the Slytherins. They have been warned by Severus to not bother the four of you, or anyone else, actually, but with this breakout, they're going to feel more confident."

"Yeah, Malfoy has his bully face on again," Ginny commented.

"Exactly. But you all know many more hexes than he does, and you're simply better fighters than he is. If you can find a teacher to defuse a situation, that's great. If not. . . ." He shrugged expressively. "Well, anyway, stick together in the halls as much as possible. Ginny, since you don't have classes with these three, make sure you walk with other D.A. members – and you might alert them to the danger, if they haven't worked it out already. I don't want there to be any fights in between students, but if you're attacked, defend yourselves. I'll back you up."

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said sincerely, comforted by his godfather's concern and advice.

"Have a good day, you lot," Remus said, rising from the table. "See you in class."

"See you, Remus," Harry answered, then seeing Snape giving him an evil look, corrected himself, "I mean, Professor Lupin." Remus grinned at Harry, earning a grin in return.

At breakfast two mornings later, Hedwig flew in during the morning mail delivery and dropped a long, thin package in front of Ginny. Since she and Harry were seated next to each other, she thought Hedwig was bringing the package to him. "Who's it from?" she asked him.

"Dunno," Harry said, trying to maintain a casual attitude. "Let's see the tag. Hmmm. It's not addressed to me," he said, giving Hedwig bits of bacon from his plate.

"But Hedwig brought it," Ginny began, her boundless curiosity making her simply itch to reach out and investigate the package for herself.

"Yes, but it's addressed to someone else. I guess she was just looking for something to do," Harry said, shrugging, toying with the package idly.

"Owls don't look for something to do – do they?" she said, confused. "Who's the package for?"

"You're a nosy little witch, aren't you?" he teased. He turned the package over slowly, not letting her see the address, humming under his breath, knowing her curiosity was driving her mad.

Hermione bent her head to look at the address to satisfy her own curiosity, but Ron trod on her toes under the table, then winked at her. She looked at him, then at Harry's face, which was becoming more amused as Ginny grew more frustrated, then understood.

"All right, Potter. Who's it for?" Ginny demanded. "What is it? You're making me crazy!"

Harry grinned and turned it over, revealing her name on the package. "It seems to be addressed to you," he said as casually as he could. By this time, Gryffindors were gathered all around them.

"Who'd be sending me. . .but it looks like. . .it can't be. . .a broom?" she said, ripping into the paper with glee. Soon a gleaming new Firebolt emerged from the wrappings. Ginny's mouth fell open in shock when she saw the broom and realized what it was. Then she burst into tears.

Harry was shocked. "What's wrong?"

"It's. . .it's. . .it's a Firebolt!" she said through her tears. "Mum and Dad can't afford this," she said in a low voice only Harry, Ron and Hermione could hear. "I'll. . .I'll have to send it back."

Harry chuckled and pulled her into a hug. "You didn't look at the tag."

She looked up at him for a moment, then dug through the papers to find the tag. "For my warrior princess. With love from your speed demon," she read. "It's from you?" she said in disbelief, turning to Harry. "I can keep it?"

"With your parents' blessing, I might add," he said with a grin. "It's all yours, sweet girl."

"But. . .but it's not my birthday or anything. . ." she said, still a bit dazed.

"It's an unbirthday present, then," Harry said, pushing her glossy red hair away from her face and kissing her forehead. "Happy Unbirthday!"

Ginny laughed aloud, throwing her arms around his neck and saying, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" before kissing him soundly. The gathered Gryffindors laughed, cheered and whistled at her performance. Ginny and Harry both blushed madly for a moment before Harry returned her attention to the broom by holding it up and showing her the registration number and the attached paperwork showing her as the registered owner. "Wow," she said as she ran her hands over the broom, examining every beautiful inch of it. She looked up at her brother and saw his eyes shining in happiness for her. "A Firebolt!" she breathed.

"Yeah. Can I have a go later?" Ron asked.

"Of course!"

Soon the other Gryffindors were asking to try the broom, "after you and Ron, of course," and a happy House headed upstairs to get their books for the day's classes.

"I'm so sick of studying!" Ginny said, stretching and rolling her shoulders to get the kinks out of them. The O.W.L. exams loomed large in her future and she was surrounded by books, notes and other fifth year students going through exactly the same stress as she was. She got up from her table in the library and walked over to the one where Harry, Ron and Hermione were working on their own revision. She sat next to Harry and leaned her head on his shoulder. He glanced at her, kissed the top of her head and said, "Hang on," then finished what he was writing. Then he turned to her and gave her his full attention.

"What's up?" he said.

"I'm tired of studying. I need a break. How about you?" she said, dark circles of exhaustion under her eyes.

"Yup, me too," he agreed.

"Can we go for a walk or something? I need to get some fresh air, see the sun, remember there's something to life other than O.W.L.'s," she whinged.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I could do with stretching my legs too. C'mon," he said, as he got up from his seat and gathered his papers.

"Harry," Hermione chided him, "we're not finished!"

"I can't see straight anymore. I've read the same paragraph five times, and finally had to write parts of it down to make any sense of it," Harry grumbled. "A break will refresh my mind and my eyes so I can work better."

"Sounds logical to me," Ron said, his face lighting up with hope that Harry could convince Hermione of the wisdom of relaxing a while.

"Ronald. . ." Hermione said warningly.

Ron sighed dramatically. "You two go ahead. Remind me what sunshine feels like when you get back, OK?"

Harry laughed. "OK." He leaned down to speak to Hermione. "All work and no play makes Ron's brain lock up – give him a break sometime soon, OK? Look at the poor bloke, his eyes are glazed over already! We simply aren't as hardy as you are when it comes to studying." He ruffled her curly hair a bit as he stood up, then ducked, laughing, as she tossed a roll of parchment at him. "See you two later."

When they got outside, Ginny spread her arms wide and turned in slow circles, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine. "What a beautiful day!" she said, spinning faster and faster until her hair flew behind her like a silken red sail. Harry stood smiling at her, enjoying her exuberance. He decided to join her fun and grabbed her, wrapping his arms around her, spinning the two of them until they fell in a laughing, dizzy heap on the grass. Ginny lay on her back where Harry had put her on the lawn, her hair spread out around her, one hand on Harry's hand, which was lying on her stomach, the other twining in his hair. Harry lay propped up on one elbow next to her, smiling down at her. When they'd caught their breath, Ginny said, "What do you want to do, Harry?"

"Well, I know what I'd really like to do," he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her comically.

Ginny's laughter echoed across the valley below the castle. "Harry, you rogue!" she said, flirting with him outrageously. She turned her head and kissed his arm, her fingers running tantalizing races up and down his chest. "Me, too. I wish we had a place with some privacy. I'm just not the Astronomy Tower type."

"Me neither. However, m'lady, I have been thinking about this problem. I may have a solution."

Her eyes lit up. "Really? Where?"

"It will take a bit of work to clean it up, but I think it will suit us just fine once that's done," he said with a warm smile.

"Let's go!" she said, getting up, grabbing his hand and trying to pull him up as she looked down at him expectantly.

"I need to go and get my dad's Invisibility Cloak. Come with me to Gryffindor Tower, then we'll go." He got to his feet and held his hand out to her.

"Oh, an Invisibility Cloak adventure! Yay!" she chortled, holding his hand and skipping along next to his long strides as they went back into the castle.

A short time later, the two of them were huddled under the Cloak, making their way across Hogwarts' broad lawns. "Wait here," Harry said, leaving Ginny under the Cloak and behind some bushes. He changed into a cat and raced across the clearing to the Whomping Willow, then pushed on the knot that made the tree immobile. He turned and looked back at the spot where he'd left Ginny waiting, his long black tail impatiently lashing the air. He soon felt an invisible hand grab him and carry him into the passageway below the tree. Once they were inside, Ginny put him down, removed the Cloak and waited while he changed back into Harry.

"This leads to the Shrieking Shack, doesn't it? Ron told me about it," she said a bit uneasily.

"I told you it's not haunted. It was Remus making all those noises. It's sort of a nice house inside, if a bit beaten up and dirty. We can clean the bedroom and just use that – if you want to, that is," he said, suddenly worried that she might not want to go on this particular adventure.

"OK," she said, taking his hand and looking up at him trustingly. "Are you positive nobody goes there?"

"Remus doesn't use it now that the potion works for him. And when he does want to go out, I turn into the wolf, and turn Ron into a collie, and we run around the grounds with him."

"You didn't tell me you and Ron were doing that!"

"I didn't want to worry you. He won't hurt us as long as we aren't human, and we steer him away if there are any humans around. But we're careful to go out so late, there usually aren't any people around," he said.

"That explains why you and Ron are so tired when it's full moon, then."

"Yeah. It's great being able to help Remus that way. The potion makes him calm, and usually makes him sleep. Ron and I stay with him in his office then, as the dog and the wolf, but sometimes he gets restless and wants to go out and run, so we go with him."

By this time, they'd reached the end of the tunnel and were climbing into the Shrieking Shack itself. Ginny looked around, awed at the former beauty of the house, and shocked by the destruction of it by Remus in werewolf form, when he was normally such a gentle, quiet man. In the bedroom, they found the bed was nearly intact, but filthy with dust. After quite a few Scourgify spells and other cleaning spells on the room and the bed itself, and some repairs on the bed frame, the room was habitable. The floor was clean enough, and the bed not only cleaned, but the mattress turned to get as fresh a side as possible.

"It's not what I'd want to offer you, if I had a choice," Harry said quietly, "but it's the most private place I can think of for us."

"It's fine, Harry," Ginny said, smiling up at him and suddenly shy.

Now that their preparations were made, both of them were nervous. They hadn't had a chance to be alone together since they'd returned to school nearly a month ago. Harry smiled down at her, his hand slowly tracing the line of her cheek, smoothing a tendril of russet hair behind her ear, then outlining the shell of her ear with one gentle finger. He put his hands softly on either side of her head and bent to kiss her forehead, each eye, the tip of her nose, each cheek, her chin, and finally, after tantalizing her deliciously this way, her lips. He kissed her softly at first, then chuckled deep in his throat as she opened her mouth beneath his, her tongue searching for his. He folded her in his arms, kissing her deeply, holding her close. When they finally broke the kiss, his lips slid down the side of her neck, brushing her jawline, the V of her collarbone, the soft skin behind her ear. He tasted her earlobe, his tongue playing with her earring a moment before moving on.

Ginny moaned in pleasure, her hands pulling his sweater up and his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans. Her hands glided over the skin of his back, tracing the exquisite flowing shapes there, teasing him, tickling him enough to make him laugh as he kissed her throat, then moving to his bum. She ran her hands deliciously that lovely well-muscled shape, squeezing the muscles and chuckling at his mild squeak of protest. Before long, clothes had been discarded and they lay on the bed, exploring each other with delight. Sunlight filtered through the cracks in the boards over the windows, outlining their bodies in a golden glow.

"I've missed you," Harry said as he nuzzled her breast, his hands exploring elsewhere.

"Mmmm, me too," she murmured, lost in delight.

"You've missed you too, eh," he teased, nipping her playfully.

"Watch it, Potter, or I'll hex you," she replied throatily, grabbing his head and drawing him to her, her fingers laced in his tousled hair. She kissed him deeply as she pulled him on top of her. "By the way? I love you," she murmured as she nibbled his ear and played with his earring with her tongue.

Harry's hands and lips moved over her body, filling her with heat and ecstasy. She threw her head back and moaned in pleasure as they finally became one.

"I love you, Ginny. I love you, I love you, I love you," he said breathlessly.

"I love you, baby," she sighed blissfully, nuzzling his hair as he rested contentedly on her shoulder.

A while later, Harry lay on his side, his head propped up on one elbow, his hand tracing the contours of Ginny's body as she lay smiling up at him. "I like your idea of a study break," he said mischievously.

"Yeah, me too," she agreed, stretching languidly. She turned on her side and ran gentle fingers down the side of his body, exploring the intriguing planes of his muscles. She rested her palm on his hip bone, her fingers teasing his bum. "What's that?" she said suddenly.

"What?" he replied, twisting to see what she was on about.

"This ridge. What is it?" She got up on one elbow and leaned across his body, looking to see what her fingers had found. "It's an old scar, kind of crescent-shaped." She looked up at him. "I've noticed it before, but I was a wee bit too distracted at the time to ask about it." She grinned as he snorted with laughter. "Seriously, what happened here? My poor sweetie," she murmured as she kissed the long, rough scar.

Harry giggled as she kissed the scar again. "That tickles! That's the one Pomfrey uses as her password."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," she said, now lying across his waist in order to study the scar better, as well as tantalizing Harry even more. "How did you get it? She said you had it the first time she took care of you."

Harry ran his hand down her smooth back, pushing her long red mane aside to get to her skin. Her hair tickled him where it fell across his body. He didn't want to talk about scars, he wanted to. . .but she was giving him that "tell me now" look, so he'd better get it over with. He sighed heavily, then answered her question.

"I got it when I was three or four. Dudley had some toy earth-moving equipment, big metal trucks and bulldozers. I wanted to play with them too, but of course, he wouldn't let me. I found one he'd already broken and started playing with it. He came over and started hitting me, and pushed me down on it. The bulldozer's blade made that cut."

"Poor baby Harry," Ginny said, kissing the scar again. "It must have been awful. It healed all crooked."

"Yeah, well, they didn't take me to a doctor. Aunt Petunia just yelled at me for bleeding on the kitchen floor and handed me a bandage for it. I suppose it should have had stitches." He rolled onto his back and pulled her up the length of him until they were face to face again. "I'd really rather not talk about my scars right now, if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Ginny's face was sad. She hadn't meant to make him relive old traumas. She'd be more careful when she felt like asking about scars in the future.

He cradled her head in his hands, lacing his fingers through her thick, radiant hair, and smiled at her. "It stopped hurting a long time ago. It's just another scar. I survived it. But I won't survive you lying there and wiggling on me for long," he said with a sudden laugh. He pulled her down into a tender kiss. "You taste good," he said between kisses.

"Mmmm, are you starting things all over again?" she purred. "I'm ready if you are!"

"Oh, you are, are you?" he said with a grin. Suddenly, he stilled, instantly alert, putting his hand on her lips to keep her quiet. "Get dressed. Somebody's coming," he whispered. They dressed quickly and pulled their wands out, listening as hard as they could.

"They're outside," Harry murmured finally, relaxing a little. "I heard voices and . . . ." He was suddenly silent again. Now he recognized the voices. Lucius and Draco Malfoy were standing just outside the house, under the window next to Harry and Ginny. They looked at each other nervously. Harry held his hand up, indicating Ginny shouldn't move. The voices were mumbles beneath them. Ginny reached into her pocket and pulled out two Extendable Ears that Fred and George had given her. Harry grinned at her, glad she was so resourceful. They put the ends of the Ears on the window ledge next to a crack in the frame. Now they could hear the conversation below quite clearly.

"The preparations are complete," Lucius was saying. "You know your part?"

"Yes, Father. I'll take care of it," Draco replied eagerly. "I can't wait to see the look on Potter's face!"

"You will, lad, you will," Lucius said complacently. "The Dark Lord is pleased with this plan. He's very angry that none of Bellatrix's schemes have worked so far. She had some other preparations ready when she died. If whatever else she had set up works, this one won't be necessary."

"But it's so cool! I hope her plan doesn't work so this one will be used," Draco whinged, sounding like the spoiled brat he was.

"Cool or not, it has to work, or the Dark Lord's wrath will be on our heads," Lucius said seriously. "I'll be in touch a few days before, to give you what's needed."

"All right." Draco paused a moment, then went on in a completely different tone. "Can I have a new broom? Potter just bought that cow he goes out with a new Firebolt. I want the new Firebolt Mark 4 – he just got her the same model he has. The Mark 4 isn't on the market yet, but I'm sure you can talk them into letting me have one, can't you, Father?" he wheedled.

"I bought your entire team new brooms not that long ago. They should be fine in competition against the rest of the school teams," Lucius said dismissively.

"Not with Potter and his stupid weasel bitch on Firebolts!" Draco cried petulantly.

Harry was so angry, he was grinding his teeth. He touched Ginny on the shoulder, willing her to not be hurt by what Malfoy was calling her. He was relieved to see she was full of fiery temper too, not the least bit upset They smiled at each other briefly, then concentrated on the conversation again.

"No, Draco. You'll be out of school in another year. Your broom is fine for school use. If you do very well in your N.E.W.T. exams next term, I will consider buying you a new broom to celebrate," Lucius said dryly. "I have to go now. Try not to be seen on your way back to school, since this isn't a Hogsmeade weekend."

"Right. Goodbye, Father."

"Goodbye, Draco."

Harry and Ginny heard soft footsteps moving away from the building. Harry risked putting his eye to the crack in the boards to look outside and see if anyone else had been present. Nope, just Draco trudging back toward school. He still wasn't very good at Apparating and was afraid of splinching himself, so instead of Apparating to the school gates as anyone else his age would have done, he was walking. Harry had to stifle a laugh over this. Lucius watched his son leaving, shook his head with a disgusted expression, then Apparated with no problem.

"C'mon," he said quietly. "We need to get back to school."

"He said what?" Hermione cried, stunned.

"Apparently the Malfoys have some new plan cooked up to get me," Harry said grimly.

"Where were you? Was Mr. Malfoy on school grounds?" Hermione pushed.

Harry and Ginny glanced at each other and blushed. "Erm, we weren't exactly on school grounds when we heard this," Harry explained, hoping they wouldn't demand more details.

"Where were you then?" Ron asked, his face twisted up in confusion.

"If you must know, we were in the Shrieking Shack," Ginny snapped.

"What were you doing there?" Ron said, totally flummoxed.

"None of your business," Ginny growled, her eyes fiery. "Listen to the NEWS we're sharing and don't get nosy about other things!"

Ron stared at her a moment, then his face lit with comprehension. "Ohhhh. I get it," he said, nodding.

Ginny glared at him, daring him to tease her or step out of line in any way at all. Harry watched her with fond amusement. Nobody got away with meddling with Ginny.

"So anyway," Harry said, trying to get things back on track before Ginny and Ron started throwing hexes at each other, "what do you think we should do about this?"

"Well. . ." Hermione began, "since we're in the Order now, you should share the information with them."

Harry looked at her, astonished. "Whoa. You're right, Hermione. I didn't even think of that. OK, I'll talk to Remus."

As Harry and Ginny got up to leave, Ron followed, touching Harry hesitantly on the arm. "Erm. . .Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You and Ginny cleaned up part of the Shack to use it, didn't you?" Ron said diffidently.

"Uh. . .yeah," Harry said carefully, glancing at Ginny, who was still looking at her brother with a steely glint in her eye.

Ron glanced at his sister nervously, then soldiered on. "So you found a place to be alone?"

"Yeah." Harry blushed and was rewarded with a blush from Ron as well.

"Hermione and I could use a place like that too," Ron said carefully, watching Harry's face closely.

Harry looked down at Ginny. They were so pleased to have a place to call their own. Did they really want to share it? He looked up at Ron and then back at Ginny. Ron was his best mate. He always enjoyed sharing things with Ron, but would Ginny agree? "OK with you?"

She studied his face a moment, then nodded. "Yeah."

Harry gave her a squeeze and smiled at Ron. "We'll have to work out a system so we don't both wind up there at the same time."

"Great! Thanks!" Ron said, his face lit up with excitement.

"Why don't you suggest to Hermione that you two need a study break right now?" Harry suggested. "There's still some daylight left. The Invisibility Cloak is in my bag – go ahead and take it, in case she agrees."

"Cool! You're the best, Harry!" Ron said, all smiles. "Thanks, Ginny!"

Harry and Ginny watched Ron approach Hermione and start trying to convince her that there was more to life than books. When they saw her face change from irritation at her studying being interrupted to delight, they left to go and find Remus.

"I don't know what we can do about it other than to be extra cautious," Remus told Harry and Ginny. "If we try to use Veritaserum on Draco, the Shrieking Shack will be revealed as not being haunted, won't it?" His eyes crinkled in a knowing smile as he looked from Harry to Ginny and back again. "And I suspect you don't want that secret known any more than I do, right?"

"Uh. . .right," Harry said, blushing madly.

"That's what I thought. We'll just have to keep an eye on Draco, see what he's up to. I'll talk to Albus about this. Thanks for letting me know."

"Erm. . .do you need to tell him how you found out?" Harry said uncomfortably, blushing even more.

"I'll be as delicate as I can, Harry, but if I have to tell him, I will," Remus said honestly. "He'll understand. Believe it or not, even Albus Dumbledore was young once."

Harry and Ginny burst out laughing at Remus's comment and the twinkle in his eye. "Yeah, I guess so," Harry replied, still snorting with laughter. "It's hard to imagine him as a teenager, though."

"I'm sure he was one once, a century or two ago," Remus teased.

April was awash in colour, flowers running rampant through the meadows and hills, water lilies in full bloom at the edge of the lake. Baby ducks and geese followed their parents happily paddling around the pond Harry had created with his explosion months earlier. The sunlight poured through the castle windows, warming the always chilly corridors enough for the students to loosen their robes and their ties as they hurried between classes.

After a truly awful and exhausting day of double sessions of his least favourite classes on one such glorious day, a very grumpy Harry saw Ginny walking ahead of him with some other girls on their way to the library. While one of the other girls was talking, Ginny was picking at a top she rarely wore, her oldest and most hated piece of clothing. Harry's dark mood lifted a bit when he saw her. He smiled sympathetically, knowing how much she loathed that top, and that, for her to be forced to wear it, there must be a good-sized pile of laundry in need of washing that she hadn't put out for the house elves to care for. As he neared them, he could hear her speaking.

"I just hate this tatty old thing."

One of the other girls mumbled something Harry couldn't understand, and Ginny stiffened, then responded, "Really? Well. . . ." There were more comments from the other girl, followed by a burst of laughter from everyone but Ginny, and then Ginny replied, "Yeah, I know. I hate shopping there, but. . .well. . . ." She sighed, straightened her shoulders and went on, "When Harry and I are married. . . ."

Her words became unintelligible to Harry again as another group of chattering girls passed in the other direction. He smiled, warmed by the thought of him and Ginny being married. *Yeah, it could happen*, he thought, his heart lifting at the prospect. Then he heard Ginny's clear, light voice again.

"Yes, he's the one who bought me the Firebolt. No, of course he didn't empty his vault to buy it for me. He's not stupid. What? Oh, didn't you know? He was wealthy already from his parents' estate, but then he inherited Sirius Black's fortune as well. Yeah, Sirius was his godfather. No, he wasn't a murderer. He was framed. Anyway, Harry's got more money than

the Malfoys now, and a big house in London. He asked me to redecorate the house, you know. I can buy whatever I want for it. When we're married, I won't ever have to wear tatty clothes again." She prattled on happily, not realizing that, behind her, Harry's face had gone stony.

Does she only care about me because of my money? he thought, aghast. His temper flared and he caught up with her in three long strides. He grabbed her shoulder and whirled her around roughly. "Is that the way it is? You only care about me because I have money? What are you, a fan girl? I thought you were better than that," he growled, his chest heaving as he tried to quell the rage building up inside him.

"Harry! I didn't see you there," Ginny began, her face bright red with embarrassment.

"No, you didn't. So that means I heard what you really think, and it isn't pretty," he snapped. "We're through." He stormed away, leaving a stunned Ginny and a gaggle of gossiping girls in his wake.

"Harry, wait! You don't understand!" she cried, throwing down her books and running after him, tears streaming down her face. "Harry! *Wait!*"

Harry lengthened his stride until he was running, bursting out of the front doors of the castle and racing across the lawn, heading toward the woods beyond Hagrid's hut. Ginny kept following him. "Harry! Harry, wait! Please! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it that way! Harry!" She finally stopped calling when she saw a raven flying straight at her. The raven dive-bombed her, droppings splattering her robes. "Harry?" she said meekly through her tears. "Harry? Please talk to me! Harry?"

The raven circled for a minute more, glaring at her with its startling green eyes, then flew away as fast as it could go. Ginny sat down hard, wrapping her arms around her legs and burying her face in her knees, sobbing so hard her body shook. Hagrid found her that way a while later, still crying.

"Ginny! What's wrong? Oh dear, some bird nailed ya, didn't he? Must've been a big'un. Come along to my hut, and we'll get ya cleaned up," he said kindly.

It took a few moments for Ginny to respond. When she did, Hagrid was astonished at how swollen and red her face was.

"How long have ya been cryin'?" he asked in concern. She shook her head and shrugged. "What's wrong?" he asked again. She just shook her head and dropped it back onto her knees.

Hagrid sat down next to her, not knowing how to comfort her. "Is it Harry? Is he all right?" She nodded, then shook her head. "What's wrong with him? Where is he? Do we need to get help? Talk to me, Ginny!" he said urgently, getting frightened now. Ginny was a strong girl. It would take something horrible for her to be crying this hard. "Talk to me! What is it?"

"H-h-h-he. . ." she began, then sniffled and tried again. "H-h-h-he overheard m-m-m-me saying s-something. . .*s-s-stupid*," she said, sniffling hard between words.

"Ah, we all say stupid things. That's nothin' to worry about. He cares about you too much ter be too upset with you for a slip o' the tongue," Hagrid assured her.

"H-h-he thinks. . .he thinks I only l-l-love him b-b-because. . .because he's . . .r-r-rich," she stammered between sobs.

Hagrid sat up straight, shocked. "Oh dear. That *would* bother him," he murmured, knowing Harry well enough to realize how deeply this idea would wound him.

"Yeah. It did," she agreed.

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. H-h-he changed into a r-r-raven and took off. He did this," she indicated the mess on her robes, "to me."

"Harry did that? Great galloping gargoyles," Hagrid replied, looking at the stains on her robes. "It'll wash, don't worry about it." He felt completely useless. *It'll wash. As if she cares about that right now!* he thought, disgusted with himself.

"But how do I make up with Harry?" she wailed. Hagrid put his massive arm around her and pulled her against his hairy vest, at a loss for a way to comfort her. He patted her awkwardly on the back, trying to console her. Fang ran up and started licking her face, upset by the sound of the girl's crying.

After a while, Ginny finally quieted. Hagrid helped her to her feet and led her to his cabin, where he gave her a cold wet cloth to wash her face, and he helped her clean up her robes. Near dark, Ginny trudged back up to the castle, picked up her books where they'd been shoved aside in the hall and made her way to Gryffindor Tower. She'd hoped to see Harry in the Common Room, but he wasn't there, and nobody had seen him. Ron and Hermione looked at her with great concern. They'd heard about the confrontation in the corridor and Ginny's face was still swollen from crying.

"Have you talked to him?" Ron asked, his face filled with worry. He led her and Hermione into a quiet corner where they could talk privately.

"No. He turned into a raven and flew away," she said miserably. "He actually dive-bombed me."

"What?" Hermione said, confused.

"He crapped on me. I had a great load of bird droppings on my robes until Hagrid cleaned me up," she mumbled.

Ron was horribly tempted to laugh at the idea of Harry actions, but his sister's anguish tore at his heart. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know. He flew off over the woods. I haven't seen him since. I waited and waited for him to come back, but he never did," she said, tears still streaming down her face.

"Does Remus know Harry's gone?" Hermione asked.

"I haven't told anyone but you and Hagrid."

Ron looked at Hermione. "I'll go and talk to Remus. He should know. It's nearly dark. Harry shouldn't still be out there." Hermione nodded, her eyes wide with fear for Harry's safety. "If he comes back here, send me an Adfero, OK?" Ron added as he patted his sister on the back and kissed the top of Hermione's head. He strode quickly to the portrait hole and left.

"Come on, Ginny, let's get you cleaned up," Hermione said kindly. Ginny followed her docilely enough, her head hanging, her hair curtaining her face so nobody could see it.

A short time later, Remus and Ron got on their brooms and flew out to look for Harry. Finding a raven at dusk is a difficult task at best. Finding a particular one when there are huge flocks of them around is even harder. They flew a long distance, calling Harry's name and looking carefully at every black bird they spotted, but to no avail. They finally gave up when it was fully dark, flying back to the castle and sitting on the steps in shared misery.

"Why would she say such a thing? That's not why she loves him," Ron said, shaking his head in disgust. "I don't blame him for getting angry."

"She's usually so mature, I think all of us forget how young she is. Some of the girls you told me she was with set a lot of store on being dressed stylishly. I think she was compensating somehow. Maybe one of them made a rude remark about her clothes and started the whole thing," Remus said carefully. "That doesn't excuse it, but I suspect that's what happened. She made a mistake. It's just a shame that Harry had to hear it."

As they sat there, full darkness fell and the torches around the entrance flared to life. "Oh, Harry, where are you?" Remus said despondently.

"Here I am," came a low voice from the darkness. Harry moved slowly into the torch light and sat beside his godfather. He looked exhausted and heartbroken.

"Where have you been?" Ron asked anxiously. "We've been looking everywhere for you. We took brooms out and went through every flock of ravens we could find, we called ourselves hoarse, we've been frantic! Where were you?"

"I saw you a few times," Harry replied. "I'm sorry I worried you. I just couldn't stand the idea of being in the castle with. . .with. . ."

"With Ginny?" Remus supplied warily.

"With her, and with everyone knowing I was duped by her," Harry growled.

"Mate, that's just not true," Ron began.

"I heard what I heard, Ron," Harry said, his voice stern.

"She's young – she has a right to be stupid every so often. She is a Weasley, after all," Ron said, trying to get a smile out of his best friend.

"That's no excuse. You, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie, your parents – none of you would say such a thing," Harry snapped.

"None of us but Mum and Ginny are girls. That fashion stuff is more important to them than it is to blokes. And you've heard me gripe about being poor loads of times," Ron said as reasonably as he could. "Having to wear second-hand stuff is hard enough for me. As much as the girls are into 'stylish' stuff, it's a lot harder on Ginny to always be wearing somebody's cast-off clothes."

Harry turned on him and snarled, "I grew up wearing cast-off clothes. I understand that. I know how miserable it can make you feel. I do my best to be careful not to offend any of you because I have money. I'd gladly give your family half of what I have, but I know it would insult all of you. I don't want to do that. I'd never deliberately hurt the feelings of anyone in your family. I try so damned hard. . . ." He was quiet a moment, his body tense as he wrestled with the emotions roiling within him. "I never had any money growing up, and was led to believe I'd never have any. You know that. I didn't earn that money, nor did I ask for it. Don't you think I'd rather have my parents, rather have Sirius, than have all the money in the world? Don't you? I'd give it all up in a heartbeat to have any of them back again!" he snapped, unshed tears in his eyes. "I asked your parents permission to buy Ginny a broom so I wouldn't offend them. I try so hard to be considerate, and look where it's gotten me!" His voice broke with grief as he finished his tirade. He got up and stormed off again, disappearing in the dark.

"Harry? Harry, wait! I'm sorry!" Ron called, starting to go after him.

"I'll go," Remus said. "I'm afraid he's going to hurt your feelings, the way he's acting right now. He and Ginny being hurt is bad enough. We don't need any more damaged friendships from this situation."

Ron nodded, his eyes heartbroken. He sat and watched Remus disappear in the dark, then waited for him to reappear. He suddenly remembered he should let the girls know Harry was all right, so he sent an Adfero to Hermione and Ginny. A long time later, Remus and Harry came back to the front door. Harry's head was hanging low, his fringe hiding his eyes. "Harry. Mate. I'm sorry," Ron said, his heart in his voice.

Harry glanced up at Ron. "I'm sorry too. It wasn't your fault. It's not your fault the Ministry doesn't pay your dad what he's worth. You know I think you and all your family are brilliant. Well, with the possible exception of Percy," he added with a hint of a smile. "Still friends?"

"Still best mates," Ron assured him, standing and giving him a back-pounding hug. When they separated, Ron looked into Harry's eyes. "What about Ginny?"

"We're finished. I can't trust her. I can't be with someone I can't trust," Harry said in a dead-sounding voice.

Ron took a deep breath. "All right, then. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. You and I are still mates, though, right?"

Harry looked up and smiled a little. "Right. Best mates. Thanks."

"Yeah."

Remus put an arm around Harry's shoulders. "C'mon, lads, we'd best get inside before they lock us out."

The next couple of weeks seemed to crawl by for Harry. He followed Ron and Hermione around most of the time, missing the warm, bright spirit that used to be by his side. He caught glimpses of her from time to time, but he would not talk to her, nor would he listen to her. She followed at a distance if they were going the same way, and sat alone or with her fellow Fifth Years when she was at meals or in the library. She stopped asking Harry, Ron and Hermione for help on her O.W.L. revision and poured herself into her work, getting huge exhausted circles under her eyes from studying too much and from crying most of the night instead of sleeping.

Harry didn't look much better, but the crowd of fan girls that had magically re-materialized when word got round that he was "single" again didn't seem to mind his sad eyes and exhausted air. Apparently, they found such things sexy.

Harry tried his best to ignore them. He was finished with girls. He just wanted to be left alone. He had to fight Voldemort. He shouldn't have a girlfriend anyway, since he wasn't likely to live long enough to enjoy one. His moods got blacker and bleaker as the days went on. Ron and Hermione were at a loss as to how to cheer him up.

One day, they were studying in the library and Harry exploded in frustration when he couldn't find the notes he was searching for. "I've had it. I have to go for a walk," he said, throwing his quill down and storming out of the library.

"Should we go after him?" Hermione asked Ron nervously.

"I dunno. What do you think?"

"I don't think he's angry enough to do any damage. . . . Maybe he does just need some time alone," she offered.

"What he needs is Ginny. She's the only one who can cheer him up when he's like this," Ron said darkly.

"That's just not going to happen," Hermione said sadly. "What a shame."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. He turned to her and gazed steadily in her eyes. "Let's make a pact."

"What kind of pact?"

"I, Ron Weasley, solemnly swear to never let the sun go down on my anger with Hermione Granger. If I have to grovel in the mud to get her to forgive me, I will do it."

"And I, Hermione Granger, solemnly swear to never let the sun go down on my anger with Ron Weasley. If I have to crawl through owl droppings to get him to forgive me, I will do it."

Ron looked at her, his eyes full of love. "You just had to go and top me, didn't you?" he said with a chuckle. "'Owl droppings,' indeed."'

Hermione just grinned at him, then leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips. "I love you, Ron."

"I love you too. Don't you forget it, either!" he said as he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her.

"No snogging in the library!" Madam Pince snapped imperiously.

"Uh-oh, busted," Ron said, sniggering.

"Yeah. We'll have to go back in the stacks with everybody else to snog, I suppose," Hermione giggled.

Meanwhile, Harry was storming down the hall, not going anywhere in particular. He was angry a lot these days, and controlling his temper was taking a great deal of effort. As he rounded a corner in the corridor, he realized a crowd of giggling girls was following him again. He sighed heavily. *Why can't they just leave me alone?*

"Harry? Harry!" one of them called. "You're single now, right? Would you like to go to Hogsmeade with me next week?"

He sighed and turned to face them. "Yes, I'm single now, but no, thank you, I don't want to go to Hogsmeade with any of you. No offence." He turned to walk away from them, but felt them surging closer behind him.

"Harry! When will you be ready for a new girlfriend?" another one called.

"Yeah! I want to apply for the position!" a blond Fourth Year Ravenclaw girl called boldly. "No, I want it!" a Sixth Year Hufflepuff cried. "No, me!" "No, Harry, pick me!" The calls were escalating. Harry could see an argument was imminent.

"Please, just leave me alone, OK? I'm not ready for another girlfriend," he said as patiently as he could. Suddenly Pansy Parkinson was right in front of him, shoving her body lewdly against him, running her hands over his chest in a much too familiar fashion, backing him against the wall.

"Harry? You were so kind to me at the Yule Ball. I'd like to repay the favour," she said in a husky voice, rubbing her body against his, now sliding one hand over his face and into his hair, the other playing with his belt, apparently heading for his crotch any minute. "I'll do anything you want. I mean it. *Anything*."

"No, thank you, Pansy," Harry said, what little patience he had running out quickly, putting his hands on her shoulders and pushing her away as gently as his temper would allow. "As I said. . .*AAH!"* he cried. Pansy had slammed the back of her hand against his cheek and pulled it down sharply, viciously slicing his face with the prongs of her ring. Blood poured from the wound. Harry put his hand up to his cheek, astonished that she'd hit him that way, amazed that he was bleeding. That was the last coherent thought he had as he collapsed and hit the floor.

Pansy looked at him in horror, then backed away, saying, "Oh, Harry! NO! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" She turned and ran. Some of the gathered girls screamed, while the rest gathered in tearful clusters around Harry, watching in horrified fascination as he moaned on the floor, writhing in obvious agony. Not one of them moved to help him, nor did any of them pay any attention to the odd flashes and clicking coming from inside the crowd.

"*MOVE!*" came a shout from behind them. Ginny came storming through the group, shoving bodies aside heedlessly. "Harry? Harry! Can you hear me?" she said as she knelt by his side.

"Help," Harry croaked, barely aware that someone had come to his aid. "Help me. Poison." His eyes flickered open and he saw a mass of long red hair close to his face. "Ginny," he whispered as darkness enfolded him.

"Yes, love, it's me. I'll take care of you," she said as she snatched off her necklace and laid it in the deepest cut the prongs of Pansy's ring had made in Harry's cheek. She wished she had more necklaces with poison wards on them to put in his other cuts. The girls around them had dispersed quickly when Ginny appeared. Nobody was left to send for help. Ginny saw Harry fading before her eyes despite the powers of her necklace. She dug into the pocket of his jeans and found the pocket knife she'd given him for Christmas. "Bless you for still carrying this even when you're angry with me," she muttered as she opened the blade. "And bless you for keeping it sharp. This is going to hurt a bit," she said as she laid the point of the blade against his cheek. "I'm sorry, baby." She cut between the scrapes from the ring prongs, then set the knife aside while sending a frantic Adfero to Remus, Dumbledore, Snape and Madam Pomfrey. She removed her necklace from the cut, then leaned down and put her mouth over the wound, sucking Harry's blood into her mouth, and then spitting it out on the floor. She noticed a bitter flavour that didn't taste like blood. She kept sucking at the wound until all she tasted was blood. She put her necklace back on the wound and kept her hand on it to keep it in place as she lay down next to him, dizzy from her exertions. She passed out, her hand still on Harry's cheek, his blood flowing between her fingers and running down her arm.

With most of the poison out of his system, Harry opened his eyes and saw Ginny lying beside him, her face too still, too pale. "Ginny? Ginny? What's. . .?"

He saw his knife on the floor and remembered her cutting his face. Suddenly, he realized she'd used a Muggle method for treating snake bite that she'd read in the old Muggle first aid book she'd found in a bookstore. She'd become interested in Muggle healer methods after Harry had used mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on her when Voldemort threw her over the cliff into the lake. Based on what she'd read in that Muggle book, she'd cut Harry's wound open more and sucked the poison out with her mouth.

"Oh, no. Please be all right, love," he said, trying to sit up. His head swam and he sank back down on the floor, moaning in pain. He took the pendant off his cheek and took her hand, the pendant held in both of their hands. He passed out, still holding her hand with the pendant between them.

Remus slid to a halt on his knees beside the still pair. "Harry? Ginny?" He stared around him, looking for someone to answer his questions. "What the bloody hell happened?" Dumbledore arrived moments later.

"Let's take them to my office, it's the closest," Dumbledore suggested. He started to levitate them, and was surprised to see Harry wake a little and reach out to embrace Ginny. Harry kept holding her hand with the pendant between them, but used his other arm to hold her close to him. Dumbledore levitated the pair of them up the spiral staircase to his office and conjured a bed, where he laid them down together, their hands still clasped over Ginny's pendant, Harry's arm still holding her close to him. Madam Pomfrey showed up with a medical kit in her hand.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Some kind of poison," Remus replied. "Where's Severus? Ginny sent an Adfero to him, too, didn't she?"

"Yes, she said she did," Dumbledore agreed. "I'm sure he'll be here soon."

Snape strode into the office at that point, looking even more grim than usual. "I have the antidote here," he snapped, pulling a flask from his pocket.

"How do you know which poison it is?" Remus asked, wary on Harry's behalf since Harry wasn't awake to question his treatment.

"He was poisoned by a ring worn by Pansy Parkinson. I've just come from her dormitory room. She took her own life with the same ring. She left a *note*," he said, his lip curling in disgust. He offered the note to Dumbledore.

Remus, Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were horrified to hear that Pansy had killed herself. Snape gave Harry and Ginny the potion while Dumbledore read Pansy's note.

"*I killed Harry Potter. I didn't mean to. Madam Desiree in The Ladies' Shop is a Death Eater. She gave me a poisoned ring and put a spell on me so I'd kill Harry if other things she had planned didn't kill him. I didn't want to do it. Harry was kind to me at the Yule Ball, and I've never forgotten that. I didn't want to kill him. I'm so sorry. I can't go on. I can't forgive myself for this."* The note was signed, *"Pansy Parkinson. I wish I'd been anything but a Slytherin."*

Harry woke up a few moments later. "Ginny?" he asked blearily, turning to look at her. Her colour was a bit better, but she was still breathing shallowly, rapidly. He started rubbing her lips with his thumb, hoping somehow to help her get well faster with his healing touch. He glanced around at the adults surrounding them. "How is she?"

"She'll recover," Snape said. "She sent the message quickly enough that I was able to bring the right antidote. I went and found Miss Parkinson right away to see what she'd used, but she was already gone. It was a simple matter to identify the poison in the ring. Bellatrix LeStrange never was very good with complex potions. This was a straightforward but very effective poison. You should've been dead in a matter of minutes, Potter. Your luck is still holding."

Harry just stared at the man in confusion, not knowing how to respond to him. He looked back at his godfather. "Pansy's. . .gone? Where?"

"She killed herself, Harry. She thought she'd killed you, and she was very upset about that. She was under an enchantment to make her kill you. It was one of Bellatrix's plans," Remus explained, dampening a cloth and wiping Harry's sweaty forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," Harry said, his head rocking back and forth, still in some pain despite the antidote. He squinted up at his godfather. Someone had removed his glasses. What Remus had told him moments before finally registered. "Did you say Pansy's dead? She killed herself?"

"Yes," Remus said sadly.

"Oh, no. Oh, no. She shouldn't have done that. She. . . ." Harry stopped talking, his mouth pressed into a thin line as he forced himself to accept this latest horror in his life. "I'm so sorry," he muttered. "How awful."

"Yes, it is awful," Remus agreed, patting the boy's shoulder gently, wishing he knew some way to truly comfort him. "Voldemort doesn't care who he hurts to get what he wants. Pansy didn't deserve this fate."

Harry looked at Ginny, his thumb still rubbing her lips. She was so still. Her eyelids looked translucent, bluish, her freckles so pale they were nearly gone. Her hair looked almost violently red against the pallor of her skin. Did Pansy looked so horribly ashen, her eyelids translucent and blue like Ginny's? *Don't think that way*, he chided himself. *Ginny's going to get well. Pansy's gone.* "She deserved better," he muttered miserably.

"Yes, she did," Snape snapped. He gathered up his things and swept out of the office like an overgrown bat. "Let me know if you need me again. In the meantime, I have a mess to clear up in the Slytherin dormitory and an owl to send."

Harry stared despondently at the door Snape had gone through for several moments, stirring only when Madam Pomfrey ran her hand over his forehead and then looked into his eyes, checking his condition. "How long do we have to stay in the hospital wing this time?" he asked sadly.

"You require at least two days of bed rest, young man," Madam Pomfrey said kindly.

Harry pulled Ginny closer to him. He had kept his arm around her throughout the levitation and while they were being treated for the poison. He smoothed her hair away from her face with the arm he still held around her back, then went back to rubbing her lips with his thumb. His other hand still held hers with the pendant between their hands. "What about Ginny? How long will she be sick?"

"She doesn't have the immunity to poisons you seem to have. She will be sick a day or two longer, possibly. We'll just have to see how she is when she wakes up," Madam Pomfrey said quietly, wiping sweat off of Ginny's face as she spoke. "We need to put you in separate beds, Mr. Potter."

"No. I'm not letting go of her. I can make her better," he said stubbornly.

"She's had the potions she needed. She'll heal at her own speed," the nurse insisted.

"No. I will not let go of her, not until she's better," Harry said firmly. He wrapped his arm more tightly around her shoulders, tucking her head securely into the hollow of his shoulder and settling down to stay like that however long was necessary. He glared around the room, challenging the adults there. If any of them tried to take her away from him, they were in for a fight.

"Leave them alone, Poppy," Dumbledore said benignly. "They're good for each other. Let them be."

Satisfied he'd made his point, Harry rested his cheek against Ginny's hair and drifted off to sleep.

The adults moved away to deal with their own concerns, or at least other parts of Dumbledore's office, letting the teenagers rest. Madam Pomfrey or Remus checked on them from time to time, but both were resting quietly. After an hour or so, Remus heard soft conversation coming from the bed and glanced over to see Ginny finally awake, and Harry giving her a warm welcome back among the living. Remus smiled and turned away, giving them a little privacy.

"Sweetheart! You're awake!" Harry said softly as Ginny's eyes fluttered open momentarily. "C'mon, open those beautiful eyes. I know you can do it," he encouraged her, kissing her forehead and cheeks softly, his heart full to overflowing that she was finally waking up.

"H-h-harry? What happened? Where are we?" She tried to lift her head to look around, but just couldn't manage it yet.

"We're in Dumbledore's office. We've both had the antidote. You're going to be fine. You saved my life again, Ginny. I've lost track of which of us has the most life debts to the other," he said with a quiet chuckle. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," she mumbled, her eyes trying to close again.

"Ginny?" Harry said quickly. "I need to tell you something. Wake up, please? Just for a minute?"

She opened her eyes again, finally getting them to focus on him. "Oh, Harry, I did an awful job on your face. You're going to have a horrible scar," she said, looking at the wound on his cheek. Madam Pomfrey had left it uncovered after pouring a potion on it that would knit the tissues back together. Tears ran down her face as she berated herself for ruining his handsome face.

"Madam Pomfrey says it won't leave a scar," Harry hastened to assure her.

"No scar? It looks terrible!" she blurted, then burst into tears again. "Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean. . ."

"Don't worry about it. I'm going to be fine, and it's all down to you. The potion that's on the wound right now will make it heal with no scar."

"Oh, that's wonderful! I'm so glad to hear that," she said with relief.

"If you hadn't been there, hadn't done what you did – and you didn't even think about the fact the poison might have killed you," Harry said, his voice breaking with emotion. "If I'd lost you. . . ." He stopped and controlled himself. "Thank you."

She smiled at him serenely. "Anytime."

He looked her quite seriously in the eyes. "I need to tell you something. Are you awake enough?"

"Um-hmm," she murmured, still smiling sweetly at him.

"What I need to tell you is – I'm every kind of idiot there is on the face of the earth. I'm stupid and insensitive and stupid and impatient and stupid and short-tempered and stupid and. . ." He had to stop because she'd put her hand on his lips.

"You're not stupid, although you are a bit impatient and short-tempered at times," she said with a smile. "What are you on about?"

"Please forgive me for being so mean to you. I do love you. The last couple of weeks were awful. I missed you so much. I'm sorry for everything I said, for how I acted, for not listening to you. . ." This time he had to stop because she was busy kissing him. She was too weak to hold the kiss for long, but she managed to get her message across to him.

"I love you, Harry. I always have, even before I had any idea that you had money or a house or whatever. Those girls had made fun of me – my top used to belong to one of their older sisters, and they don't wear hand-me-downs, but give their cast-off clothes to charity. And then I wound up with it." The hurt showed in her eyes, then flared briefly into anger that just as quickly faded. "I just wanted to throw something in their faces – and I made a complete fool of myself. Please forgive me," she said humbly. "I won't ever say such things again. And I'd like to give the Firebolt and jewellery back to you. Maybe then you'll believe that I'm in love with you, not your money."

"You will keep all the gifts I've given you, and all the gifts I'm going to give you, sweet girl. I don't want them back. I love you. I love to see your face when you open a present. Even when I pass you notes in the library, the look on your face when you open them just . . . I don't know, it just lifts my heart." He kissed her again, softly, tenderly, not wanting to tire her too much. "You need to rest now. I'm going to take good care of you." He tucked her head into the hollow of his shoulder again and finally opened their hands with the pendant between them. "This pendant has more than proved its worth," he said. "It needs to be cleaned up a bit, but do you want to wear it?"

"Yes. I've never taken it off since you gave it to me, except when Ron needed it at the Yule Ball. Would you put it back on for me?" she said, smiling at him.

Harry looked at the chain and did a quick "Reparo" spell on it, then sat up a bit to fasten it around her neck. He settled back in the bed, opening his arm for her to snuggle in next to him. "You rest. We'll be well in no time," he assured her. He kissed her forehead and breathed in the scent of her. She was going to be all right. His heart finally stopped pounding with worry and he slept peacefully for the first time in weeks.

Chapter 32 – "The Boy-Who-Lived No More"

The *Daily Prophet* headline the next morning filled the top third of the page with thick purple letters: ***"Special Edition! The Boy-Who-Lived No More?"*** Most of the rest of the page was taken up with a vivid colour photo of Harry lying on the floor in the corridor, writhing in agony, his face cut and bleeding profusely, a crowd of screaming, horrified girls surrounding him. The article began on the bottom of the page and continued on three full pages inside, going into gruesome and flamboyant details about the violent attack on Harry. Other pictures inside the issue showed Ginny sucking the poison out of Harry's wound, Ginny collapsing on the floor next to Harry, and Harry waking up just long enough to embrace her.

"**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. On 14th April, sixteen-year-old Harry Potter was viciously attacked by Pansy Parkinson, 16, a Sixth Year member of Slytherin House. Potter is well-known throughout the wizarding world as 'The Boy-Who-Lived' for his defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named when Potter was only a year old. Harry Potter is also the Hero of Hogsmeade, Hero of the Battle of *Cascade Prele du Chevaux*, France, survivor of several other encounters with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, defeater of Dementors and Death Eaters in numerous battles, and the youngest person ever nominated for the Order of Merlin, Second Class, by no less than Albus Dumbledore himself.**

Charismatic and attractive despite the lightning-bolt shaped scar on his forehead, Potter, a Sixth Year Gryffindor, is not only widely known as a hero, but also as the youngest Seeker in a century at Hogwarts, and will probably be scouted for professional Quidditch teams if he survives his years at Hogwarts. He is now the Gryffindor Quidditch team Captain and Seeker, and is featured on Gryffindor Quidditch posters as well as being the youngest wizard ever to be honoured by being featured on Famous Wizard Cards. He is the founder and leader of 'Dumbledore's Army,' a Defence Against the Dark Arts club now in its second year at Hogwarts, where the students practice their Defence spells and learn other hexes and jinxes in preparation for the war with the Dark Forces. Potter has been able to cast a corporeal Patronus since the age of 13, and won the Tri-Wizard Tournament at the age of 14. Quite a remarkable wizard indeed, and he's grown into a truly handsome young man, his wildly tousled shock of jet-black hair framing a pale face with rosy cheeks and lips, flashing emerald green eyes and hint of a dimple in his chin, tall, broad-shouldered, muscular – everything you could hope for in a hero. With all this, he's humble, kind-hearted, polite and charming as well.

The heroine of this tragedy is the beautiful, vivacious and petite Ginny Weasley, 15, a Fifth Year Gryffindor, Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, leader of the Healer Squad of Dumbledore's Army, and the youngest-ever nominee for the Order of Merlin, Third Class, as a result of the Battle of *Cascade Prele du Chevaux*, which took place over the Easter holiday on a mountaintop in eastern France. Miss Weasley is the youngest child and only daughter of Arthur and Molly Weasley. Arthur Weasley is head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office in the Ministry of Magic. He and his wife, Molly, a homemaker, have seven children, two of whom, including Ginny, are still at Hogwarts. Their son Ronald, a tall, rugged seventeen-year-old Sixth Year Gryffindor, is Harry Potter's best friend and Keeper on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, the strategist and one of the leaders of Dumbledore's Army, as well as a nominee for the Order of Merlin, Third Class for the Battle of *Cascade Prele du Chevaux*. Ginny Weasley is athletic but dainty, with a luxurious mane of red hair that falls past her waist, her nose decorated

with a charming assortment of freckles. Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter have been a hot item all this school term, but recently had a disagreement that ended their relationship.

"**On the day in question, Pansy Parkinson, a sarcastic, pug-faced girl with a sour attitude and no accolades to her name, tried to take advantage of Potter's break-up with Ginny Weasley, making lewd advances to Potter in the corridor. When he politely rejected them, she hit him in the face, deliberately cutting long, deep slices in his ruggedly handsome features with the sharp prongs of her ring. This act wasn't heinous enough – no, the ring itself contained a fast-acting poison. Fellow students watched in horror as Potter writhed in agony on the floor while the poison did its nasty work, his beautiful green eyes flashing as he moaned in agony. Ginny Weasley, who still loves Potter despite the recent problems in their relationship, broke through mob of the weeping girls and began to administer some type of first aid that involved cutting Potter's stunning face further and sucking his blood, and, this writer supposes, the poison out as well, then spitting it on the floor. Weasley passed out on the floor after finishing her ministrations, probably sickened by the vile poison she was sucking out along with Potter's blood. Potter woke up long enough to see it was his own true love that was caring for him, and embraced her before he, too, passed out, both of them barely breathing. School staff soon arrived on the scene and Potter and Weasley were removed to Headmaster Albus Dumbledore's office rather than the hospital wing. As they were levitated off the floor, Potter awoke long enough to embrace Weasley, holding her close until they were out of sight in the staircase to the Headmaster's office.**

"**There have been numerous attempts on Harry Potter's life this school term, an apparent plot of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, who, from rumours heard by this writer, has made it his primary objective to kill Potter.**"

The article went on to review all the attempts on Harry's life in the last year, elaborating madly where the writer didn't know all the facts. The story ended several pages later with these lines:

"**The question in everyone's mind now is, why Dumbledore's office? Surely, if these two students are recovering, they would be in the school's hospital wing. Is The Boy-Who-Lived dead at last, his body being kept in Dumbledore's office to hide the fact that Harry Potter is deceased? Repeated efforts have been made to find out Potter's condition, to no avail. If The Boy-Who-Lived is dead, why have we not been told? What of Ginny Weasley? Is she deceased as well? Did they die in each other's arms, lovers to the end? If Harry Potter truly is dead, who will save us from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? It's inconceivable that Potter could survive a Killing Curse at the hands of You-Know-Who himself, only to be murdered by a poisoned ring on a vengeful schoolgirl's hand, but Potter has spent his entire life doing the inconceivable. Has he cheated death again, or finally succumbed?**"

"Oooooo, this is horrible!" Hermione growled over breakfast as she scanned through the article.

"Who wrote it? Who took the pictures?" Ron asked anxiously. "Is Rita Skeeter sneaking around the school again?"

Luna Lovegood sidled over to the Gryffindor table, sitting down across from Ron, gazing happily at the paper in Hermione's hands. "Hello, Ronald," she said vaguely. "Good article on Harry, huh?"

Hermione exploded. "NO! It's dreadful! I'm going to get that Rita Skeeter if it's the last thing I do." Her rage did nothing to dim Luna's dreamy smile.

"Is she the one who wrote it?" Ron said. "She's changed her style a bit, hasn't she? Not much," he amended in the face of Hermione's rage, "just a little. The writing's a bit different, that's all. And how did she get those pictures?"

"Oh, she got them from me," Luna offered blithely. "And I gave her the story."

"WHAT!" Hermione and Ron said together.

"Luna, I thought you liked Harry," Ron said, totally gob-smacked.

"I do," she said serenely.

"Then why would you do such a thing?"

"I got a camera during the summer and have been following him around ever since the first time he was attacked this year, hoping to get pictures like these," she went on as if there had been no interruption. "The article about him that was in *The Quibbler* and then the *Daily Prophet* seemed to be a help to him, so I thought more articles and photos would be even more help. But I can't get in to see him and find out how he is, so Rita had to take what I gave her. Still, it's a good article, don't you think? Daddy's publishing the one I wrote like it in *The Quibbler* today. I'm a published writer! Isn't that wonderful?" She smiled at them, completely oblivious to their fury.

"It's a HORRIBLE article, and these pictures are AWFUL!" Hermione snarled, reaching across the table as if she'd throttle Luna if only she could reach her. She pulled out her wand and was about to hex the girl when Ron stopped her. "Get off, Ron! She deserves this!" Hermione said, struggling to pull her arms out of the grip of Ron's big hands.

"'Mione, the damage is already done. The article is in print and published. Hexing Luna won't change that," he said reasonably.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Ronald," Luna said sweetly as Hermione settled back in her seat, still huffing with rage.

"Huh?" Ron replied.

"Your sister. And Harry as well. I wish they hadn't died. Surely if they were alive, they'd be in the hospital wing? So they must be dead," she said with her maddening calmness.

"For your information, Luna, Harry and Ginny were taken to Dumbledore's office because it was the closest place to take them. They're recovering just fine. We visited them last night after dinner." He blanched suddenly. "Oh, no! Mum!"

"What?" Hermione cried, shocked.

"She's going to read this. She knows about what happened, but what if she BELIEVES this tripe?" Ron stood up suddenly and ran to the Head Table. "Remus! Remus!" he cried as he ran.

"Mr. Weasley!" Professor Snape sneered, "despite your personal relationship with Professor Lupin, you are required to show the proper respect to a Hogwarts teacher."

"Yes, Professor, sorry, Professor," Ron blurted as he stopped in front of Remus. "May I use your fire to contact my parents? Mum will have read that article in the *Prophet* by now. If she believes it. . . ." Ron's heart was in his eyes.

"Ron, as soon as the first paper arrived and we saw the headline, Professor Dumbledore contacted your parents to assure them everything is all right," Remus said calmly. "That's where he is now, I imagine, still talking to them in his fire. They'll be able to see Ginny and Harry there, too. You're welcome to use my fire if you'd like, of course."

Ron breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks. I was worried. . . ."

"I know," Remus said consolingly.

"Luna Lovegood's to blame for this, Remus. She took the pictures, and she fed the story to Rita Skeeter, and had a similar article of her own published in *The Quibbler*," Ron said, his face deadly serious. "She's supposed to be Harry's friend. I can't believe she'd betray him this way."

Remus frowned in concern. "Did she say why she did it?"

"She thought it would help, like the articles last year did."

"Maybe it will," Remus mused.

"Do you think so?" Ron said, amazed. "All I can see is Harry in a towering rage blowing up the castle, or finding Luna and strangling her. I had to stop Hermione from hexing Luna a few minutes ago." He turned and looked over his shoulder to make sure his girlfriend was still behaving reasonably.

Hagrid, who was sitting next to Remus and heard this whole conversation, said, "Daft, she is. Completely daft."

"Exceedingly daft," Ron snarled. "What are we going to do? Harry will explode when he gets his strength back and hears about this. You know he will," he said to Remus.

"We'll just have to deal with things as they come," Remus said with a shrug. "Why don't you and Hermione go and visit him and Ginny this morning? They may be asleep, but in case they're awake, I know they'll enjoy a visit from you. You already know how to do the curses we'll be doing in Defence today, so I'll give you an exemption."

"OK. Thanks, Remus," Ron said, still looking upset.

"Coddling your favourites again, Lupin?" Snape sneered.

"I think it will be good for all of them," Remus said calmly. He glanced up from the pass he was writing for Ron and Hermione and saw Dumbledore entering the Great Hall. "Ah. Hopefully, Albus will be able to set things right." He handed the note to Ron and indicated the boy should go back to his seat. Dumbledore was standing up in front of his large gold chair, his very presence casting an expectant hush over the gathered students.

"Good morning," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "I know you are all concerned about the article that appeared in today's *Daily Prophet*,"

"It's in *The Quibbler*, too!" Luna called out proudly.

"Ah yes, so I've heard," Dumbledore replied serenely over the titters of laughter Luna's comment had caused across the hall. "It seems Miss Lovegood has a journalistic spirit like her father. Her intentions were, I'm certain, the best, as I know Miss Lovegood is a friend of both Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley." He smiled benignly at Luna, then sighed, lacing his fingers together in front of him, his face growing more serious. "I'm sure you've all heard a great many rumours about what happened, and this article will make you even more curious, so I'm going to tell you the facts as they stand this morning. The photos in the article, are, alas, real. Harry was attacked by Miss Parkinson. His life was saved by Miss Weasley's quick action. Miss Weasley was taken ill from her efforts, which caused her to ingest some poison herself. So the basic facts of the article are true, with one serious exception. Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are both alive and recovering nicely. They will be back in the student population in a day or so, with no lasting effects from their experience. And as for the cuts on Harry's face – they will not result in a scar of any kind. He will look just as he did before. And although the article does not mention it, Miss Parkinson took her own life after she attacked Harry. She thought she'd killed him. She was under an enchantment that forced her to do something she didn't want to do. She couldn't bear the thought that she'd killed Harry, who was kind to her, as she mentioned in a note she left." He paused, sighing heavily. "Let us have a moment of silence in memory of Miss Parkinson."

The Great Hall was so still, even the candles didn't flicker. After a few minutes, Dumbledore went on. "We took Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley to my office because it was the nearest place to work on them. I conjured facilities to make them comfortable and we have continued treatment there, rather than moving them, since they were both in considerable pain for a while. All that said, once Harry and Ginny are back among you – and by the way, they've made up quite nicely – please don't pester them about this incident. As you can see from the pictures, it was an awful thing. Be kind to them, welcome them back, and allow them to put it behind them." He paused, looking around the hall more sternly. "I cannot believe such a large group stood by and watched that boy bleeding, suffering, dying on the floor and not one of them called for assistance. Those of you who were in that group are pictured in the newspaper photos. I will be speaking with each of you in turn. You will each lose house points and have detentions. There will be no more idle standing by in the face of an emergency. Is that understood?" He glared around the silent room, catching the wide, frightened eyes of each and every fan girl who'd been there. Dumbledore took a deep breath and calmed himself a bit before going on. "Now that the explanations of these articles and the incident itself have been made, I am adding to the school rules. There will be no more articles about Harry Potter or anyone else or photos published in any form of any Hogwarts student without their

permission, no matter how good your intentions. Please see me after breakfast, Miss Lovegood. I'd like to speak with you."

"She's in for it now," Ron whispered into Hermione's ear. She nodded. Luna's blissful expression hadn't changed. Apparently, she thought she was going to be rewarded somehow, because her face glowed with pride.

Colin Creevey, however, had cringed at Dumbledore's words. He'd learned his lesson the previous summer when Harry had confronted him about the Quidditch posters and the Famous Wizard Cards. If Harry hadn't set him straight, he'd be in trouble along with Luna. He gulped and reminded himself to be extra nice to Harry the rest of the year to thank Harry for keeping him out of trouble.

During their Defence class time that morning, Ron and Hermione went to Dumbledore's office to visit Harry and Ginny. When they arrived, Madam Pomfrey was bustling around, cleaning up after taking care of her patients. Harry and Ginny were both sleeping soundly, Harry snoring softly, a little whistle coming from Ginny's nose. Her head was nestled on his shoulder and he had both arms wrapped around her. They looked very peaceful. The wound on Harry's face wasn't as livid as it had been the previous day, but it was still ugly.

"What are you two doing here?" the nurse asked.

"Professor Lupin said we could come and visit them," Hermione said quietly, "but we don't want to disturb them. Can we just sit with them for a while?"

"Of course," Madam Pomfrey said with a smile, pulling two chairs up next to the bed. Ron sat down as soon as the chairs were placed, with Hermione standing behind him gently running her fingers through his long wavy mop of hair. "They will probably sleep through the day and tonight as well," the nurse added. "They're making good progress. They were awake a little while ago and they said they weren't in as much pain as before."

"Oh, that's good," Hermione said, her face relieved as she sat down on the arm of Ron's chair.

Madam Pomfrey picked up her bag and said, "I have to go to the hospital wing for a while. Stay as long as you like."

"Thanks," Hermione said. She looked at Ron, who was leaning close to the bed, gently touching Ginny's red mane with one finger. He looked lost. "She's going to be fine, Ron," Hermione murmured.

"Yeah," he said, his eyes still filled with pain. He looked over at Harry, his gaze fixed on the awful wound in his cheek. "Poor Harry. Everything happens to him."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. She put her arm around Ron's back, leaning her head on the back of his shoulder, trying to comfort him, while still trying to deal with her own emotional burdens. "This was a close one. If she hadn't been there, if she hadn't read been studying first aid and healing techniques. . . ." Tears began to run down Hermione's cheeks.

Ron realized she was crying and sat back, pulling her into his lap. "It's OK, 'Mione. They're going to be fine."

"Seems to me," she said between sniffles, "that I just told you the same thing." They chuckled sadly together, and just held on to each other as they watched Harry and Ginny sleep.

The next morning in Dumbledore's office, Harry and Ginny were giggling. The potion Madam Pomfrey had given them for pain from this particular type of poison made them giddy when it didn't make them sleepy. They'd slept through an entire day and night, and now the potion had nearly worn off and they were awake and feeling well enough to be playful. Harry was gently but determinedly tickling Ginny.

"Harry, stop!" she cried, tears of laughter running down her face. "Stop, please!"

"Only if you give me a kiss," he said stubbornly.

"I've already given you loads of kisses! Use one of them!" she laughed, wriggling beneath his tickling hands.

"Nope, I need a new one!" he insisted, leaning down to blow a raspberry on her neck.

"OK, OK, take it!" she said, pushing his hands away from her stomach so he would stop tickling her. He looked around. No adults in the room at the moment, although he knew Dumbledore's instruments were observing them, as well as the old Headmasters and Headmistresses. He leaned on one elbow and bent over Ginny, suddenly serious, and kissed her gently, then more deliberately, his fingers laced in her hair, cupping the back of her head.

"You must feel better," he said quietly. "You certainly taste good." He rested his forehead against hers and smiled at her. "I love you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers twining in his hair. "I love you, too."

"I think they're going to boot me out of here today," Harry said, lying down beside her, his head propped up on his hand.

"If I have to stay in here another day or two, as Madam Pomfrey said, I'll get so far behind in my classes," she moaned. "I'm going to have a horrible time with my O.W.L.'s. I've lost so much study time!"

"I'll help you," he promised.

Just then the door opened and Madam Pomfrey came in, followed by Ron and Hermione. "How are you feeling?" Madam Pomfrey said brightly.

"When I'm not sleepy, I'm silly," Harry said with a goofy grin.

"Me too!" Ginny agreed.

"That's the potion I've been giving you. You don't need that one anymore, and it will wear off in a few minutes. You'll be back to normal soon."

"Oh, that's too bad," Harry giggled. "I've been enjoying feeling silly."

"Me, too," Ginny said, snorting with laughter as Harry made a goofy face at her.

Ron laughed. "Why haven't any of us had that potion before? It looks like fun!"

"It's for specific poisons, Mr. Weasley. We haven't needed it before," Madam Pomfrey replied a bit sternly. It wouldn't do for the students to become too interested in potions they didn't need.

"Hey! We just saw you the last time we were awake!" Harry chortled, still feeling silly.

"Nice to see you too," Hermione said with a smile, pulling a chair up next to the bed.

"Harry, we need to tell you something," Ron said a bit uneasily as he pulled a chair up next to Hermione's.

"What?"

"Erm. . .somebody wrote an article on your attack and published it," Ron said hesitantly.

"What?" Harry looked a bit confused.

"They're asking if you're dead or not – in the article – because you're up here instead of in the hospital wing," Hermione explained carefully.

"Just tell them we're fine," Harry said airily, but his friends could see his expression was changing. The potion was wearing off, as was his giddiness.

"Dumbledore did that at breakfast yesterday," Hermione replied. "The article was in yesterday's paper, but you two slept all day, so we couldn't tell you about it."

"OK," Harry replied, seemingly satisfied. He was quiet for a few minutes, all the giddiness leaving his face, leaving him with a much more serious expression. His eyes grew thoughtful, then stern. "Where did the paper get the information?"

"Um. . .somebody thought it would be helpful to you for such an article to appear, the way the articles last year helped," Hermione said hesitantly. Now she almost wished she hadn't contacted Rita Skeeter to do those articles last year. But they honestly were helpful to Harry. She sighed. There was no easy way around the situation.

"Rita Skeeter's writing about me again? Who told her what happened? Or is she bugging the school again?" Harry asked, sitting up, his senses all alert now, the potion completely out of his system. He ignored the twinges of pain in his face and body and waved Madam Pomfrey off as she approached him with more potion. "Later, OK?" She nodded. "Thanks."

"Rita wrote the one in the *Prophet*. There was also one in *The Quibbler*," Ron said quietly.

"You have the paper with you, don't you?" Harry said to Hermione.

"You don't want to see it, Harry, honestly," she said nervously.

He held out his hand and waited. When she didn't give him the paper right away, he wiggled his fingers and said, "C'mon, Hermione. Better now than later, after I've had more time to get angry, right?"

She sighed and dug the paper out of her bag, handing it reluctantly to Harry. He glanced down at Ginny, who was still lying down, then set the paper aside and helped her sit up, pulled the pillows up so he and Ginny would be comfortable sitting up, then helped her lean back against the pillows. He was very solicitous of Ginny, making sure she was well tucked-in and the pillows properly fluffed behind her.

Ginny smiled at him warmly, nervous herself about seeing the pictures and about how he would react to them and the article.

Finally satisfied Ginny was comfortable, and having given himself enough time to brace himself for what they were about to see, he unfolded the paper and was greeted by the horrible sight of him writhing on the floor, blood streaming from his wounds, and the huge purple headline. He took a deep calming breath and held the paper so Ginny could read the article as well. They scanned the article quickly, then settled down to read it thoroughly. Everyone was shocked when Harry chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Ron said, completely bewildered.

"All of this. They're going on about how wonderful I am, calling me all these things, and I'm just Harry. When are they going to understand that? It's just silly. 'Hero of Hogsmeade,' all that. What tripe."

"Um, Harry?" Hermione said slowly. "Do you remember what happened in Hogsmeade?"

"You were attacked by Dementors and fought them yourself for a while. Then Ron sent a Patronus that distracted a Dementor from kissing you, and my Patronus chased him and the others away. All three of us did stuff. It wasn't just me. These people are so stupid," he said, a bitter edge to his voice, but no real rage showing yet. "Did you think I forgot?"

"I just . . ." Hermione began, then simply shrugged her shoulders. "Just checking," she said finally.

Harry and Ginny read to the end of the article, and sat gazing at the photos. "It looks so horrible," Ginny murmured, trembling a bit. "I was so scared."

Harry kissed the top of her head, putting his arm around her and squeezing her shoulders consolingly. "Yeah. It does look a bit nasty at that," he agreed. He looked up at Ron and Hermione. "So who took the pictures? Was Rita here? Is she following me around again?"

"No, Rita wasn't here," Hermione replied.

"So who fed Rita the story if she wasn't here herself?" Harry pressed. "And who took the pictures? Colin knows better by now, and I didn't see him anywhere around. I didn't know any of the fan girls had cameras, but I suppose one of them must have had one."

"It wasn't Colin or a fan girl, Harry," Ron said quietly. "It was Luna."

Harry and Ginny both stared at Ron. "Luna? But she's a *friend!*" Harry said, suddenly incensed. "Why would a friend of ours do this to us? Why. . .?" His temper was flaring dangerously.

"Harry, please, calm down," Hermione said, placing a hand gently on his arm. "Please. Luna came and told us about it herself. She said she thought it would be helpful to you, the way last year's interview article was helpful. She wrote the article that was in *The Quibbler* herself, and sent the information to Rita for the *Prophet* because we used Rita last year to do that article. Luna took the pictures. She said she's been trying to get that kind of photo ever since you were first attacked this year so she could write an article to help you out like the one last year did." Hermione wrung her hands miserably as she finished speaking.

Ron saw her nervousness and put his hand over hers, stilling her nervous motion. He wrapped his big hand around her small ones and held them firmly. "It wasn't anyone's fault, Harry," Ron said, doing his best to protect Hermione from Harry's wrath. But it wasn't Harry's wrath they needed to be worrying about just then.

"Luna Lovegood?" Ginny exploded after being quiet throughout the previous conversation. "*Luna Lovegood!* How could she? I'm going to hex her so she can't write or take pictures for years!"

Harry turned and gazed at Ginny. "You are so beautiful when you're angry," he said, an amused smile tickling the corners of his mouth.

"How can you be so calm?" she barked. "Everyone thinks we're dead!"

Harry laughed out loud. "It's kind of liberating, in a way, isn't it?" he said, stretching his arms up above his head and smiling.

"What?" Ginny replied, shocked.

"Wow. If I could keep people thinking that, I really could be 'just Harry,'" he mused, a wistful expression on his face.

"But Mum and Dad, and our brothers," Ginny began, looking frantically at Ron. "They know we're OK, don't they?"

"Yes – Dumbledore talked to them in the fire yesterday from here – at least, that's what Remus thought. He said they'd be able to see you from the fire."

"Maybe we were asleep when he was talking to them," Harry offered. "We honestly didn't wake up until a few minutes before you got here."

"Harry, you don't really want people thinking you're dead, do you?" Hermione asked carefully.

He took a minute to think about it before answering. "No, not really. For one thing, Voldemort would move on to other things if he didn't have me to play with," he said with a shrug. "And we have the Quidditch finals coming up, with the Cup within reach. No, Ginny and I both need to be among the living, I suppose. Still, it was a nice thought for a while. . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked out of the high window across the room, watching a bird in flight and wishing he was that free. But he wasn't. Time to get back to the life he was destined for. He sighed and looked at his friends. "I think it will be best if we fight fire with fire."

"What do you mean?" Ron said.

"We need to do a newspaper article, complete with photos, about me and Ginny being very much alive. Colin can do the photos, I know he'll agree. Hermione, would you write the article? I don't want Rita Skeeter getting any more mileage out of me."

"Me? I'm no writer," she protested.

"You're the top student in our year. If you can't write an article, nobody here can," Harry assured her. "Just consider it another school essay. Get Professor McGonagall to look it over before you send it in, if you're worried about it."

"Won't you want to see it too?" she asked nervously.

"Yes, I suppose we should all go over it to make sure it says what we want it to say," Harry mused.

"And what is it we want to say?" Hermione said.

"I don't know exactly – we'll figure it out. But mainly that Ginny and I are alive and well. That's probably the most important thing."

"I think one of the photos should show us holding this issue of the paper, so the readers will know we were alive after this was published," Ginny suggested.

"That's a great idea. We need you to get well quickly, sweetheart, so we can do this. You've got another day to recover, so lie down and get well!" Harry said, helping her slide down into the bed again.

"Mr. Potter, you're right," Madam Pomfrey said, approaching them again with their potion. "She needs her rest. And you are well enough to be released. Both of you need this potion, but she needs one more day in bed. She'll be ready to go in the morning," Madam Pomfrey held out Harry's dose of potion again. This time, he took it.

When Ginny had taken hers, Harry leaned down and kissed her. "I'll miss you, love," he murmured as he rubbed noses with her.

"I'll miss you more," she said, pulling him down for another kiss.

"I'd better go," Harry said, kissing her forehead as he got out of bed. "I'll come back and see you again after classes are over today." He turned to Ron and Hermione. "C'mon. I want to find Colin and get this project started as soon as possible. We need to plan what kinds of

photos he's going to take and what's going to be in the article." The three of them waved at Ginny and walked out of the office.

"***The Boy-Who-Lived Lives!"*** the headline read three days later. Numerous photos showed Harry and Ginny together, one of them posed with the "The Boy-Who-Lived No More?" article held in both of their hands, Harry and Ginny leaning in to look at the photos from time to time, gesturing as if they were pointing various things out to each other. Other pictures showed them in their Quidditch uniforms, Firebolts in hand, or whizzing around in the air, the wind whipping their hair back from their laughing faces, and there was one of them with their arms around each other, smiling at each other, then laughing about something, their faces turning toward the camera as they laughed. They looked healthy, happy and very much alive. The wound on Harry's face was still vivid, but healing well. It showed in the photos, but the caption of the photo in which it showed the most strongly explained that it was healing and would not leave a scar.

The article read,

"**Harry Potter, 16, and Ginny Weasley, 15, both members of Gryffindor House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, are back to full health after suffering the effects of poison. Potter, a Sixth Year student, was attacked by Pansy Parkinson, a Sixth Year member of Slytherin House. Miss Parkinson was under an enchantment that forced her to attack Potter. She believed her attack to be successful, and so regretted her act that she took her own life soon after returning to her dormitory, which saddened both Potter and Weasley greatly when they heard about it. Parkinson left a note saying she was very sorry she'd 'killed Harry Potter' and that she didn't mean to do it. She mentioned being grateful for a kindness Potter showed her just before the Christmas holidays. Potter is well-known for his generous spirit and kindness of heart . . ."**

"Oh Hermione, this is too much!" Harry said, making retching sounds. "'Generous spirit and kindness of heart.' The team will never let me hear the end of that!"

"Ginny approved that part," Hermione said defensively, her nose in the air. "It's the truth, so just shut up and accept it!"

"OK, I'm sorry," he said, doing his best to sound contrite but looking not all that repentant. He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Forgive me?"

"See, there's that 'kindness of heart' she mentioned in the article," Ginny said with a giggle.

"Why are you kissing my girlfriend?" Ron asked calmly as he dropped his bag on the floor under his seat at the breakfast table. He'd gone up to the Head Table to discuss some D.A. plans with Remus and had just joined them.

"I flew into a great rage at Hermione and had to beg her forgiveness," Harry said brightly. "I'm merely displaying my 'generosity of spirit.'"

"And your vast emotional range," Hermione said with a laugh. "Oh, dear, I forgot to mention that. I'll have to write a follow-up article."

"That's all right, I think this one will do," Harry protested with a grin. He glanced around the Great Hall. "Look at everyone reading the paper. Yeah, the Slytherins just hate the article, especially when it says nice things about poor Pansy," he said, studying the reaction at the Slytherin table. "That's what I expected from them. The rest of them are either laughing – those are the ones who know me, no doubt – or discussing it in excruciating detail." He looked around some more, catching a wink and a nod from both Dumbledore and Remus, a small smile from McGonagall, and cheery waves from Hagrid and Flitwick. He grinned back at all of them.

Hermione's article was upbeat, cheerful and painted a picture of two happy teenagers living a normal life at school, good students who studied hard and enjoyed playing Quidditch, Exploding Snap and Wizard's Chess, as well as having numerous friends. Hermione had gone to the trouble to get quotes from other students about their reactions to the various articles they'd read in the past that told lies about Harry. She set the record straight on every count they could think of. The article was blunt, honest, to the point and not florid at all except where Ginny had helped out. Those parts got just the tiniest bit gushy, but nothing like Rita Skeeter's level of excess. Hermione also got quotes from various students and teachers saying what they thought of Harry. The positive nature of the article warmed Harry's heart, because everything in it was true, with the possible exception of those somewhat syrupy additions of Ginny's, and those he could live with. The *Prophet* had been reluctant to publish an article by a student, but when they saw the photos attached and were told they could not use them without using the article as well, they relented. Harry Potter on the front page always sold loads of papers, and with so many excellent photos of Harry, the paper's editors knew they'd have to do an extra printing, which suited them just fine. They didn't have to pay for the article or photos, so every galleon they made went into their own pockets.

Colin came over, a package in his hands. "You've seen the paper, then?" he asked gaily. "Isn't it brill?"

"Yeah, the pictures are great! And Hermione did a fantastic job on the article," Harry said, clapping the younger boy on his shoulder. "Thanks a lot for helping us out this way."

"Hey, I'm just glad to help. Here are the prints you wanted. Let me know if you want more." He handed the package to Harry.

"Thanks, Colin! I appreciate it. Are you certain I can't pay you for these?" Harry said.

"Nope. They're my treat. See you later!" he said, waving as he walked away.

"Thanks again!" Harry called after him.

"What did he give you?" Hermione asked.

"Now you're turning into a nosy reporter, eh? Needing to know all my business?" Harry teased. She gave him her best disgusted look. He relented. "Oh, all right, I suppose you'll see them soon anyway." He opened the package and spread out the pictures inside. There were copies of most of the photos from the article as well as many others. Colin had followed Harry and Ginny around the entire afternoon after Ginny was allowed to go back to her routine. Harry and Ginny had gone for a walk, snogged a bit, studied a lot, taken part in Quidditch practice, and studied some more. Colin had documented everything, and Harry and

Ginny had chosen the photos for the article from the lot. Harry went through the stack of photos, showing them to his friends after he and Ginny looked at them. Here was one of the two of them walking, holding hands, Harry bending down to pick a flower and put it in Ginny's hair. Here was one of them leaning against a tree, kissing each other tenderly, then the kiss dissolving into laughter for some reason known only to Harry and Ginny. Here was a beautiful picture of the two of them on the top of a hill, the castle in the distance behind them, a gorgeous blue sky behind them as they looked at something far above and behind the camera's lens. Here was a close-up of Harry on his broom, his face concentrated as he raced for the Snitch, then split into a grin of satisfaction as he pumped his Snitch-filled fist aloft for his team to see. Here was one of Ginny, the red Quaffle under her arm, racing for the goal and then scoring. There they were, sitting at a table in the library, red hair and black intermingling as they both poured over a book while Harry helped Ginny with her O.W.L. revision. They were all wonderful pictures.

"Wow," Hermione breathed. "These are fantastic!"

"Yeah, Colin's got a real gift with the camera, doesn't he?" Harry agreed. Just then, Luna came and plopped down next to Ron.

"Hello, Ronald. Hello, Harry," she said, ignoring Hermione as usual and barely glancing at Ginny. She sounded a bit morose.

"Hi, Luna," Ron said carefully. "What's up?"

"I see there's another article about Harry in the paper," Luna said. "Hermione's going to get into trouble for it." She still acted as if Hermione wasn't there.

"No, I'm not," Hermione snapped. "Harry asked me to write it, and he asked Colin to take the pictures. We had permission from Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore as well."

"Oh," Luna said in a small voice.

"What's wrong, Luna?" Ginny said kindly, surprised she was able to treat the girl nicely after what she'd done to her and Harry.

"Oh, I thought I was going to be a journalist," she sighed, "but my career's been nipped in the bud."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"Professor Dumbledore told me I can't write about Harry anymore. There's nothing else as interesting to write about around here, so I guess I won't be a journalist after all." She looked very glum, staring at the table, with a furtive glance up at Harry from time to time. She seemed to be waiting for him to say something.

Ginny looked at Harry, not knowing what to do next. Luna was a friend, if an odd one, and hadn't meant any harm. There wasn't a mean bone in her body, from all appearances. She floated through life being picked on, never picking on anyone else, and ignoring those who made fun of or bullied her. Harry read the plea in Ginny's eyes and sighed.

"You don't have to write about me to be a journalist," he said as kindly as he could manage. "But whatever you write about, you do need to ask if the person minds you writing about them, and you need to get all the facts before you print the story. You had people thinking we were dead. That would have really hurt Ginny's family if they hadn't already known she was all right."

"And it had the wizarding world in an uproar, Luna," Hermione added. "In the paper the next day, there were stories about riots in Diagon Alley. People panicked, wondering who was going to protect them from You-Know-Who. People were building shrines to Harry, loads of flowers and toy broomsticks and candy and notes piled up in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies because it's his favourite store. People were sitting and wailing there for hours at a time because they thought he was dead. That was cruel, to let people think he was dead."

"Shrines?" Harry asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, shrines. I didn't tell you about it. You were busy getting better and I didn't think you needed the distraction."

"Thank you, I think," he said, looking at her with his head tilted, still trying to sort out if he minded her editing the information he got that much or not. Shrines? Riots? Weird!

"Professor Dumbledore talked to me about it after my articles came out and again the next day, after all the news about the riots and shrines and stuff," Luna said quietly. "I won't be writing anymore."

"Why don't you write about Crumple-Horned whats-its?" Harry suggested sympathetically. "Your dad would enjoy publishing that kind of story."

"Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. We still haven't found them. We hunted them this past summer, but they'd migrated away from the area where we expected to find them," she said with a forlorn look.

"Then write about them migrating away. Write about Thestrals – you can see them, and loads of other people can't. Write about whatever interests you, as long as it isn't me, OK? You can be a journalist if you want to. Just don't try to be my personal journalist, OK?" Harry said earnestly, hoping he was getting through.

Luna lifted her large, odd eyes to him, staring at him seriously. Harry grew uncomfortable under her steady gaze. She wasn't trying to do Legilimens on him, of that he was certain. She seemed to be trying to memorize his face. "What is it, Luna?"

"Are we still friends, Harry?" she asked sadly.

"Yes, we're still friends," he assured her. "Friends can disagree, even hurt each other's feelings and still be friends. We each have to learn from our mistakes and try not to make them again. And we have to forgive each other. I know you were trying to help, not hurt me."

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said humbly. It was the most lucid moment any of them remembered with Luna – she always seemed to be on some other plane, but just now, she was solidly with them, unusually so.

"It's OK, Luna. I forgive you," Harry said gently.

A tear rolled down her cheek unchecked.

"Luna? Friends?" Harry said, offering his hand.

"Oh, yes!" she replied throwing herself into his arms. He patted her awkwardly on the back until she relaxed and pushed away from him again. "Sorry. I was worried you'd hate me."

"Nah. Life's too short to stay angry at your friends. Enemies, sure, but not friends," Harry assured her.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, getting to her feet. "Bye, Ronald. Bye, Harry. Bye," she said, looking from Ginny to Hermione and back at Harry again.

"See you around," Harry said.

"Well, that was interesting," Ron said after she was out of earshot.

"I feel sorry for her. She's a nice girl, just a bit. . .different," Ginny said.

Harry leaned over and kissed her temple. "That's my sweet girl," he said fondly. He went back to looking at the photos in his hands.

"Why are there duplicates of some of these?" Ron asked.

"Ginny and I thought your parents would like copies of some of them, so I asked Colin for extras for them. And I had some made for Remus and Hagrid, as well."

"What about us?" Hermione asked, her eyebrows raised.

"What about you?" Harry said, a smile tickling the corners of his mouth.

"Ron and I might like pictures of the two of you, too, you know," she said, looking a bit hurt.

Harry spread the pictures out further. Some of them had even more copies. "I already had the copies made. Pick out what you want," he said with a smile. Ron, Hermione and Ginny each picked out some photos, comparing their choices and going back through the stack to change their choices over and over.

"Oh, this is too hard! I can't decide which one to take," Hermione said.

"You can have more than one, if you want," Harry assured her.

"Thanks!" she said brightly. "Ron, we should get Colin to do this for us, too. These are fantastic photos."

"Yeah, we'll have to ask him," Ron agreed.

Just then, Malfoy and his gang walked by behind them. "Oh, please. Not another meeting of the Potter Fan Club," Malfoy sneered. "It's not enough for you to be on the front page of the paper twice in one week. Now you're signing photos like Gilderoy Lockhart. Next you'll be curling your hair and wearing bright-coloured robes. You're disgusting, Potter."

Harry turned around and looked at Malfoy, quietly gazing into the Slytherin's eyes until the blond boy dropped his eyes.

"You'll regret all this publicity, Potter," Malfoy sneered, trying to regain his composure after being stared down by his enemy.

"I regret all the publicity that's followed me through my whole life, but you know what? I didn't ask for it. It just happens, and it's nearly all due to Voldemort. So gripe at him if you're jealous of the publicity that follows me around. Maybe he'll give you a scar and torment you for years so you, too, can be front page news. Would you like that, Malfoy? Would you?" Harry said in a dangerously quiet voice.

"Your time is running out, Potter," Malfoy warned, trying to sound as dangerous as Harry but sounding only whiny instead.

"Yeah? I've heard that before, loads of times," Harry replied tersely. "Don't bother me again until you have something interesting to say. Which means you'll never bother me again." With that, Harry turned his back on Malfoy, completely ignoring him.

Malfoy's face was white, he was so incensed. He stood there huffing in rage, not sure what he was going to do, but knowing he was going to do something to get Potter for insulting him so much.

"Harry," Hermione whispered urgently, "he's going to hex you."

"I can't wait," Harry said with a cocky grin, lifting his hand from his lap enough to show them he had his wand ready.

"Mr. Malfoy," came a sneering voice, "why are you loitering near the Gryffindor table?" Snape descended on them like a huge silent bat.

"Uh . . . I was just. . ."

"You were just what?" Snape said in a dangerously honeyed tone.

"Just. . .um. . ."

"How about 'just leaving'?" Snape said, his greasy black hair falling forward and curtaining his face as he leaned toward Malfoy and murmured, "Remember my warning. Leave Potter and his little friends alone. You don't want to cross me on this."

Malfoy gulped, whiter than ever, but with angry red patches blotching his face. "Yes, Professor," he said through gritted teeth, then stormed out of the Great Hall, his gang following him in complete confusion.

Harry looked at Ron and the two of them had to stifle their laughter. Snape was still close by. Harry quietly pocketed his wand, glancing up at the Head Table and seeing Dumbledore and Remus both watching him. Dumbledore gave him a slight smile and a nod. Remus grinned openly. They were both proud that Harry had held his temper and the situation had been defused with nobody hurt, no damage done.

Ron saw their reaction, then grinned at Harry and said, "You keep up all this good behaviour, you'll end up as Head Boy despite never being a Prefect."

"Oh, no, that would be awful!" Harry protested as he laughed. "We can't have anyone thinking Harry Potter the troublemaker is following rules! I wonder how many school rules we can break today and get away with it?" He and his friends discussed many outrageous plans that would never come to fruition as they finished their breakfast and left for class.

The next-to-last Quidditch game of the year, Hufflepuff vs. Slytherin in early May, was a study in viciousness. The Slytherins used every dirty trick in the book, and seemingly invented quite a few more, to defeat the Hufflepuffs, who had actually had a decent record this year. Half the Hufflepuff team was carried off the field with injuries before it was all over. The final score was a miracle, showing the Hufflepuff determination despite all odds: Slytherin 200 to Hufflepuff's 120. It was a hard-fought game that kept the school buzzing for the remaining weeks before the final game, which pitted Gryffindor against Ravenclaw.

The morning of the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game dawned bright and hot, with the wind blowing erratically, sometimes just a gentle breeze, other times nearly a gale force wind. A weather change was coming, probably by mid-afternoon when the game would be in full swing. By early afternoon, the stands were full to capacity. Every student and staff member welcomed this happy break from preparations for end-of-term exams. Cheers and whistles filled the air, as well as choruses of "Weasley is our King" and "Weasley is our Queen" from the Gryffindors.

Finally, the teams came on the field. The Ravenclaws, dressed in blue, were captained by Roger Davies. They flew around the pitch to cheers and formed a half circle near the centre of the pitch, while Roger landed and waited to shake hands with Harry.

Dean Thomas announced, "And now, the Gryffindor team!" To cheers, wild applause and stamping of feet, the Gryffindor Quidditch team circled the pitch, then hovered in a half-circle facing the Ravenclaw team as Harry landed and stretched his hand out to Roger.

"Good luck," Harry said with a cheerful smile.

"You too," Roger replied, shaking his hand firmly, then leaping onto his broom and zooming upward. Harry followed close behind.

"And the balls have been released!" Dean cried. Soon the air was filled with scarlet and blue streaks as the teams raced around the pitch, doing their best to outmanoeuvre each other.

"It's Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle and look at that Firebolt go! Nice Bludger work by the Creevey brothers. And Ginny is fouled by Ravenclaw Chaser Atkinson. Ginny will take the

foul shot – and she scores! Gryffindor 10, Ravenclaw zero!" The wind was whipping up strongly now, and the sky was darkening. Storms were on the horizon.

"And it's Finnegan racing up the pitch – he passes to Ginny Weasley, who passes to Bell, who passes back to Weasley. Look at the teamwork! The Gryffindor Chasers are a well-oiled machine! And Bell scores! Gryffindor 20, Ravenclaw zero!"

"Ravenclaw in possession. Davies is racing up the pitch, and . . .OH! Nice Bludger work by Colin Creevey! Davies drops the Quaffle, which is captured by Seamus Finnegan! Go, Seamus, go! Finnegan passes to Weasley, who dodges the Ravenclaw Beaters handily on her Firebolt. And she SCORES! Gryffindor 30, Ravenclaw, zero!"

The game went on in this fashion for a couple of hours, the Ravenclaws eventually getting their rhythm going and scoring several times, finally drawing almost even with Gryffindor in the scoring. It was an exciting, fun, well-fought game on all counts. The wind intensified, black clouds blotted out the sunlight, making it seem more like dusk than late afternoon, and the skies opened. It became hard to see the action at all, much less which robes were blue and which were scarlet. Dean Thomas kept his commentary going, struggling to see past the sheets of rain that darkened the entire pitch as if the sun had already gone down. Thunder boomed, and lightning creased the sky repeatedly.

"Davies has the Quaffle. He races up the pitch, guarded closely by Ginny Weasley and Katie Bell. He reaches the goal, throws and. . .Ron Weasley saves it! Weasley is our king!" A chorus of "Weasley is our King" rang through the Gryffindor stands. "Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle, neatly dodging both Bludgers. Look at that girl fly! And. . .wait! Is that the Snitch? It's so bloody dark, I can't see it at all, but Harry Potter is doing one of his trademark dives straight toward the ground. Ravenclaw Seeker Cho Chang is on his tail, but her broom is no match for Harry's Firebolt. Whoa, look at that! The Snitch must have changed course, because Harry's zooming straight up! He's past Chang, who just fell off her broom onto the muddy pitch. That girl nearly ploughed herself trying to follow Potter! I hope he catches the Snitch soon, he's nearly out of sight! Look at him go! He's reaching. . .he's reaching. . . and he's got the Snitch! Gryffindor wins the Cup! But wait!" Dean's voice suddenly lost its booming vitality. "Where's Harry?" he said in a tremulous voice. Pandemonium broke out both because the Gryffindors had just won the Quidditch Cup, and because Harry had completely disappeared when he caught the Snitch. The Gryffindor team zoomed around the pitch, then outside it, looking for Harry, calling for him over and over. Ginny came back a few minutes later, wailing inconsolably, holding Harry's Firebolt in her hand. Ron flew to her and wrapped his arms around her, guiding their brooms slowly to the ground.

"Silence!" came Dumbledore's magnified voice. "Everyone please be calm." When the immense crowd quieted, Dumbledore went on. "Apparently someone made the Snitch a Portkey. We will make every effort to find Harry Potter. Everyone go quickly and quietly to your dormitories. Prefects, please make certain all students are accounted for. Teachers, please meet me in the staff room right away. Mr. Weasley, when you have completed your Prefect duties, please see me in my office." Ron glanced up at Dumbledore and nodded, then wrapped his arm around Hermione, who'd just reached him and was sobbing as if her heart would break. He kissed the top of her head and, with one arm around her, the other around his grieving sister, a grim-faced Ron led them on the long, sad walk to Gryffindor Tower. A very subdued Gryffindor House made their way inside the castle, along with the rest of the stunned student body. Only the Slytherins seemed to find anything at all to smile about. Draco Malfoy

was strutting for some reason. Remus Lupin noticed this, grabbed Malfoy by the scruff of the neck and dragged him along to the staff meeting.

When Harry was racing for the Snitch, he could sense Cho close behind him, but he poured on the power and the Firebolt left her far behind. He reached out, the Snitch just beyond his fingertips, then closer, closer, and. . .it zoomed upwards and he had to chase it again! The Firebolt responded beautifully to his demand for a quick turn and more speed, and soon the Snitch was within reach again! He stretched out his arm. . .closer. . .closer. . .closer. . .he had it! Just as his heart leapt with elation that they'd won the Quidditch Cup, his stomach felt that familiar tug that told him he was holding onto a Portkey. He did his best to let go, but the only thing he was able to let go of was his faithful Firebolt. He hoped the Whomping Willow wouldn't make it a victim, as it had his Nimbus 2000. Harry soon found himself thumping to the soggy ground in a graveyard. He glanced around quickly and saw he was surrounded by Death Eaters, with Voldemort standing right in front of him, laughing his high, cold laugh.

"I guess you caught more than a Snitch this time, eh, Potter?" he sneered.

"What do you want? You interrupted a perfectly good game," Harry snapped in disgust as he got to his feet, apparently wiping the mud off his robes, but in reality, trying to smear the mud across their bright scarlet colour to give him some camouflage.

"What do I want? The usual," Voldemort replied silkily. "I want you dead. Actually, you're already dead, you just haven't fallen down yet. Stand and meet your fate like a man, Potter."

Harry looked down at his body with apparent interest, then made a show of pinching himself. "Dead? Nope, not yet!" he cried, pulling his wand as he dropped and rolled away. The ensuing battle lit up the dark sky like fireworks.

Voldemort was determined that Harry would die this time, whether at his hand or someone else's. More than fifty Death Eaters, plus Voldemort, were after Harry.

It was all Harry could do to dodge the dozens of spells coming his way. He shot spells as he rolled, dodged, used whatever shelter he could find to protect himself, trying to aim well, but between slipping in the mud and having to shoot so fast, his spells often went wide of their mark. He managed to hit six of the Death Eaters, taking them out of action, either injured, stunned or dead, as he ran. Finally, he managed to duck behind a large headstone and change into a cat, racing off through the high grass to disappear in the woods, leaving the Death Eaters behind him running around in confusion, shooting each other in their frantic attempts to kill him. Once he was in the woods, Harry changed into a raven and flew above the trees to get his bearings. Yes, there was that house on the hill he'd seen in his Fourth Year – the Riddle house. He was in the same graveyard. He landed high in a tree and changed back into himself so he could send an Adfero to Dumbledore. He considered Disapparating back to Hogwarts, but something in him simply wouldn't let him run from the battle. *Stupid really, but there it is. I can't just leave,* he thought morosely, thinking of Ginny, thinking of the fun of the Quidditch game, thinking of the fabulous victory party that should be going on in Gryffindor Tower right now, but probably wasn't. Voldemort managed to spoil an awful lot of the fun things in Harry's life, and Harry was sick and tired of it. No, he wouldn't Disapparate. Somehow, he was going to beat Voldemort and his gang of thugs. Somehow. But how?

The Death Eaters had spread out to search the woods. Some of them were smart enough to look up from time to time, and one of them noticed his silvery Adfero flying away. "There! In that tree!" he called. Spells hit the tree, destroying all the branches around Harry as well as the one he was on. He held his arms in front of his face to protect himself from flying debris as he fell several feet. Halfway to the ground, he managed to change into a raven and fly to another tree, but someone had seen the sudden movement and was following him. The tree he landed in was blasted to splinters. Harry was stunned by the blast and fell painfully to the ground. He lay there in raven form, trying to get his breath back. Death Eaters were still running through the woods looking for him.

"Remember, he's an Animagus now. Look for a black cat!" came Voldemort's cold, high voice.

Antonin Dolohov stopped beside the raven's still form, turning the bird over with his foot. "I guess this one was in the tree when it got blasted. Bye-bye, blackbird!" he sneered, and lifted his foot to kill the bird.

The raven quickly rolled over and took off, its flight awkward and lumbering, but still flight. It disappeared in the dark forest, leaving the Death Eaters behind for the moment, and landed in a huge old beech tree, settling in a wide spot formed by a large branch coming out of the trunk. The raven changed back into Harry, who lay there gasping for breath, whispering, "Help me. Help me. Help me," on each exhalation. He sat up and did a Disillusionment Charm on himself so he could rest a while in peace. The Death Eaters were racing madly through the forest, sometimes shooting each other when they thought they saw Harry ahead of them, or hiding in the brush nearby. Harry wanted to laugh but knew that was a bad idea. Still, it was almost entertaining to watch them hurtling around like mad things below him. *How am I going to get out of this one?* he worried. *There are just too many of them. I could fight Voldemort alone, or some of them alone, but not so many all at once. That's just not possible.* He gave little thought to the fact that his survival so far in this battle was another impossible thing. He was alive, and mostly in one piece, with only minor injuries so far.

"Mr. Weasley, it's time to use Dumbledore's Army," Dumbledore said reluctantly. "I'd rather use Aurors or Order members, but the Ministry isn't likely to send Aurors quickly enough. There will be Order members there to help, but I suspect we'll be badly outnumbered if we don't use D.A. members as well. Order members will be recognizable by a phoenix symbol on their robes that will glow briefly when a wand is pointed their way. Be sure to tell the D.A. members that, so they don't shoot our people by mistake. I think your older group is ready for combat, so let's plan on using them."

Ron gazed at Dumbledore, his eyes steady and his face grim. "Yes, Professor. They're as ready as we can get them."

"Good lad. Call them together. Leave the First Year D.A. members behind to guard the castle. Get brooms for all the Second Year D.A. members even if you have to borrow personal brooms from those who aren't going. Have everyone meet me in the Entrance Hall in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, Professor," Ron said, and left the office.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said sadly. "It seems you know something I wish to know. Will you tell me willingly, or will I have to use Veritaserum?"

"You can't get it out of me!" Malfoy sneered boldly. "I'll never tell."

Dumbledore sighed, then glanced up at Snape. "Severus, if you would, please?"

"Certainly, Headmaster," Snape said, gliding over to where Malfoy was magically bound to a chair and pushing the boy's head back roughly. "Drink this," he said, his lip curled in disgust.

"TRAITOR! The Dark Lord will hear about this!" Malfoy spat, fighting to avoid the Veritaserum that was being dripped into his mouth despite his best efforts.

"Watch who you're calling names, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said in a dangerous murmur. "You don't want to cross me."

"You're double-crossing the Dark Lord!" Malfoy screamed. "He will find out! He'll punish you!"

"And you won't be around to see it, tsk-tsk, isn't that tragic?" Snape whispered in Malfoy's ear.

Malfoy's face went whiter than ever before. "What?" he said, aghast.

"Take your potion," Snape insisted, pouring more liquid down the boy's throat, making him gag. He looked up at Dumbledore. "That should be enough."

"Thank you, Severus," Dumbledore said mildly. "Now, Mr. Malfoy," he began, "you have been a very naughty boy, haven't you? You've joined the Dark Lord, you've taken the Dark Mark, and you're plotting against Harry Potter and the wizarding world. Is this true?"

"Yes, of course it is," Malfoy snapped. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Yes, yes, why indeed," Dumbledore mused sadly. "Where is Harry Potter?"

Malfoy thought a minute, trying to fight the effects of the potion. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Where did the Portkey take him? Who put the spell on the Portkey?" Dumbledore asked.

"Madam Hooch put the spell on it. Bellatrix Lestrange put the Imperious Curse on her with the instructions on what to do, and I activated the Trigger Charm on her to make her do it when Pansy's poison ring didn't kill him." Malfoy was answering coolly, as if he was proud of what he was saying – and, knowing Malfoy, he probably was proud of it.

Dumbledore turned to McGonagall. "Send for Madam Hooch."

"Yes, Albus," she replied, then hurried to do his bidding.

Dumbledore looked at Malfoy seriously. "Where did the Portkey take him? What's going to happen there?"

"He's being taken to the Dark Lord. I don't know the location, but Potter's been there before. It's where the Dark Lord got his new body. They're going to kill him there."

Remus and Dumbledore exchanged a glance. "The Riddle house," Remus breathed. "That's a couple of hundred miles away. It will take us a long time to get there on brooms."

"I'll make Portkeys for the D.A. members to use so they'll get there quickly. I'll set them for about a mile away, then they can fly to the graveyard," Dumbledore said. "I'm alerting the Order and the Ministry, as well. Hopefully, the Ministry can send some Aurors to help, but I won't count on them."

McGonagall arrived with Madam Hooch. "Rolanda, what do you know about the Snitch being made into a Portkey?" Dumbledore asked her seriously.

"Nothing," the woman said honestly, her yellow, hawk-like eyes flashing. "I was astounded when Potter disappeared. It was a Portkey?"

"Yes. Has anyone else been near the Quidditch equipment in the last few days?"

"Only the teams, when they check it out for practice," she replied.

"Have you visited The Ladies' Shop in Hogsmeade this year?"

"Yes, they had some wonderful lotion that helped the windburn on my face," she said with a smile. "A lovely woman ran the shop. I was sorry to see it close."

"Bellatrix LeStrange, a Death Eater, ran the shop," Dumbledore informed her sadly. Madam Hooch's face fell. "She tried to kill Harry Potter with various potions delivered by girls she'd enchanted. I think she must have enchanted you to tum the Snitch into a Portkey. I believe you've had a Memory Charm put on you, or you'd remember turning the Snitch into a Portkey. I'd like do a Memory Charm reversal spell on you, and I'd also like you to take some Veritaserum so we can find out if you know any more information that will be helpful in rescuing Harry."

"Yes, yes, of course, do the charm, and I'll take the Veritaserum," Madam Hooch said, obviously upset. "I certainly wouldn't have done anything to harm a student on purpose. You do know that, don't you, Albus?" she said desperately. "Remus, I'd never harm Harry! I think the world of him!"

Remus looked lost, his eyes dark hollows in the haggard landscape of his face. He'd grown to love Harry as a son. He wouldn't have been any more heartbroken if the missing child was his own flesh and blood. Harry had given him so much joy in the last year, as well as scaring him with his many close calls, but the overwhelming feeling Remus had when he thought of Harry was joy. Somehow, in the midst of the horror that often filled his life, Harry managed to find joy and laughter in even the simplest things, and he'd helped Remus to find it, too.

Dumbledore noticed the heartbroken look on Remus's face. "We'll find him, Remus," he assured him. "And he's a fighter. He'll be all right."

"We're wasting time here," Remus said suddenly. "Draco told us where to look for him. Can't we go after him now?"

Snape had already done the Memory Charm reversal spell and was giving Rolanda Hooch the Veritaserum. "She's ready," he said quietly.

"Rolanda, do you know where the Snitch was to take Harry?" Dumbledore asked her.

"The graveyard down the hill from the Riddle house just outside Little Hangleton," she answered immediately.

"What's going to happen there?"

"I don't know. I was told to turn the Snitch into a Portkey that would take Harry there."

"What if the other Seeker had caught it?" Remus asked suddenly.

"Harry would have to fall off his broom before Cho Chang could catch a Snitch before him," Madam Hooch said with a smile in her voice. "That boy can out-fly anyone. But I also spelled the Snitch to evade Chang."

"Do you know anything else about their plans for Harry? Did you have any other instructions?"

"I was not supposed to do anything if Pansy Parkinson had succeeded in killing Harry," she replied. "I don't know anything else about it."

"Did someone put a Memory Charm on you?" Remus asked suddenly.

"Yes. It was the woman in The Ladies Shop. She also did the Imperious Curse on me," she replied.

Remus looked at Dumbledore. "That means this was the last resort. He's being taken to Voldemort, just as Draco said. The other plots were to kill him outright."

"Yes, I believe you're right," Dumbledore said. He looked at the people gathered in his office. "All right. Severus, you and Filius organize the defence of the castle using the staff, the First Year D.A. members and any of the older students who remain after the D.A. leaves." Snape and Flitwick nodded and left the office. "Fawkes, take this to Order Headquarters for me. Then go and find Harry. He's near Little Hangleton. He may need your help," Dumbledore said, handing a quickly scribbled message to the phoenix. "Hagrid, I'd like you to inform the dragons that no one is to come on Hogwarts' grounds except staff and students. No one. And see if Grawp will help out with guarding the gates, as well. I'd like you to stay close to your hut. It's possible Harry will try to get to you, if he can escape at all." He looked at Hagrid and saw that the gamekeeper understood his meaning. Harry might come to Hagrid in an Animagus form and be injured, needing Hagrid's help. "If you hear from him, let me know right away." Hagrid nodded, his face grim, and strode out the door. "Minerva, contact Fred and George Weasley and tell them it's time. Give them the location and tell them Harry's already there. Tell them we'll be there in a few moments." McGonagall left to contact the Weasley twins.

He looked at the remaining staff. "Remus and I will be going with the D.A. to rescue Harry. It's possible that his kidnapping is a diversionary tactic. Voldemort may be trying to get us out of the castle so he can take it. We must not let that happen. I'm leaving the rest of you here to defend the castle. Minerva, Filius and Severus know what to do. Follow their instructions, and offer them any help you can." He looked around the group a moment longer. "What we've been preparing for, and dreading, for so many years is happening now, I believe. Our preparations will not be in vain. Good luck." With that, he and Remus swept out of the office, followed quickly by the other teachers

In the Entrance Hall, nearly a hundred students waited for the Headmaster. The Second-Year D.A. ranks had been swelled from the initial twenty-five members to almost a hundred by a lot of hard work on the part of older students who had joined this year. They stood quietly holding brooms and whatever other equipment their particular jobs required. Some looked nervous, others looked ill, some were crying, but all had a determined air. Ron was briefing them.

"Squads one and two will come in from the left and right flank. Squads three and four will come up the centre. The rest of you will be held back as reinforcements. Hermione and I will be circling the battlefield on brooms, watching the action with Omnioculars. When I see a need to change tactics, to have you fall back, or to reinforce a line somewhere, I'll tell Hermione and she will send an Adfero to your squad leader. She and I will then move immediately so the enemy can't pinpoint our location. We'll send in reinforcements when we see the first squads tiring or needing help. Ginny will be watching with Omnioculars and will send in the healers where needed. Healer Squad, I need to speak to you a moment. Follow me," Ron said, leading them to an empty classroom.

"You all have the supplies you need, right?" He glanced around at the ten Healers plus Ginny and saw all of them nod. "You have a tough job. You will have to be strong. Here's the thing – if someone is hurt but still able to fight, do a quick job of healing them or just leave them unless they're bleeding badly, and let them go back to fighting. If someone's down and can't fight, pull them onto your broom and get them behind our lines before you try to treat them. If someone's dead. . .," here, Ron had to swallow hard. He steeled himself for the job ahead, knowing they were depending on him to be strong for all of them. "If someone's dead, leave them where they've fallen. Don't take the time to get them out of there. We'll pick them up after the battle is over. Keep these orders to yourselves so you won't discourage our fighters. Defend yourself if you have to, but don't go out of your way to engage the enemy. Your job is to heal the fighters, not to be a fighter. Got it?" He looked around and saw grim determination on all their faces. "Let's go rejoin the others." When he stood before the assembled D.A. members again, he said, "This is what we've been training for. We can do this. I'm really proud of all of you. Good luck. Let's do it."

Chapter 33 – The Battle of Little Hangleton

Harry sat very still in his beech tree, studying the situation below him. There were so many Death Eaters and only one of him. What was the best thing to do? He'd been there for probably half an hour now, watching them rushing through the forest looking for him. Voldemort had just reminded them scornfully to search higher in the trees, since Harry could turn into a cat. He'd sat still long enough to catch his breath and get some strength back after his fall out of the tree as a raven. He was bruised and battered, but nothing seemed to be broken, for which he was very grateful.

The Death Eaters were on the far side of the woods now. If he was going to move, this was the time to do it. He'd heard Voldemort calling orders to his followers from the graveyard, so he must still be standing disdainfully on his father's grave, as he had been before Harry escaped from the graveyard.

Harry carefully pictured the biggest headstone he could remember in his mind, then a spot a few feet behind it. That headstone was on the edge of the graveyard, some distance from where Voldemort was standing. Holding fast to the vision of the spot near that big headstone, Harry Disapparated with as small a pop as he could manage. Instantly, he was standing behind the huge granite monument, which was taller and wider than he was. Voldemort was about twenty yards away. Harry stood there a moment, wishing desperately he was wearing his black Hogwarts robes rather than his scarlet Quidditch robes. He couldn't risk the spell light required to Transfigure them into a darker colour. He felt as if his robes were glowing in the dark, they seemed so bright in the dim light of a stormy evening. *At least it isn't raining anymore*, he thought miserably, shivering in his wet clothes.

Sticking to the concealment of the headstones as much as he could, he made his way closer to his enemy. Voldemort's attention was on the sight of his followers' lit wands as they continued to search the forest. Harry moved closer and closer, until he was only twenty feet from the monster who'd made so much of his life a nightmare. He raised his wand to send a curse at his enemy, and, just before he sent it, Voldemort turned and looked right at him.

"I wondered when you'd get tired of hiding, Harry," he said smoothly. "You wanted to face me man to man, eh?"

"Man to monster, more like," Harry snapped.

"Whatever," he said with maddening calmness. "Wands at the ready, then?" Voldemort sketched a mocking half-salute, shooting his first curse while he was still mid-bow. His high, cold laughter filled the graveyard as the young man ducked and rolled, dodging the curse easily.

Harry fired back, and soon there were curses filling the air with violently coloured light. He tried an Impedimenta charm, then an Expelliarmus, and various other charms and hexes, to no avail. He finally started resorting to the Dark spells he'd learned. *Fight fire with fire*, he told himself as he sent a Bone-Removing Curse at Voldemort. A Death Eater behind Voldemort screamed as his body turned to a screaming mass of jelly with no real form, because all of his bones had disappeared. Harry knew the man would die of suffocation since he had no bones to give his lungs room to breathe, but he couldn't worry about that right now.

Voldemort was as adept at dodging curses as Harry. The returning Death Eaters soon learned what the safe distance was, and stayed beyond that. They formed a silent circle around the battle between Harry and Voldemort, just watching, like jackals waiting for another animal to make a kill so they could steal it.

Voldemort was discovering that he and Harry were frighteningly evenly matched. He sent Killing Curses, Crucios, various jinxes, and other horrific things at the boy, and Harry eluded or blocked every one. "Attack!" Voldemort screamed at last, and the Death Eaters acted as one, shooting spells and hexes at Harry so fast he couldn't dodge them all. He shot back as quickly as he could, then Disapparated back into the woods to catch his breath and try to recover from his wounds.

Oh come on, this is just not fair, Harry thought, shaking his head in disgust. He was becoming discouraged as well as injured. "Help me, help me, help me," he whispered desperately as he rubbed his thumbs on his wounds, trying to heal himself so he could get back to work fighting his nemesis.

"Harry? Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Voldemort called in a chillingly cheerful voice. "Come out and play, Harry! You're taking all the fun out of this by hiding."

"Call off your dogs so you can fight me one to one, you coward! Then I'll come out and play," Harry called in a mocking voice, instantly Disapparating to another part of the forest. He saw the wisdom of this choice when he reappeared and saw a score of spells all aimed at the spot where he'd been mere seconds before. He sent Bone-Removing Curses in quick succession at several of the Death Eaters, hitting every one of them. *Five more down, less than forty more to go,* he thought resolutely as he changed positions to avoid return fire. He kept dodging spells, all the while working his way around the edge of the graveyard, trying to sneak up on Voldemort. *Time to stop fighting face to face – an ambush sounds like a good idea*, he thought.

A Death Eater caught sight of him and fired a Leg Locker Curse at him. Harry cast a Petrificus Totalis on the man, then removed the Leg-Locker holding him in place and raced away. He sensed a spell coming from behind him and quickly ducked, the spell whizzing by just where his head had been a heartbeat before. Harry fired an Impedimenta spell over his shoulder, slowing the man down and giving Harry time to get away.

Suddenly, spell fire came from three directions outside the graveyard, and Death Eaters were going down. Harry glanced around – help had arrived! His heart lifted with joy and renewed energy, and he headed for Voldemort again. Glancing skyward, he could barely make out Ron and Hermione on brooms, watching the action below, and Ginny on her Firebolt hovering off to one side, watching for injured D.A. members who needed her healers' services. Their strategies were being used in the real world. *Hope they work!* he thought as he raced across some open space to get close to Voldemort. Soon, battles raged all around him, giving him the freedom he needed to take on his nemesis.

Now Harry and Voldemort stood face to face, fighting with such intensity that their wands were blurs, the movements they made to avoid each other's spells looking like a macabre dance. Harry threw up shield after shield, dropping them only long enough to fire back. Voldemort had to duck to avoid his rebounding spells, which went past him and killed or injured his own men and some of the D.A. members as well. The Death Eaters, sensing this,

moved farther away from Voldemort and Harry, drawing the battling D.A. members after them.

The D.A. members outnumbered the Death Eaters, especially since both Harry and Voldemort had killed or maimed a good many of the Death Eaters, but the students' lack of real-world experience showed in their hesitation to cast spells at times. Those who hesitated went down under a hail of curses, but those D.A. members who went boldly forward were rewarded with victory over their enemies more often than not.

Some D.A. members, as well as some Death Eaters, were caught in crossfire when they stopped to watch the astounding battle between Harry and Voldemort. Nobody had ever seen such a fight as these two were waging. Dumbledore and Remus were fighting alongside the D.A. members, trying to protect as many students as possible while battling the enemy.

The Order members finally arrived, and were saved from attack by D.A. members only by the red Phoenix emblems on their robes that appeared momentarily when a wand was pointed their way. The D.A. members had the Hogwarts crest on their robes which showed up in purple sparks momentarily when wands pointed their way. There was no other way anyone could think of to show the Order members and the D.A. who they should not fire upon. Each Order and D.A. member knew that he or she needed to dodge as soon as that emblem showed, or they'd be targeted more easily by Death Eaters. So far, they were following their instructions fairly well. The tide of the battle with the Death Eaters was turning, little by little.

Ginny's healers flitted around on brooms, dropping out of the sky to land beside injured D.A. or Order members, helping those they could, sending the ones not badly wounded right back into battle, but doing so with heavy hearts. Neville landed beside Seamus, who'd caught a glimpse of Harry's battle and hesitated just long enough to be shot off his broom and caught in crossfire between three Death Eaters and an Order member. Seamus lay on the ground panting with pain. Neville knelt beside him, doing what he could for him. Neville kept an eye out for attacks, his wand held loosely in his hand as he worked on his friend. When Seamus's wounds were bound up as well as Neville could manage, he turned to lift his friend onto his broom to take him out of the battlefield. Suddenly, he saw Rudolphus LeStrange looking right at him, an evil grin on his face.

"Ah, unfinished business," LeStrange said with a sneer, lifting his wand. "Care to join your parents in St. Mungo's nutters' ward? Or shall I just kill you outright?"

From his kneeling position, Neville shot a full body bind which hit LeStrange just after he'd fired a purple spell at Neville. Neville grabbed Seamus and rolled away as fast as he could, trying to protect his friend from LeStrange's hex. When he heard the man's body hit the ground fully paralyzed, Neville walked over to him and began kicking him repeatedly, oblivious to the battle raging around him.

"I should" *kick* "do a Cruciatus" *kick* "on you." *kick kick kick* " I'm angry enough to do it" *kick kick kick kick* "really well," Neville growled between kicks. "You and" *kick* "Bellatrix had" *kick* "no" *kick* "right to torture" *kick kick kick* "my parents" *kick* "or anyone else that way!" *kick kick kick kick kick*. By this time, the man's face was a bloody, soggy mess and most of his ribs were broken. Neville was no longer a podgy, weak little boy, and he put a lifetime of pent-up rage and grief behind each and every kick. He backed away from the man, panting, astonished at what he'd done. Neville glanced at Seamus, who gave Neville a weary thumbs-

up. Neville managed half a smile back at Seamus, then conjured ropes to bind his prisoner, and put a Silencio charm on him as well, then picked up the man's wand and, making certain LeStrange saw what was happening, very deliberately broke it in two. "You won't be hurting anyone else for a while," Neville snarled as he threw the pieces of the broken wand as far away as he could. He rubbed his arm, which had a long ugly burn on it from the purple spell LeStrange had shot at him. "Come on, Seamus, let's get out of here," he said, hoisting the wounded boy onto his broom and flying behind the lines.

"Neville, you're hurt!" Ginny said as she landed beside him. "I saw you get hit. How's Seamus?"

"Seamus got caught in a cross-fire. I did what I could for him," Neville said apologetically.

"You were brilliant. I saw you fighting that man," Ginny said, looking at him seriously as she bent to check Seamus. "And then I saw you kicking him."

"He tortured my parents," Neville said simply.

"Well done, all around," Ginny replied. "How badly are you hurt?"

"My arm got burned, that's all," he said, doing his best to mask the pain.

"Let me see." Ginny examined Neville's arm, then got a potion out of her kit. "Take this, it will help."

"We need to save that for the fighters," he protested, pushing it away.

"You're as much a fighter as a healer. Don't argue with me. Take it," she commanded, and he complied meekly. "You should rest a while," she added as he handed the flagon back to her.

"No, I'm fine. I'm still needed out there," Neville said, jumping on his broom and taking off before she could stop him.

"Be safe, Neville," she whispered as he flew away. She did what she could for Seamus, then gave further instructions to the healer squad members who'd been assigned to stay on the ground to take care of the wounded.

Ginny got back on her broom and started scanning the battlefield again, looking for injured D.A. and Order members who needed her healers, and she kept an eye on Harry. He'd been hit repeatedly by spells from both Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and he was already badly wounded when the D.A. arrived – she could tell from the way he moved. But he kept getting back up and going back into battle, and it was his own rule that those who were still able to fight should be allowed to do so. He wouldn't appreciate her interfering in his battle, and her being near him would just give Voldemort another weapon to use against him. They'd had this discussion many times already. She knew what he wanted her to do – stay on her broom and observe, commanding her healers as Ron was commanding the fighters.

"Did you know how hard this would be for me, Harry?" she whimpered, her heart in her mouth as she saw him fall again. He got up, his face set and hard, determined not to quit until he'd conquered his enemy. The wind whipped his black hair away from his face, the scar livid

against his pale skin. Ginny knew it only brightened in colour when it was giving Harry pain, so Voldemort was doing something to hurt Harry through the scar, or Voldemort's rage was making it hurt, or it could be just being so close to the evil git was causing the pain. Whatever the case, Harry had to fight while suffering excruciating scar pain. *He can barely see when it hurts like that*, she thought, scared to death for him.

He seemed to feel her thought, because he glanced up, looking directly at her, and gave her half a smile just for a moment.

Her heart turned over with love for him. *Please, please keep him safe!* she prayed, then went back to work guiding her healers to the wounded.

The battle between Harry and Voldemort was still raging full force, but Voldemort's expression had changed from sneering arrogance to concern. He seemed to be getting desperate, flinging spells out wildly. Harry was a stronger opponent than anyone could have expected. How could a mere school boy be such a challenge to the Dark Lord? Suddenly, Voldemort changed into a serpent and tried to wrap Harry up in his coils, but Harry changed into a phoenix and vanished before the snake could crush him. He reappeared and changed back into himself a few feet away.

"Man to man?" Harry said laughing derisively. "Man to snake this time. You're pathetic."

"Pathetic, am I?" Voldemort screamed, enraged. His wand suddenly developed a dozen whiplike lashes, flaming red-orange, out of the end. He whirled it at Harry, who managed to evade most of them, but was cruelly cut by several on his back, buttocks and legs. He stood bleeding and panting with pain, but still unbowed.

"Is that the best you can do?" Harry taunted him. He had no idea why he was provoking the monster. His own temper was well beyond the breaking point, but Harry seemed to be seeing things with crystal clarity. Rage made you lose control. He was doing his best to infuriate Voldemort. If he became truly enraged, he would let his guard down and Harry could kill him. He was certain of this, as certain as he was that the sky was blue and he loved Ginny Weasley.

"You're such a bloody coward, you bloody great wanker," he snapped. "Always standing behind your Death Eaters, having them wear masks to try to make them more scary. Whooooo, I'm scary, I'm wearing a mask, big scary Death Eater!" he snarled, skipping out of Voldemort's range. "Big scary Voldemort. Have you looked at yourself? You're not that old, only about seventy, right? But you look like you're a thousand years old, just a decrepit mummy with red eyes! You're not doing much to keep up appearances. You could've probably won more followers if you'd kept Tom Riddle's appearance. At least he wasn't disgusting to look at, except for his perpetual sneer."

Harry had no idea what he was doing. Words just poured out of him unchecked, as he danced away from the more and more erratic spells Voldemort was casting. "You want scary? Try some of THIS!" he yelled as he sent a bolt of pure power at Voldemort. Voldemort jumped just in time, but the ground beneath the Dark Lord disappeared, leaving him screaming as he fell into a massively deep hole that tried to close over him. He managed to stop his fall after twenty feet or so and levitated himself to solid ground a few yards away.

"That was dismal, Potter," Voldemort scoffed. "Can't you do any better?" He lashed out with his magical whip again, so fast that more lashes caught Harry, cutting cruel stripes on his back and left arm as he twisted out of the way.

Harry and Voldemort got back to the serious work of lobbing spells at each other and dodging the ones that came their way. Both of them were wounded and bleeding, and visibly weakening, but Harry had, by far, the worst injuries of the two. Apparently Voldemort's immortality spells also covered quick recovery from wounds, because his minor injuries healed up right before Harry's eyes.

Harry was beginning to feel faint from loss of blood. *If only I could have a break – just a few minutes to rest*, he thought desperately.

Without warning, the sky burst open in a multitude of colour as firebombs rained down from the sky. Fred and George Weasley were on their brooms, lobbing bombs at Death Eaters wherever they could. When these "bombs" exploded, those closest to them were either petrified or covered in oozing boils. Some of the bombs featured Ear-Hair Growing jinxes, which made the victims ear hair grow until the person's whole head was encased in a wiry web of thick ear hair, including a rich, gooey coating of wax. Fred and George could be heard chortling as they watched the mayhem their bombs were causing. Once in a while they'd accidentally catch an Order or D.A. member in the splatter from the bomb, after which they'd shout, "Sorry!" or "Oops!" and reverse the spell. The Death Eaters were being overwhelmed by the fighters on the ground and the aerial attack by the Weasley twins.

Some of the spells from the Weasley bombs managed to hit Voldemort, but only enough to make him angrier. He was bruised, battered and bleeding, but so enraged he didn't notice his wounds or the boils caused by the Weasleys' bombs. He shot at the Weasley twins' brooms but missed, their many years of Quidditch making it easy for them to dodge the spells being aimed their way.

Harry wished he had some time to deal with his own injuries, but he had to strike while Voldemort was tired and bleeding and distracted by the Weasley twins. He tried his Bone-Removal Curse again, but Voldemort moved away just in time. Part of it hit Ernie McMillan, whose legs turned into jelly and let him fall. Ernie looked stunned for a moment, but then, realizing he wasn't really in pain, he battled on from his position on the ground. Harry had a bleeding scalp wound which was dripping blood in his eyes and onto his glasses. He shook his head trying to clear his vision, thankful the Impervious charm built into his glasses was keeping them clean.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Voldemort said, suddenly catching Harry with his guard down, and Harry's wand went flying. "Now, let's see. What shall I do to you first, now that you're disarmed?" the monster said, tapping his finger idly against his teeth. "Oh, I know! *Crucio!*" He laughed in delight as Harry writhed on the ground in agony.

As he suffered unbearable pain in every cell of his body, Harry heard a small voice in the back of his mind saying, *I don't have to do what he says. He doesn't have control over me. It's all in my mind, and my mind says* "NO!" He screamed the last word aloud as he spread his hands wide and concentrated – a golden sphere suddenly appeared around him, a difficult but very effective type of shield charm he'd found in his Dark Arts books. It required tremendous effort to sustain, but it was the best thing he could think of at the moment. He needed time to

get to his feet, wipe the blood from his eyes, and get back to battle. This sphere would give him this, as long as he could concentrate well enough to hold its strength. It was a very tricky charm to manage at the best of times, and these weren't the best of times. He managed to summon his wand and slid it into his pocket. He was deep into wandless magic now – the wand couldn't help him do what he needed to do.

Through the shimmering light of the sphere, Harry could see Voldemort's unnatural red eyes wide in disbelief. Nobody had ever broken a Cruciatus curse – nobody!

"What magic is this?" Voldemort screamed as he began blasting the sphere with every kind of spell from Reducto to Avada Kedavra. Nothing penetrated the sphere. Inside the sphere, he could see Harry standing upright now, a gleam of fury in those green eyes despite the blood pouring down his face from his scalp wound, the boy's teeth gritted as he called on every ounce of power he had to fight Voldemort's attack on his protective sphere. The sphere held.

Ron and Hermione were busy directing the offensive from their brooms high above the conflict. They heard Harry yell "NO!" and then Voldemort's scream of rage when Harry broke his Cruciatus curse, glancing down just in time to see their best friend lying on the ground, battered, bleeding but still defiant as he created the golden sphere around him and rose to his feet, glaring insolently at the monster before him.

"I've never seen him do that one," Ron commented briefly as he went back to studying his troop movement.

"Me either. He looks about done in," Hermione said worriedly, her voice breaking with emotion.

Ron glanced at her, then placed a gentle hand on her arm. "Harry wants us to do what we're doing. This is the best way we can help him. It's killing me not to be there next to him, helping him, but we have to do this right now. All these people's lives depend on our decisions up here."

She nodded, tears in her eyes, a soft sob escaping her. "So many of them are down."

"You have to sacrifice some soldiers to win a war," Ron said, his face grim. "I never thought it would be so hard, but you can see from here, we're winning. You *can* see it, can't you?" he asked, suddenly worried that he was convincing himself of something that might not be true.

"Yes, we're winning. The battle's nearly over, actually. I think we need to reinforce the line over there," she said, pointing to the left flank.

"And we need to remind the squad leaders to tell their people to stop watching Harry fight. That's where a lot of our casualties have come from, people standing and watching."

"Doing it now," she said, sending the message to the squad leaders. It was gratifying to both of them to see the quick responses of their squads. Gawkers stopped gawking and got back to their jobs, and the left flank was strengthened by an additional squad in a matter of moments.

As Harry held the sphere, his mind spun wildly. *Think of something!* he thought *C'mon, brain, work!* As he stoodwondering what he could do next, a flash of golden light burst inside the

sphere and Fawkes landed on his shoulder. Fawkes's tears healed the wound in his head, stopping the bleeding so Harry could see clearly again. The phoenix sang his liquid song, the notes of his ethereal music filling the sphere and lifting Harry's heart. He stood completely still, drinking in the tranquillity and soaring joy that quickly filled his spirit due to the phoenix song.

"Thanks, Fawkes," he said, resting his cheek against the bird as if he had all the time in the world to do so. "I know what to do now." He moved the sphere until it was within inches of the Dark Lord.

Voldemort's eyes widened. The sphere before him seemed to be growing, as did the boy inside it. Voldemort hurled spells at it repeatedly, to no avail, his spells bouncing off the sphere and hitting people randomly all around him.

Still inside the sphere, Harry swiftly changed into a phoenix, flying at the level of Voldemort's face. As Harry changed, the sphere wall began to dissolve and the phoenix that was Harry burst through what remained of the sphere's wall directly at his enemy's face, Fawkes following closely behind. The two beautiful scarlet birds pecked, scratched and clawed at the monster's face, holding on despite his every effort to get them off of him, their golden tail feathers lashing in fury as they attacked.

All the healers were fully involved in working on casualties, so Ginny had landed to attend to some wounded herself. As she worked on her old boyfriend Michael Corner, she tried to smile at him, hoping to cheer him up a bit. He was seriously wounded, but Ginny wouldn't give up on him. She heard Voldemort shriek and looked up to see two phoenixes striking his face with beaks and talons repeatedly. Like everyone around her, she stared transfixed at the horrible sight. The entire battlefield seemed to be in suspended animation, all faces turned to the sight of the phoenixes attacking Voldemort.

Voldemort screamed in agony over and over. His skin hung in tatters. Silver and red blood ran down his ruined face and over his body, pooling on the ground. The two phoenixes flew away from him, having done what they could to stop him. Voldemort was still fighting, but he was fighting phantoms. The phoenixes had clawed his eyes out completely. His evil, red, snake-like eyes were no more than oozing holes now. He was firing spells blindly, sending Killing Curses in every direction. Death Eaters, D.A. and Order members alike, those who were still able to do so, dived for cover.

Ginny shook herself out of her stupor and levitated Michael Corner slightly off the ground so she could get him behind a headstone for protection. One of the phoenixes flew right into her face, knocking her down and breaking her Levitation spell so she dropped Michael. The phoenix stayed suspended where it was, drinking in a Killing Curse that would have killed Ginny if the phoenix hadn't intervened. Voldemort Disapparated just as the phoenix hit the ground and lay all too still.

"Nooooo," Ginny moaned. "Harry?" she cried anxiously as she turned the bird over. Beautiful green eyes caught hers for a heartbeat, focusing on her in recognition for an instant before the light of life faded from them. "Harry! NO! *HARRY!*" she screamed in agony. She jumped back in horror as the bird's body was consumed in flames, a small pile of ash all that remained of the phoenix that was Harry Potter. "*NOOOOOO!*" she screamed, rocking back and forth,

beating her chest with her fists as her heartbroken screams echoed through the graveyard. "*NOOOOO!*"

"Ginny? What is it?" Ron said, quickly landing next to her, Hermione right behind him.

She pointed mutely at the pile of ashes before her.

"What's that?"

"H-h-harry," she mumbled, turning to her brother and holding onto him desperately.

"Harry?" Ron said, dumbfounded. He looked at the pile of ashes. "How did he get burned to ash? He was still fighting, the last time I looked at him." Hermione burst into tears, falling to her knees sobbing, her hands over her face as she rocked in grief. Ron knelt next to her and put his arm around her comfortingly as he tried to understand what Ginny was saying.

"He became a phoenix. He saved me from a Killing Curse," she moaned.

Ron was silent a moment, his body taut with nerves, holding his sister as she sobbed against his shoulder and keeping one hand comfortingly on Hermione, who was completely bereft. He was too shocked to react. His best mate, dead? No, it couldn't be. He stared at the small pile of ashes, not willing to believe the truth they told. Then he relaxed and a low chuckle began deep in his chest. "He's brilliant," Ron said, grinning. "Well done, mate."

"Huh?" Ginny said, pulling back to look up at her brother. He turned her around and showed her the pile of ashes, which now contained a baby bird. He tapped Hermione gently on top of the head to get her attention.

"He took on the magical abilities of the phoenix when he changed into one," Ron reminded her. "They're immortal. They die, then are reborn from the ashes. Look, Hermione. He's all right."

Ginny sobbed, reaching out toward the baby bird. "Oh, Harry, I was so scared! Come on, love, I'll carry you in my pocket."

Hermione laughed in delight to see the ugly little bird. "Oh, Harry! Well done!"

Fawkes dived in front of Ginny as she reached out, flapping his wings at her, violently chasing her away from the baby bird. He picked the little phoenix up in his claws and lifted into the air again, the two of them disappearing in a flash of golden light.

"Harry? Where's Fawkes taking him? Where. . .?" Ginny said in shock, tears streaming down her face again. Ron and Hermione could only gaze back at her, horror-struck. What just happened?

"Fawkes will take good care of him," Dumbledore said as he limped up to join them. "He'll take him to Hagrid. I asked Hagrid to stay in his hut so he'd be there if Harry was injured in Animagus form and needed his help. He should be fine," he assured her, patting her shoulder kindly.

"Is it over?" Ginny said in a tremulous voice, looking around the graveyard. Her healers were working frantically, doing their best to help the fallen. Those who were still upright were helping the Order members tie up the remaining Death Eaters.

"Yes, it's over," Dumbledore said quietly. "I cannot tell you how proud I am of all of you. Well done."

"I wish we could've done it with no casualties," Ron said, his eyes stricken as he saw several still forms lying beyond the graveyard fence. Hermione stood and leaned against him, heartsick and suddenly exhausted.

"How many did we lose?" Dumbledore asked sadly.

"I don't know. Ginny?" Ron said.

"I know of three dead, and I've lost count of the injuries. Some of them are serious. We need to get them to Madam Pomfrey as soon as possible," she said. "Some of them may need St. Mungo's, but I'd rather Madam Pomfrey made those decisions. A lot of these injuries are well beyond my knowledge."

"We'll get them transported as quickly as possible," Dumbledore said. "Portkeys will be a little hard on them, but that's the fastest way," he said, musing to himself. "I'll talk with the Order members and arrange something. Try to get all the wounded together if you can. It will make things easier for us."

As the Battle of Little Hangleton raged, Lucius Malfoy attacked Hogwarts, with Draco and the Slytherins who had become Death Eaters attacking from inside the castle while Lucius's group of Death Eaters attacked the outside. Unfortunately for Draco Malfoy, the teachers were on to him. McGonagall and Flitwick soon had the entire group surrounded, bound and quickly secured in the dungeons. The professors deliberately kept Snape away from the action with his House so his secret assignment as a double-agent would be as safe as possible.

The dragons and Hagrid's giant half-brother Grawp put up a good defence of the gates, wounding or killing many of the attackers. Flames lit up the night from the dragons' attacks on the intruders, and bodies flew through the air as Grawp made good use of his club. Despite their best efforts, some Death Eaters managed to get inside the gates. They stormed the castle walls and were amazed when the gargoyles, which everyone thought were merely decorations, leaped off the walls and began fighting off the attackers, hitting, running over, punching any enemy within reach, then trampling on the fallen until they were no more than messy piles of gore. The staff, older students and First Year D.A. rained spells down on the Death Eaters from the ramparts of the towers, putting up a powerful defence. Firenze, the Centaur, had been transported to a tower by a Levitation Charm of Professor Flitwick's. Firenze proved what an excellent marksman he was, every one of his arrows flying straight and true, leaving only death in their path. The suits of armour and the many statues in the castle left the corridors and raced outside, fighting with an otherworldly fury. During a fierce but brief battle, scores of the magnificent trees on the grounds were decimated by spell fire, but the Whomping Willow proved to be as good a defence of the castle as anyone could want, tossing anyone who came within range of it well away from the walls, and seriously injuring many of the Death Eaters.

The castle's wards held, the inhabitants were victorious and many of the Death Eaters who were not dead or seriously wounded were soon rounded up and secured in the dungeons, along with the Slytherins who had turned against their school. McGonagall said some rather unladylike things as she saw Lucius Malfoy's white-blond hair catching the moonlight as he retreated through the gates with a straggling group of other escaping Death Eaters close behind.

A couple of hours later, Hagrid was busy setting his cabin to rights after racing from dragon to dragon to tend wounds while doing his best to keep an eye on his cabin in case Harry arrived needing his help He'd just finished bandaging Grawp's wounds, who had been a surprisingly good helper when it came to treating the dragons. Medical supplies were strewn everywhere.

"Here, what's this?" he said as Fawkes appeared in a flash of light and landed on Hagrid's massive bed, laying the baby bird there for Hagrid's inspection. "A baby phoenix? Fawkes, is this Harry?" he asked, bending over the little bird. Fawkes blinked, and prodded Hagrid to get on with taking care of him. "Right then, Harry," he said kindly. "Let's see what I can do for you." He examined the baby phoenix and then put him on a blanket in a box next to the fireplace to stay warm. Fawkes made a nesting spot in the blankets and settled into it, keeping the baby bird warm under his wing, crooning comfortingly to him all the while. Hagrid put healing ointment on the wounds he found on the little bird, then made a strengthening potion for him and managed to convince Fawkes to let him give it to Harry drop by drop.

"There now. That's about all I can do for the moment. I'll just carry you up ter the hospital wing and when you can change back, Madam Pomfrey can take care o' you, how's that?" he said tenderly as he wrapped a scrap of blanket around the little bird. The baby phoenix never opened his eyes, just moaned in pain as he was handled. "Och, Harry, I'm sorry to hurt you," he rumbled as he held the tiny bird between his gigantic hands.

Fawkes flew beside Hagrid as the gamekeeper made his way up to the castle, which was a nightmare landscape of bodies and debris. Two greenhouses were destroyed from various blasting spells that had been used to try to breech the castle walls. Professor Sprout and some student assistants were frantically trying to round up plants that had been tossed out of the buildings, and save those that were under debris. Professor Flitwick was busily restoring gargoyles to their proper places on the walls. Professor McGonagall was repairing statues and armour and sending them back into the castle. Professor Sinistra was on top of the Astronomy Tower repairing the ramparts there. Madam Trelawney was fluttering about her tower, which was now missing an entire wall. Scarves that had been blown off the tables by the power of the attack now fluttered hopelessly, hanging out of holes in the wall. Other staff members were occupied picking up the dead and wounded, or starting the cleanup and other repairs on the castle. Mr. Filch ran around wringing his hands, so distraught at the mess everywhere that he had no idea where to start working – nor could he find his cat, Mrs. Norris. Death Eaters who hadn't yet been taken to the dungeons lay trussed up like so many bundles of firewood, in groups here and there across the grounds. The giant squid gave a loud belch, creating a small waterspout for a moment. He had managed to capture a few Death Eaters himself, and had enjoyed his snack. In the future, students would be a little more cautious when hand-feeding him despite his seemingly gentle nature.

Hagrid opened the door to the hospital wing. Beds were everywhere. Madam Pomfrey had recruited help from St. Mungo's because there were so many casualties from the Battle of

Hogwarts, and so few people with any training at all in healing or even first aid left in the castle once the D.A. went to Little Hangleton. "Madam Pomfrey?" Hagrid said quietly, his face serious. "I have a patient for you."

"I thought they'd cleared the grounds of wounded people. Did you find someone by the gates?" she asked, her face a study in tense concentration. "What's wrong with him? Where is he? Or she?"

"Here," Hagrid said, then opened his hands to show the ugly little baby bird.

"Is that Fawkes?" she asked, but then she noticed the phoenix perched on a statue by the door. "That's not Fawkes." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Is it Harry?"

"Yeah. I reckon he's hurt pretty bad. I gave him a strengthening potion for birds and did what I could for his injuries, but he needs a lot more than I can do for him," Hagrid said sadly. "I know you're busy. . ."

"Bring him over here," she said, moving to the quietest corner she could find, then conjuring a bed and curtains to pull around it. "Put him there."

"He needs to be kept warm," Hagrid said. "Phoenixes need heat to get their strength back." Just then, Fawkes flew to the bed and lay down beside Harry, nestling the small bird under his breast as if Harry were his baby. Fawkes fluffed his feathers around the baby phoenix until the baby was completely out of sight and began crooning to him again.

"I don't know much about phoenixes, Hagrid, but I do know about people. If he's bleeding, we need to treat it. Can he change back to himself?"

"I don't think he has the strength ter do it righ' now," Hagrid replied, brushing a tear off of his cheek with the back of his trembling hand. He had stayed strong as long as Harry needed him. Now that he was turning his friend's care over to the nurse, Hagrid's emotions were threatening to overwhelm him.

"I have forty injured people to deal with here, and not enough help. If Harry's here now, surely that means the battle is over?" Madam Pomfrey mused to herself. "The rest of them will be returning soon. Oh no, that means more injured people." She put her hands to her face, panicked for a moment. "Where will we put them all?"

"Why not use the Great Hall?" Hagrid suggested humbly.

"Oh, that's brilliant!" she exclaimed, patting his arm gratefully. "Thank you, Hagrid. Can you help us move them?"

"O' course," he rumbled, blushing at her praise. "Can I move Harry first? I can take him in me pocket, see, and carry several beds stacked up, if you can get the people down there without beds."

"Levitation charms will work for that. Let me get things organized here. You go ahead and get Harry settled. I wish we'd thought of this before we put him to bed," she muttered as she strode down the aisle between the closely-packed beds.

"Fawkes? I need to move Harry again. I'm sorry," Hagrid said gently as he petted the phoenix. Fawkes reluctantly got off of the baby bird and allowed Hagrid to pick it up. He wrapped the little bird in the scrap of blanket he'd used before, being careful to keep his head free so he could breathe. Then he stowed the blanketed bird in his roomiest pocket. He held the pocket open. "C'mon, Fawkes, there's room in there for you too, if you want to stay with 'im." Fawkes flew to Hagrid's outstretched arm and then made his way into the huge pocket in Hagrid's moleskin overcoat. "There ya are, snug as a bug in a rug," Hagrid said warmly. "You'll be safe now, and warm too." With that, he started stacking beds and soon was carrying five beds at a time down to the Great Hall, followed closely by several healers with injured people levitating weirdly in front of them.

Before long, the Great Hall was set up as a hospital and triage centre, with the house tables all shoved against the walls behind the staff table. Those patients with the worst injuries were in one section, those with less serious injuries in another. Nobody was in danger of dying, except Harry, of course. The castle wards had protected the inhabitants quite well. Only those who had exposed themselves on the ramparts to fight had any injuries at all, but out of a population of a thousand or so, having forty injured people wasn't a bad ratio.

Some time later, the survivors of the Battle of Little Hangleton began arriving, bringing with them casualties, prisoners and the bodies of those who'd perished in battle. Madam Pomfrey sent to St. Mungo's for more help. There were far more injuries than she could treat, and she didn't have enough medical supplies to treat so many at one time, either. When Ginny arrived, she and Madam Pomfrey went to a quiet corner to confer about the wounded. The Battle of Hogwarts wounded who were in the "worst injuries" section were soon reclassified as "mild" injuries once the Little Hangleton casualties arrived. Injured Death Eaters from the Little Hangleton battle had been Portkeyed directly to Azkaban for treatment there. Once they knew what Dumbledore wanted done with their injured enemies, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick hurried to the dungeons and Portkeyed the injured Death Eaters there to Azkaban as well. Most of the Order of the Phoenix casualties had gone straight to St. Mungo's for treatment. Madam Pomfrey put Professor Snape in charge of getting all the casualties settled in beds and their care organized so she could attend to Harry's injuries. When she arrived at his bed, she found not only Hagrid, but Ginny there, as well.

"How is he doing?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"I know he has multiple wounds and he was bleeding a lot the last time I saw him as a human," Ginny offered, "but Fawkes won't let me look at him." Her face was set in grim determination. She scolded herself. *I will do this job like any other. I will not fall apart. Harry needs me!*

"I think we need Professor Dumbledore to talk to Fawkes for us," Madam Pomfrey surmised. No sooner had she said this than the headmaster parted the curtains around Harry's bed.

"There you are," Dumbledore said with a smile as he entered the curtained area and saw Fawkes on the bed. He bent down and patted the bird. "How's our patient?" Fawkes crooned something mournful-sounding to Dumbledore that seemed to make sense to the professor. "Ah. I see," he said, his face instantly sombre.

"What is it?" Ginny said nervously.

"Fawkes says he's very weak. He's lost a lot of blood. Fawkes has stopped the bleeding with his tears, but his tears didn't close all of the wounds, and there are other things wrong with him that Fawkes can't manage, which has him quite distressed. He isn't used to not being able to heal wounds." Dumbledore leaned over the beautiful bird and stroked him gently. "Thank you for what you've done," he said kindly. "Let's see what else we can do for him." The phoenix reluctantly got up and moved away from the tiny bird, which was panting and flinching in obvious pain. When Fawkes moved, the baby bird began shivering, as well. Dumbledore did a Warming Charm to keep the bird comfortable, then gently turned him this way and that so he and Madam Pomfrey could examine him. His face grew more and more serious as he examined the bird. He straightened up and sighed heavily, then looked up at Madam Pomfrey. "Poppy, we need a healer here. I'm going to change him into himself, but his wounds are quite serious. He will need immediate treatment by a healer we can trust to keep his secrets."

"I know just the one," she said, and bustled out of the enclosed space around the bed. She soon reappeared with a man who already looked quite tired. "This is Marcus Pomfrey, my brother," she said as they entered the curtained area.

"Are you sure he's who you think he is?" Ginny snapped, doing her best to protect Harry. "Does he have a password?"

"Password?" the healer said, looking at Madam Pomfrey oddly.

"It's to protect this student – he's been attacked repeatedly this year, and. . ." Madam Pomfrey began.

"The only student I see in here is a girl," Marcus interrupted impatiently. "What's going on?"

Dumbledore walked over to the man. "I must impress upon you the importance of maintaining this patient's privacy," he said with utmost sincerity. "I will Memory Charm you, if I must, to protect him."

Marcus's eyes widened. "It's Harry Potter, isn't it?" Dumbledore nodded. "Of course, I'll do whatever I have to in order to protect his privacy. I've admired that boy his whole life. Poppy's told me what a fine young man he is, besides being a hero." He looked at the bed, seeing the phoenix there next to the baby bird. "He's the baby bird?"

"Yes," Dumbledore answered.

"What kind of bird is he?" Marcus asked Dumbledore, still unconvinced that this bird was actually a student.

"A phoenix." Dumbledore's expression was quite serious.

"Who transfigured him?" Marcus said, looking at the bird without touching it yet.

"He's an Animagus. He transfigured himself," Dumbledore told him. "This is one of the many secrets of Harry's that you must keep."

"I didn't know it was possible to become a magical animal. Wow." Marcus swallowed hard, giving himself time to adjust to this new concept. "I don't know how to treat birds," he muttered to himself. It was apparent that his mind was racing, trying to sort out where to start.

"I can change him back, but he will be in tremendous pain. Being a phoenix has kept him more comfortable than he would have been otherwise," Dumbledore responded.

Marcus straightened up and looked Dumbledore square in the eye. "If you want to Memory Charm me when this is over, or at any point during my treatment of him, that's fine with me. It will be an honour to take care of Harry Potter. Try to leave me my medical training when you do it, though, all right?" he added with a nervous half-smile.

"Certainly," Dumbledore promised. "I'm going to put a Silencing Charm on this area so we won't attract undue attention. And Professor McGonagall will be standing guard outside the curtains so we won't be disturbed." When he saw Ginny's eyes widen, he added, "Harry's loved ones will be allowed in, but no one else. There are a great many students who want to speak to him, you see, but he's just not strong enough, and won't be for a while, I imagine." Ginny nodded.

She reached out toward the baby bird, and for the first time, Fawkes didn't chase her away from him. She touched the little bird's downy cheek, which was encrusted with blood, then his sharp little beak, his tiny talons. Tears ran down her face as she pulled her hand away from him. She'd done her best not to disturb him, but she just had to touch him for some reason, perhaps only to see if he was really there. She looked up at Dumbledore, who had waited quietly while she grieved over the bird.

"Are you ready for me to do this now?" he asked her kindly. She nodded again. Dumbledore tapped the bird with his wand three times and the tiny bird swiftly changed into Harry Potter. Dumbledore levitated Harry for a moment so he'd fit on the bed better.

"Why is he in Quidditch robes?" the healer asked as he began looking at the boy, using both his eyes and his wand to examine him.

"He's the Gryffindor Seeker. When he caught the Snitch, it took him to Voldemort," Dumbledore explained softly.

Harry was stirring, moving just a little, seemingly about to wake up. "Poppy, do you have the non-drowsy pain potion at hand?" Marcus asked. "He'll need it when he wakes up."

"I'll go get it," she said, then rushed out of the curtains.

"I want him to be awake as much as possible so he can help me with my examination," Marcus explained in response to Ginny's raised eyebrows. "What caused these cuts?" he asked as he examined the deep gouges in Harry's left arm and across his back.

"V-v-voldemort made a wh-wh-whip come out of his wand," Ginny explained, nervously at first, then forcing herself to look at Harry's wounds clinically, not as severe injuries to the boy she loved. "It had a lot of lashes. They were red-orange and looked like fire. Harry . . . he screamed so badly when it hit the first time, but after that, he was quiet."

"You mean he passed out?" Marcus said, looking up at her.

"No. He just refused to make a sound. Harry's like that," she said simply. "He wouldn't give that monster the satisfaction of hearing him in pain."

Marcus's eyes widened. This must be a very strong young man to not cry out under such abuse. He pulled gently at the edges of the wounds, trying to find out how tightly Harry's Quidditch robes where bound to the wound edges. "This is going to be very hard on him. The fabric has melted to his skin," he commented sadly. He began using his wand to cut away Harry's Quidditch robes so he could examine the rest of Harry's body, then glanced up at Ginny. "Miss Weasley, would you step out so we can examine him thoroughly?"

"I've taken care of Harry through several illnesses," she said defiantly. "I've treated wounds, fevers and other illnesses, and bathed him repeatedly. I have six brothers. I don't need to be protected from the sight of his naked body," she snapped, growing angrier the longer she spoke.

Marcus's eyes twinkled a moment, admiring her spunk. "Yes, I've heard from Poppy what a fine healer you're going to be, and what good work you've done already. But I know you care about him, too – I can see it in how you behave with him. He's your boyfriend, correct?"

"Yes." Her lip quivered a bit as she said it, but she was holding her tears tightly in check.

"Then you might not want to see what I'm going to have to do to examine him. It might upset you too much."

"I'm going to be a healer. I may as well learn on Harry. He seems to need my services more than anyone else I know," she said sadly.

Marcus looked up at Dumbledore and saw him give an approving nod. Madam Pomfrey also agreed. "All right then. Here we go." With a wave of his wand, he vanished Harry's clothes, except for the edges of fabric that were stuck to his whiplash wounds. The boy was a mass of bruises, burns and open wounds, blood covering nearly his entire back and most of the front of his body. His legs had a few open wounds from the whip as well as cuts from other spells, and three long, deep gashes went from his mid-back to the bottom of his bum. Some injuries were still oozing blood. Fawkes moved around Harry's body, dripping tears into every open wound, but his tears had no effect on the deep gashes caused by Voldemort's whip.

"Why aren't the phoenix tears healing those?" Ginny asked.

"Something in the spell that created the whip is making these wounds resistant to phoenix tears. We'll have to heal them the old-fashioned way," Marcus said grimly.

"The old-fashioned way?" Ginny asked uneasily.

"We'll treat the wounds and wait for Harry's body to heal itself," Marcus replied grimly. He sighed at the sight of Harry's abused body, then levitated him, turning him slowly in the air so he could check for wounds on all sides. He laid the boy back in bed, resting him on his right side since most of the whip wounds were on his left arm and the left side of his back. He put a cushioning charm on Harry's body and drew covers up over him. They floated weirdly a

couple of inches above him, just giving him privacy, not warmth. A Warming Charm was added to keep him comfortable.

Marcus straightened up and looked around at the group quite seriously. "He has numerous internal injuries, some internal bleeding, spell burns and spell damage over most of his body, from the looks of things. I won't fool you – he's in very bad shape."

Chapter 34 – Elegy

Harry was in a deep, dark, warm place. He wanted to stay there, but something was drawing him out of it. Coming out of that lovely rich darkness meant he hurt. He hurt all over. His head hurt, his scar hurt, his back hurt, his chest hurt, his arms and legs hurt, his insides hurt. Some were sharp, stabbing pains, others were dull, throbbing pains, others were pain beyond description. He moaned and moved restlessly, which made everything hurt more. He moaned again, fighting his way out of his stupor, finally opening his eyes to see Ginny sitting next to his bed, her face red and blotchy, tears streaming from her eyes, kissing his right hand over and over, glancing up at him between kisses.

"Harry, come back to me! Come on, wake up! OH! *HARRY!*" she cried when she saw his eyes were open and actually looking at her. She stood up and leaned over the bed, kissing him gently on the temple. He groaned as she bumped his bed in her excitement. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" She bent to kiss him again, moving more carefully this time. "Madam Pomfrey!" she called, running to peep out of the curtain. "Madam Pomfrey? Healer Pomfrey?" Soon both the nurse and healer were standing by Harry's bed, examining him, full of questions but trying hard not to overwhelm him.

"Hello, Harry," Marcus said kindly. "I'm Marcus Pomfrey, your nurse's brother. I'm a healer at St. Mungo's."

"St. Mung. . .?" Harry mumbled, glancing around. Due to his injuries, he was still lying on his side, so looking around was difficult at best. His bed was surrounded by curtains, but the Great Hall's celestial ceiling with its thousands of floating candles showed above him. His forehead furrowed in confusion, making him moan in pain again.

"We're at Hogwarts, Harry," Ginny said quickly. "We're in the Great Hall so there would be more room for the wounded. You're going to be fine, sweetheart," she assured him, hoping she was right.

"Can you tell me how you're feeling?" Marcus asked as he used his wand over Harry's body, casting Diagnostic Spells here and there to check his patient's progress since his initial treatment.

"Password?" Harry muttered.

"He is my brother, Harry," Madam Pomfrey said, leaning down to whisper "scar on bum" in Harry's ear. "My brother's password is the scar on my left arm – he dropped me when we were little and I landed on the gravel path. See?" she said, pulling up the sleeve of her robes so he could see the small jagged scar above her elbow.

Harry looked from one to the other and finally nodded. "Hurts all over," he muttered. "Different. . .in different places."

Marcus threw back Harry's covers, exposing his bare back, bum and legs, making the boy blush all over. "Do you have to. . .?" Harry asked uncomfortably, clutching the covers to his chest.

"Afraid so, lad," Marcus replied kindly. "You have wounds just about everywhere. It looks like you were spinning when you got some of these injuries."

"I was," Harry replied softly. "Sloth Grip Roll . . . without . . . a broom," he added, looking at Ginny and very deliberately winking, a small smile tickling his mouth. He was rewarded by a small smile from her in return. Both of them remembered having to learn that manoeuvre, a very difficult evasive Quidditch move. He reached out to touch Ginny's face, his fingers awkwardly brushing the tears from her cheeks. "Don't cry, sweetheart," he whispered. "I'm . . . all right."

His assurance just brought a fresh flood of tears from Ginny, but these were tears of relief. He'd been unconscious for hours, breathing in pain-filled gasps despite the potions they'd managed to get into him. She was so afraid she was going to lose him this time. She kept kissing his hand, laying her face in his palm, breathing in the smell of him.

"Ginny?" he murmured.

"Yes, baby, what is it?" she said eagerly.

"Ron . . . Hermione . . . OK?"

"Yes, they're fine. Minor spell burns, already treated. They're helping Dumbledore with something or they'd be here too," she said, hoping he wouldn't ask what they were doing.

As if he'd read her mind, he asked, "What are they doing?"

"I'll tell you all about it later, sweetheart," she said evasively. "You need to talk to the healer now."

"You? Your folks? Fred and George? Remus?"

"Yes, baby, all of us are fine. Please, listen to the healer. He needs to ask you some questions."

Marcus had pulled the young man's covers back over him, then waited patiently for Harry and Ginny to get to a stopping point in their conversation. He looked at Ginny gratefully, then walked around the bed so he'd be in Harry's line of sight.

"How . . . bad . . . am I?" Harry asked, obviously in considerable pain.

"Much better than you were, Mr. Potter," Marcus assured him. "The phoenix stopped the bleeding in the worst of your wounds and healed the minor ones completely. He couldn't heal the worst ones beyond stopping the bleeding. Apparently there was some kind of spell on the lashes of the whip that prevented the phoenix's tears from healing the deepest wounds. You have some internal injuries and had some internal bleeding. We've managed to control some of those with potions. What you need now is lots of rest and some medications, as well as time. You're young and healthy. You should heal quickly."

"How long?"

"A matter of weeks or months at the most," he assured Harry.

"Weeks or months?" Harry's eyes widened in shock.

"Your injuries would have killed anyone else, Mr. Potter. You're a very strong young man." He moved Harry's covers so he could look at his chest, lifted his arm to see how the deep gashes on his side were doing, then covered him again. Marcus turned and took a flagon of potion from Madam Pomfrey. "This is a non-drowsy pain potion, Mr. Potter. I'm going to give it to you to ease your pain, but it won't put you to sleep like most other pain potions do. That way, you can answer questions for me and help me make sure I'm treating all your injuries. All right?"

Harry nodded and tried not to cry out as the healer lifted his head a little so he could take his potion.

"You should feel better in a minute or two," Marcus assured him. Before long, Harry relaxed as his pain subsided and he was able to respond to the healer's questions. Marcus was able to prescribe some different potions than the ones he'd been using, now that he knew how Harry actually felt. "These should set you right much more quickly than the ones I had to use before. These potions are more targeted at your specific injuries. How are you feeling now?

"It hurts again," Harry said breathlessly as waves of pain washed over him.

"That's because the non-drowsy potion doesn't last very long if you have serious pain. This one," he said, picking up another flagon, "will ease your pain and help you sleep for a while. It isn't like the Dreamless Sleep potion – you won't be so sound asleep that you won't wake for hours. We may need to wake you from time to time to check on you, so I don't want you to sleep too soundly."

As the healer started to give it to Harry, the boy said, "Wait." He looked at Ginny seriously. "I need to tell you something."

"What is it, sweetheart?" she said, smoothing the hair gently off his forehead, wincing when it stuck to the blood from his scar.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you too," she replied, blinking hard to keep the tears from flowing again.

Harry looked up at the healer and nodded, then took his potion willingly. He slept.

Some time later, the calm by Harry's bed was disrupted by a commotion outside the curtains. "I WILL see them, RIGHT NOW!" someone was saying quite forcefully. Ginny kissed Harry's hand and laid it gently on the bed as she got up to peek out of the curtains.

"Mum!" she cried, then ran out to hug her mother. "Mum, are you all right? Professor Dumbledore told me you and Dad were fine, but I haven't seen you, and I've been so worried!" Ginny said at the same time as her mother asked her similar questions. They both laughed through their tears, exchanging hugs and kisses. "Where's Dad?"

"He's coming. He went to see how Ron's doing," her mother began.

"Shh. Harry doesn't know yet," Ginny whispered.

"Oh, OK," Molly replied nervously, hoping Harry hadn't heard her. "How is he?"

"He just went to sleep. They finished examining him a few minutes ago." Ginny turned to go back in, still holding on to her mother's arm. "You're on the list of immediate family, Mum. Come and see him," she urged, glancing at the nurse from St. Mungo's holding a list of names of those allowed in to visit Harry and daring the woman to contradict her. "Look on the list. Molly Weasley." The nurse found Molly's name and made a note by it, then stopped trying to block their entrance.

"I'm on the list?" Molly exclaimed, touched.

"Of course," Ginny replied, her hand on the curtain ready to open it.

"Ginny, wait. What's wrong with him?" Molly asked, worried.

Ginny went through the list of injuries Harry was suffering from. The anguish on Molly's face increased with every additional injury she heard about.

"And he has internal injuries as well?"

"Yes. Those are pretty serious. He's been bleeding internally. He lost a lot of blood from his wounds, as well. He's white as a sheet – scary looking. They think the internal bleeding's stopped now, but still – he's in very bad shape," Ginny said wearily.

"I'm glad I asked you before I saw him. Thank you for being honest with me," Molly said as she lifted Ginny's thick red hair off her shoulders and brushed her cheek with her fingers.

At her mother's gentle touch, Ginny fell apart. "Oh, Mum! It's been so awful! He's hurt so badly. He . . . . Did you hear he took a Killing Curse for me?"

Molly pushed her daughter back and looked into her eyes in horror. "He what?"

"He was a phoenix when he did it. That's why Fawkes had to bring him back here, why he didn't come back with the rest of the wounded. He became a baby phoenix after taking that curse for me. It really injured him, Mum. His scar has an extra zigzag and it bleeds every so often. It's never bled before that I know of. It's longer and thicker than it was. Voldemort was doing something to make his scar painful when they were duelling, too, and when his scar hurts, it's nearly unbearable for him. Sometimes he can barely see, or even passes out when it hurts. And yet he had to fight while suffering all that pain! Harry's been through so much, I just don't see how he . . . ." She collapsed on her mother's shoulder, the wracking sobs she'd been fighting back for hours released at last. Molly held her and comforted her, rocking her back and forth and crooning soothingly to her.

"What's wrong, Miss Weasley?" Madam Pomfrey gasped as she ran up to them. "Is he worse?"

"No, oh no, he's . . . no change," Ginny said, straightening up and fighting to regain her emotional control. "My mum. . . ."

Madam Pomfrey looked from Ginny to Molly and back again. "Oh, I understand. I'm glad you're here for her, Mrs. Weasley. She's been so strong. I knew she'd need comfort at some point."

"I'm here to help you, but I'll be in with Ginny and Harry for a while, if you need me," Molly said quietly.

"Thank you. I appreciate your willingness to help," Madam Pomfrey said, then turned and went back to her duties.

Ginny tiptoed into the curtained area around Harry's bed and caught the gleam of a green eye as he awakened. "Harry, Mum's here to see you," she whispered, not wanting to wake him if he was truly asleep. Harry opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Molly, squinting as he did so. Ginny put his glasses on his face for him. He smiled his thanks.

"Oh, Harry, dear, how are you?" Molly said, gently touching his hair. There were very few places on his body that weren't bloody or wounded in some way. She wanted to enfold him in her arms, to help him somehow, but he was so badly injured, she was afraid to touch him.

"Hi," he said quietly. "You OK?"

"Yes, dear, I'm fine. So is Mr. Weasley. He'll be along soon," she assured him. "I don't want to tire you, dear. I just wanted to see how you and Ginny are. Mr. Weasley and I are both helping out here. I'm working with the healers, and Mr. Weasley is helping deal with the prisoners, the paperwork, the bureaucracy – you know." Harry smiled a bit. They could see he was fighting to keep his eyes open. "I won't keep you, dear. I'll come back and check on you later, how's that?" Molly offered.

"That would be great, Mum," Ginny said. "Bring Dad, too, and the boys – but not all at once. I know Harry wants to see them," she added, looking at him. He caught her eye and smiled for just a moment before his eyes drifted closed. She carefully removed his glasses and sat back down in the chair by the side of his bed, where she'd already spent so much time. She looked exhausted.

"Do you need a break, dear? I could watch him for you," her mother offered.

Ginny looked at Harry, not wanting to leave him even for a moment. But life sometimes got in the way of what she wanted. "A quick trip to the loo would be nice. Thanks, Mum. Don't let anyone in who doesn't give a password you recognize, all right? Madam Pomfrey's is 'scar on bum' – that's in reference to a scar Harry has – and Healer Pomfrey's is 'scar on elbow' – he dropped Madam Pomfrey when they were children and she has a scar above her elbow to show for it," Ginny explained, seeing her mother's confusion. "I'll be right back. Thanks," she added, leaning down to give Molly a quick kiss on the cheek and a hug around her neck. "I'm so glad you and Dad are all right." With that, she dashed through the curtains and off to the loo.

Molly sat by Harry's bed watching him sleep, twisting her fingers anxiously as she tried to think of something to do to help him. Finally, she conjured up a basin with warm water and a flannel and began dabbing at the blood in his hair and on his face ever so gently, trying not to wake him, but certain the dried blood must feel uncomfortable to him. She jumped back, startled, when he murmured, "Umm, feels good. Thanks." He opened his eyes briefly and saw a fuzzy image of someone with red hair, but the hair was too short and the face too round to be Ginny's. "Mrs. Weasley?"

"Yes, dear. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you, but I simply can't believe they didn't wash you yet."

"They've been . . . pretty busy, I think," he murmured sleepily. "Where's Ginny?"

"She went to the loo," Molly said with a smile. "Do you want me to continue, or am I hurting you?"

"They have me so full of potion, you could probably rip my arm off and I wouldn't notice," he mumbled slowly, then stifled a yawn. "Have fun," he added, looking up at her and smiling again, a brief twinkle in his eye. "I know how you hate to see boys with dirty faces." A soft laugh rumbled through him as he remembered when he first met Ron, and how Molly had tried unsuccessfully to get the black smudge off of Ron's nose before he got on the train. "Don't tell Ron," he added drowsily, "but I like it when you fuss over me." He chuckled softly, then yawned hugely. "'Scuse me."

Molly went back to work washing the blood off of his face. "You go right back to sleep then, dear, and I'll fuss over you all you want." As she worked, she unconsciously hummed a lullaby she used to sing to her own children when they were small. Harry smiled, truly enjoying the attention and sorry he was falling asleep in the middle of it, but fall asleep he did.

Ginny had returned and caught part of this conversation. She stood quietly watching her mother treat Harry like one of her own children. When Molly stood up and stepped away from him, finally satisfied that she'd got Harry's face and hair as clean as she could manage, Ginny moved to stand behind her mother and hugged her. "Thanks, Mum."

"Oh, you're welcome. I'm sure you needed a break," Molly said, patting Ginny's arms wrapped around her middle.

"No. I mean, thanks for that, yeah, but thanks for caring for Harry so much. It means a lot to him, you know?" Ginny moved in front of her mother and hugged her again, resting her cheek on Molly's shoulder. "It means a lot to me too."

"He's a dear sweet boy. Any mother would be proud to have him as a son," Molly said, tears threatening to spill from her eyes. "I just hate to see him like this."

"Me too." The two women held onto each other and watched Harry sleep for quite a while.

Ginny had fallen asleep in the chair by Harry's bed. She was awakened by a sound that hadn't been there before. When she opened her eyes, she saw a phoenix curled up against Harry's abdomen. "Fawkes? He's not worse, is he?" She looked at Harry and saw he looked no worse

than before, even a little bit better, with a tiny bit of lifelike colour beginning to bloom in his stark white cheeks, thanks to the Blood Restorative Potion. She turned her eyes back at the phoenix. The magnificent bird looked at her steadily. It had a small blue feather over each eye, the two feathers pointing toward each other as they ran toward the back of his head. They would outline his crest when he raised his feathers in warning. "You're a different phoenix, aren't you? Whose are you?" she wondered. She stroked the beautiful bird, and felt a soothing peacefulness steal over her body from his gentle crooning. "Mmm, I see why Harry likes phoenixes so much. You're lovely," she murmured. She pulled the side of her chair up against the bed next to the phoenix and facing Harry, took Harry's hand in hers again and rested her other hand on the phoenix. Leaning her head against the back of her chair, she fell asleep again. The phoenix continued his comforting song as the two warriors slept.

"I can't do this anymore, 'Mione," Ron complained, rubbing his eyes, which were burning with exhaustion. "It's too hard."

"Ron, we must. There aren't that many left to do," she said, trying to think how she could console him. "Tell you what. Let's do these, then we'll go to see Harry. We can do the others later."

Ron slumped in his chair. "OK." For hours, they'd been writing letters to the parents of those who had died in battle. They'd been careful to include some heroic thing each student did in each letter, and praised every one of them to the skies. They knew all these students, and some were good friends. It was horrible work, but they both felt they needed to do it. Dumbledore would include their letters in with the official notification of death he'd be sending each family. Once they finished the letters for the D.A. members who had died, they were going to do the same for those who were wounded. Every one of them deserved the highest praise. They'd all fought with tremendous honour and bravery. Not one had turned and run, and only a few had frozen in fear for any length of time. Every single D.A. member had stood his or her ground, followed orders like a professional soldier, and remembered their training. Plenty of mistakes had been made, but those would not be pointed out to the grieving relatives of those who'd perished to protect the wizarding world from the depravity of the Death Eaters. And nobody would point out how many of the D.A. and even Order members were injured because they stopped in amazement to watch Harry and Voldemort during the fiercest parts of their fight. Ron and Hermione had needed to shriek orders to the squads to get them moving again when that kind of thing happened. No one but those closest to Harry had ever seen him do battle with Voldemort, and they were amazed to see that the stories they'd heard paled in comparison with reality. It had taken a lot of work to get the D.A. fighting again once they'd seen Harry in action, but when they were over their initial shock at the intensity of his battle, they were brilliant. Nobody could ask for more than they'd given, and this was the message Ron and Hermione were trying to share with the grieving families of these students. Piles of crumpled parchment were scattered all over the Common Room floor, a mute testimony to how much work had gone into each letter Ron and Hermione had written.

"We should find out how the ones in the hospital wing are," Ron said, looking for an excuse to at least stretch his legs.

"They put everyone in the Great Hall, did you forget?" Hermione said reasonably.

"Yeah. Slip of the tongue, I guess. Force of habit. I don't expect the Great Hall to be a hospital," he grumbled wearily. "Please, 'Mione, can we go for a walk? Can we go and check

the others? I'm going crackers here not knowing how Harry and Seamus are. Seamus was in pretty bad shape. Colin, too. And poor Harry. . . ." He shook his head. The wounds he'd seen on his best mate were unbelievable. He could not imagine how Harry had stayed upright, much less fighting, after the punishment Voldemort had doled out with his whips and other spells.

Hermione sniffled, rubbing angrily at a tear that had escaped her control. "I just can't believe so many are gone. Katie Bell. Cho Chang. Roger Davies. Hannah Abbot. Terry Boot. Justin Finch-Fletchley. Michael Corner. And so many seriously injured. Seamus, Colin, Neville, Lavender, both Patil twins, Ernie McMillian, Susan Bones, Luna Lovegood. And Tonks and Remus. And your mum and dad. I'm glad they had only minor wounds. They're probably fine by now."

"Yeah, I imagine so, or someone would've told me. At least we know Remus will get well. He makes me think it isn't so bad to be a werewolf," Ron said with a sad chuckle. "At least there weren't many hurt here at Hogwarts."

"Yeah, just some minor spell burns and some cuts from flying stone when spells chipped the castle walls. Nothing life-changing there," Hermione said. She laughed suddenly. "I'll never forget seeing Ernie McMillan coming to the triage area. What a sight!" Since he had no bones in his legs, Ernie had levitated himself to the triage area, his swollen, useless legs dangling weirdly beneath him. The healing squad members had indulged in a welcome laugh from Ernie's attitude about his injury. "He was so funny. He said he'd never seen a Jelly Legs curse go so badly wrong," Hermione added, chuckling at the memory.

Ron walked behind her chair and bent over her, wrapping his long arms around her and resting his cheek on her hair. "It's nice we can find something to laugh about in all this. Ernie was hilarious. Did you see the puppet show he put on, levitating his legs as if he was a marionette? That was so weird."

"At least he only needs a dose of Skele-Gro to get better. Some of the others will take longer." Hermione wiped away a tear, then scratched her nose with the end of her quill, ready to get back to work. "Who's next?"

"I am," Ron said, putting his hands under her legs and lifting her from the chair from behind, making her giggle. "You needed a laugh. So did I. A good snog wouldn't hurt much either," he said seriously. "Come here, you." He set her back on the chair and leaned over to kiss her upside down, his long hair tickling her nose and making her laugh. Their upside-down kiss turned into a serious snog. Ron moved around and knelt beside her chair, so tall that he was at eye-level with her in her chair. He pushed her thick curly hair back off her shoulders tenderly and kissed her under her ear, nibbling down her neck the way he knew she liked it, his hands exploring freely. The Common Room, indeed all of Gryffindor Tower was empty. Everyone was in the Great Hall, either hurt or helping care for the injured, or visiting their wounded friends. "Come on, we do need a break," Ron said breathlessly, taking her hand and leading her up to his room. He picked her up and carried her to his bed, kissing her all the while, but when he sat up to take off his shirt, he saw Harry's empty bed next to his, Neville's next to Harry's, Seamus's and Dean's beds across the room. He froze in place, his eyes going from bed to bed, thinking of his missing mates, then put his face in his hands, overcome with emotion. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I just can't do this here."

"I can't either," she said, sitting up and wrapping her arms around him.

Ron laughed sadly. "All the times I've wished I could get you alone up here, and now I have you here and . . . ."

"I know." She nuzzled her face into the wavy red hair on his neck, breathing in the scent of him. He was sweaty, dirty, exhausted, but she didn't care. He smelled warm and alive and completely Ron, and she loved it.

He pushed her away and looked at her, his aching heart in his eyes. "Please, 'Mione, can we go see how they are?"

Hermione relented. Those letters could wait a little while. "Yes, let's go. Maybe it will be easier to finish the job when we know how Harry and the others are."

Ginny awoke with a start, reaching for her wand so she could protect Harry, cursing herself for falling asleep, cursing the nurse guarding the door for allowing someone in, all this before she got her eyes opened properly. Someone had entered the curtained area and gasped. Ginny looked across Harry's bed and saw Ron and Hermione, both with tears streaming down their faces. The first thing they'd seen when they entered the enclosure was Harry's back, covered in whip cuts that were still red and raw-looking. His covers had slipped down to his waist and his entire back was exposed to view. It was still a bit bloody, quite a frightening sight. When the medical staff had tried to clean him up, it had caused him agonizing pain despite the initial potions he'd been given, so they'd just cleaned what they had to for treatment and left the rest for when he was feeling stronger, or knocked out with stronger potion. Everyone had been too busy to finish cleaning him up, and Ginny kept falling asleep whenever she sat down, so he remained blood-covered.

Ginny put her wand away, glad she didn't have to fight anyone in her exhausted state. "He's actually doing much better," she said encouragingly. "Come in. He'll want to see you when he wakes up."

Ron and Hermione moved around the bed and sat in the chairs Ginny conjured for them, Ron scrubbing madly at the tears on his face, Hermione wiping hers daintily away with one finger, hiccupping as she tried to stop crying.

"His face doesn't look much better than his back," Ron muttered in horror when he could finally speak.

"Shhh," Ginny snapped quietly. "Don't let him hear you say that. I haven't told him yet."

"Told me what?" Harry murmured sleepily. He opened his eyes and squinted at his friends, murmuring "Thanks," when Ginny handed him his glasses. "Hi! I'm so glad . . .to see . . . you two," he said, a tired but delighted grin spreading across his face. "I've been asking everyone . . . how you are, where you were . . . and all that. Are you OK?"

"Better now that we've seen you, mate," Ron said with a grin, reaching out one hesitant finger to gently poke Harry on an uninjured part of his shoulder.

Harry lay there beaming at them. He'd been so worried about them, despite all the assurances he'd been given that they were all right. "I heard you had spell burns. Where are they? Are they healed?"

"We've been too busy to come down here," Hermione said quietly. "And our injuries are very minor. We didn't want the healers to take time away from those who needed care more than we do."

"Show me," Harry said, reaching toward her.

"No, Harry, you're . . .," she protested. She stopped, not wanting to tell him how weak he looked, how badly injured, how scary it was to look at him with so much abuse all over his body.

"Show me," he insisted.

She held out her arm and pulled back the sleeve of her robe. Her left arm had a bright red spell burn that ran from shoulder to elbow.

Ron gasped. "You didn't tell me it was that bad," he scolded.

"You haven't told me how bad yours are either," she retorted.

"Please don't bicker," Harry chided them. "Lean over so I can reach it, Hermione. I think I can fix that." He rubbed his hand so gently over her arm that it barely brushed the hairs of her arm, but the burn faded away. Finally, there was Hermione's normal skin colour on her entire arm, with no sign she'd ever been burned.

"Oh, Harry, thank you! That feels so much better!" she said, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

"Are you kissing my boyfriend?" Ginny teased.

"Yes, I am," she replied playfully, leaning down to kiss his cheek again. Harry deliberately turned his face just in time to get a kiss on the lips from her, making her blush and him giggle mischievously.

"Hey!" Ron protested mildly. "Are you snogging my girl?"

"Yeah," Harry said, his eyes twinkling. "Not bad!"

"Not bad!" Hermione said huffily. "I'll show you not bad!" and she leaned down as if to kiss him again, but hesitated, waiting for Ron to grab her. He did just as she expected and pulled her onto his lap, then kissed her soundly. "Hmm, not bad," she commented, wrapping her arms around Ron's neck.

"Not bad," he sulked. "Not bad?"

Hermione twined her fingers in his hair and pulled him into a serious kiss. "Ummm, nope, not bad at all," she purred when she broke the kiss. Ron was blushing but grinning goofily.

"Oy, get a room," Harry teased.

"Thanks, I needed that," Ron said, hugging Hermione and winking at Harry.

"Yeah, I thought so," Harry replied, still grinning. What a joy to be able to be silly with his friends, even for a moment, in the midst of all this heartache. "Ron, where are you hurt?"

Ron lifted his shirt, showing a spell burn along his ribs, and another across his back. Harry quickly healed them both. "Thanks, mate," Ron said sincerely, stretching comfortably for the first time in many hours. "Why's Fawkes staying with you?"

"I have some internal injuries. He stayed with me a while to heal them, then left. I guess he decided to check on me again and thinks I still need him," Harry replied. He looked down at the phoenix, which had been sleeping with its head under its wing. At his movement, the bird lifted its head and gazed at Harry and each of his friends serenely. "Hang on – this isn't Fawkes. Where did you come from, mate?" he said in surprise.

"He was there the last time I woke up," Ginny said. "I noticed he has two blue feathers on his crest, so I knew he wasn't Fawkes. He must belong to one of the healers. Maybe they thought you needed more healing from a phoenix. The last I heard, Fawkes was still working on the other seriously wounded people."

The phoenix raised its head and looked deeply into Harry's eyes, making a series of low chirruping sounds as it did so. Harry stared at the bird for a long, quiet moment. His friends were perfectly still, not knowing what was going on, but certain there was some kind of communication happening between Harry and the magnificent bird. After several minutes, Harry looked up at his friends, his face glowing with amazement. "He's Merlin," he said simply.

"Merlin? That's a nice name for him, Harry," Hermione said, smiling at the bird as she reached out to touch its rich red plumage.

"It's his name. He told me," Harry said, his eyes still wide.

"What else did he tell you?" Ginny asked, tilting her head to look at the bird more closely. There was something about his eyes that was different to Fawkes's eyes, but she couldn't say what, exactly.

"You don't get it! He's Merlin! Great Merlin! The wizard? It's him!" Harry said breathlessly.

His friends looked at Harry sceptically, then at each other. Had he gone round the bend?

"I'm serious! He told me that, when he was old and weak, Nimue took pity on him and released him from the Crystal Cave where she'd imprisoned him. He could still do his Animagus transformations, so he decided to become a phoenix because it's reborn after it dies. He wanted to see how the world developed after his time, so he's been a phoenix ever since. He's never come to a wizard before, to be his phoenix, but Fawkes thought I needed more help than he could give me. Fawkes went wherever it is phoenixes go and brought Merlin back and he's been with me ever since. Isn't that amazing?"

"Merlin. King Arthur's mage?" Hermione said, still disbelieving.

"Yes!" Harry insisted.

"Is he going to stay with you once you're well? Be your phoenix like Fawkes is for Dumbledore?" Ron asked excitedly.

"Merlin?" Harry asked, gazing seriously at the bird. The bird crooned something sweet-sounding and Harry smiled. "Yes, he's going to stay with me. Isn't that brilliant?"

"Yeah!" Ron said, his animated face showing his delight. "How cool is that! D'you suppose he can help you with exams and stuff? Just think of the spells he knows! Wicked!"

"Won't it be wonderful to talk to him?" Ginny said, sharing Harry's and Ron's excitement. "Just think of the stories he can tell us! Ask him to turn into a person, Harry."

Harry looked at his friends. They were all exhausted, their minds not working properly –or else they really did not understand. "If he becomes a person, he'll die. His human body would have been dead over a thousand years if he'd left one behind. The only reason he's here is that he's a phoenix. He can't change into anything else ever again." He could see growing understanding on Ron's and Ginny's faces, but Hermione's mind was whirling with questions.

"I don't see how that could be the real Merlin," Hermione said sceptically. "I mean, he lived over a thousand years ago!"

"And phoenixes are reborn from the ashes whenever they die, or have you forgotten that part of Care of Magical Creatures?" Ron teased.

"I haven't forgotten, but that means – if Harry wants to, he can live. . .forever!" she said, amazed at her own conclusion.

"You just worked that out?" Ron teased. "And everyone thought you were the smartest witch in school!"

"I don't want to live forever," Harry said seriously. "I just want to be allowed to live as long as my friends are alive. I'd hate to be the only one left. Merlin's made of stronger stuff than I am, to be willing to live forever." The bird chirruped again. Harry smiled at him sadly. "He says I'm the one made of stronger stuff – he was afraid of dying, so he chose not to." He stroked the bird's gorgeous plumage. "Well, I'm glad you're here, Merlin. I'll take good care of you. I hope you and my owl get along well. Her name's Hedwig. She's a snowy owl." The bird chirped again, then went back to its crooning song.

"What did he say?" Ginny asked.

"He said he's always liked snowy owls, and he'd be pleased to meet her. Now he's back to healing me again," Harry replied, his eyes still wide in wonder. "Wow. A phoenix chose me," he said softly.

"Ah, I see Fawkes was right, as usual," Dumbledore said as he entered the curtained area around Harry's bed. "You have been chosen by a phoenix. Well done, Harry!"

"I didn't do anything. . ." Harry began.

"Yes, of course, you did," Dumbledore contradicted him. "Phoenixes only come to the pure in heart. That's why so few wizards have them."

Harry snorted with laughter, then groaned. Laughing that hard was painful. When he caught his breath again, he said, "I'm not pure in heart. I'm always in some kind of trouble, and when I'm not in trouble, I'm thinking of ways to get around school rules. You know that."

"True, true, but still. . .your motives are pure. Your heart is filled with purity of purpose and courage. That's what draws phoenixes, that and great need. But even someone with tremendous need won't be able to call a phoenix to him unless his heart is pure. You always put other people first, Harry. You would never have called a phoenix for yourself. That's another reason this one chose you." Dumbledore admired the bird for a moment. "Ah. Those blue feathers are unusual. He's a remarkable bird."

"You don't know how remarkable," Harry said, his eyes dancing despite his grogginess.

"Oh? How remarkable is he?" Dumbledore said, going along with whatever game Harry was playing. As ill as he was, Harry's sense of fun was showing again, and that was an excellent sign. Dumbledore smiled fondly at the boy.

"He told me his name is Merlin," Harry said, watching Dumbledore carefully to see his reaction. He was rewarded with a puzzled expression followed by eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Merlin? He told you his name is Merlin?"

"Yes."

Dumbledore sat gently on the edge of the bed and looked steadily into the phoenix's eyes. After a moment, his eyebrows rose again. "Well, my word. How remarkable!" He looked at Harry with a very serious expression. "This is a secret you must keep. I'm sure you've already told your friends here, but to anyone you haven't felt safe telling your other secrets, he's just a phoenix named Merlin, not Great Merlin. All right?"

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"If dark wizards found out who he was, they might try to harm him in some way, or capture him. It's not easy to capture a phoenix, but there's no reason to take chances." He turned back to Harry. "Just say you chose his name out of a book as you did for Hedwig, all right? It's for your safety as well as his."

"OK," Harry replied.

Dumbledore looked around at Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "You must keep his secret as well."

"We will," Ron said, and the girls nodded in agreement.

"It's good to see you looking so much better, Harry," Dumbledore said, smiling at the boy. "Merlin is doing good work with you, helping you get well."

"Thanks for sending Fawkes to me during the battle, Professor," Harry said seriously. "I don't know how I would have managed without him, then and afterwards, too."

"Fawkes knew you needed help. He wanted to go to you. I suspect that's why he found you your own phoenix."

"Yes, that's what Merlin said," Harry replied, gently stroking the bird warming his abdomen.

"I'll leave you to your visit," Dumbledore said, getting to his feet. He looked at Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "I know you all care deeply about Harry. I'm so glad he has such wonderful friends. Do try not to tire him out too much, all right?" They all nodded.

Hermione rose and followed him out of the enclosure, gesturing to Ron to stay where he was. "Professor," she said when they were a short distance from Harry's area, "we've nearly finished the letters to the parents of those who died. We just had to take a break."

"I understand. I know you're putting a lot of effort into those letters, and that you're both exhausted from the battle. I am so grateful to you for what you're doing."

"Erm. . .are there . . . are there likely to be others? Should we wait a while to finish?"

Dumbledore's face saddened. "Yes, there are likely to be one or two other deaths. We have two students who are hovering very near the brink."

Tears filled Hermione's eyes. "Who?"

"Seamus Finnegan and Colin Creevey."

Hermione stifled a sob. Dumbledore laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, giving her what comfort he could as she tried to regain control of herself. "Don't give up on them yet. They're both fighters. But you did ask."

"Yes, I did. Thank you for being honest with me," she replied. She returned to Ron's side, unable to hide the sorrow in her face.

"'Mione, what's wrong?" Ron asked, rubbing her back gently.

She sniffed, trying to control herself. "I'll . . . I'll tell you later," she said, glancing quickly at Harry.

"All right," Harry said sternly. "When I woke up, I heard Ginny saying I didn't know something yet. What is it?"

His three friends looked at each other, uncertain what to say or where to start. Ginny cleared her throat. "Well. . .erm. . .what I was talking about was, um. . ."

"Spit it out, Ginny," he snapped, getting impatient. He knew they were keeping something important from him. *Better to know the truth than to wonder and worry unnecessarily,* he thought.

Ginny was wringing her hands anxiously. Harry reached out and covered her hands with his, trying to calm her. "I love you, Ginny. I won't get mad at you, if that's what you're worrying about, whatever it is. Tell me the truth. What's bothering you? What don't you want to tell me?"

"Well. . .there are several things I've been keeping from you, actually. I didn't think you were strong enough," she began. "I suppose you are strong enough now. What I was talking about when Ron and Hermione arrived was your face. Ron made some comment about it, and I told him you didn't know yet."

Harry's eyes widened. He reached up to touch his face, feeling scratches, cuts and other wounds all over his cheeks, chin and forehead. "I'm horrible," he said, feeling a bit sick. "I must look like Mad-Eye now."

"No, you're not horrible, and you don't look a bit like Mad-Eye!" Ginny cried. "That's why I've kept it from you. I was afraid it would upset you. You are badly cut up, but none of them will scar. The healer promised that. He said none of them are bad, and they should be gone in a few days."

"Oh, that's good," he said with obvious relief. "Am I scary looking?"

"You were when you were bleeding everywhere," she said with a sad smile. "Not that your face scared me – just that you were so badly hurt. That's what scared me." She touched his cheek tenderly, being careful to touch only the unbroken skin. "There is something else. Your scar? It has an extra zigzag now. It's longer and thicker, not a lot, but enough to be noticeable. The healer said he thought the swelling would go down eventually. It bled for quite a while, too. Even Fawkes couldn't stop it from bleeding."

"I guess I'll always have a fringe, then," Harry said philosophically. "I can't do anything about that scar." He could see from the sad faces around him that there was more bad news coming. "What else? Am I going to be crippled somehow, or scarred elsewhere, or what?"

"The whip cuts on your back – some of them will leave scars, but you shouldn't be handicapped in any way," Ginny replied.

"That's OK then," Harry said, his eyes still uncertain. What were they hiding? "Ginny? You said earlier that Fawkes was working on the other seriously wounded people. Now that my head isn't so muzzy, I remember seeing bodies lying outside the graveyard. Did we lose anybody? Or are they just hurt? Is anyone. . .dying?"

Hermione sat on the edge of Harry's bed and took his hand in hers. "We lost several, Harry, and there are others who are in bad shape. Dumbledore. . .Dumbledore just told me two boys might d-d-die." She sniffled. "That's why I was crying when I came in."

"Who?" Harry said, his stomach clenched in fear.

"S-s-seamus and C-c-colin," Hermione managed to say before being overwhelmed with sobs. Ron pulled her into his arms and rocked her, tears streaming down his face as well. Ginny pulled her legs up to her face and was sobbing into her knees. Harry's face was white with shock.

"Seamus? Colin? What happened? What's wrong with them?"

"Seamus got caught in crossfire between two Death Eaters and an Order member," Ron rumbled. "He never had a chance. He was shot off of his broom and landed right in the middle of their fight. And with all that, he was shooting spells at the Death Eaters while he was lying there bleeding. Colin. . .he kept pushing forward, you know how impetuous he is. He got too far ahead of his squad and was cornered with no backup for a while. The rest of the squad got those Death Eaters. Neville's hurt, but not too badly. Dean got off without a scratch. Lavender and the Patil twins are all injured, but not too badly, I think. Luna has some serious spell burns. That girl can fight once you get her aimed in the right direction," Ron added with a chuckle. "Um, who else is hurt, 'Mione? Ginny? I know I'm leaving some people out."

"Ernie McMillan was hurt, but he'll be fine tomorrow. Susan Bones got hit with just the edge of a nasty spell. . ." Hermione was saying when Harry interrupted.

"Yeah, I saw it coming at her and blocked it," he commented. "Is she going to be OK?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "It was that same purple spell that got me so badly in the Department of Mysteries, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "Who else?"

"Tonks and Remus got hit, but Remus is getting better quickly. Tonks will take a bit longer, but she should be fine," Hermione replied. "Ron's parents had minor injuries. They've already been taken care of, from what I've heard," she added.

"Nobody told me they were hurt!" Ginny said in shock. "Mum even came to visit us and didn't tell us!"

"I guess they thought you had enough to deal with here," Ron said, tilting his head toward Harry.

"Is that everyone?" Harry wanted to know.

"Everyone from our battle. There were only minor injuries from the battle here at Hogwarts. No deaths," Ron answered, then stopped himself, a look of horror on his face when he realized what he'd said.

"Ron? Who died?" Harry asked carefully.

Ron gulped, then looked at Hermione and Ginny for help. He sighed. He'd gotten himself into this, he may as well see it through. "You sure you want to know?"

"Yes. Tell me."

Ron groaned, resigning himself to what he had to do. "OK. That's what Hermione and I have been doing, writing letters to the families of those who died. We got to a point where we just couldn't do any more, so we came to see how you were. And then Hermione asked Dumbledore if we should wait to do others – that's what you did, isn't it?" Ron asked, looking at her. She nodded, tears streaming down her face. "OK. So. Um."

"Just do it, Ron," Harry urged.

"Roger Davies. Terry Boot. Hannah Abbot. Justin Finch-Fletchley. Michael Corner." At this, Ginny sobbed.

"Oh, Ginny, I know," Hermione said, rubbing her back comfortingly. "I'm so sorry."

"No! It's my fault!" she cried.

"How can it be your fault?" Harry asked, aghast. "You were doing everything you could to take care of people! I saw you!"

"I was working on Michael when you and Fawkes attacked Voldemort," she explained through her sobs. "When Voldemort started shooting spells everywhere, after you blinded him, I levitated Michael to put him behind a gravestone for protection. Then the Killing Curse came at me and you knocked me down to save me and I dropped him!"

"Did he die from being dropped?" Harry asked in confusion, apologetically pushing Merlin aside and awkwardly pulling her into his arms. She lay on her back as close to him as she dared, trying not to touch his chest or arm – he had so many injuries and they were so raw. He just held her quietly for a moment, and then kissed her temple. When he kissed her, Ginny sobbed and turned toward him, tucking her head under his chin, still trying hard not to touch him, but relishing the warmth of his body and the fact he was alive. Her tears splashed onto his chest, their saltiness stinging his open wounds, but he forced himself not to flinch. She finally began to calm down a little.

"He didn't die from being dropped, Ginny," Hermione said when Ginny was quiet enough to listen. "He had serious spell damage when you got to him, right? That's what killed him. We just couldn't get him here in time to save him."

"It's not my fault?" she said in a small voice, turning to look at Hermione.

"Not at all. You were brilliant. I was keeping an eye on you and the other healers, to direct squads to protect you as needed. You were closer to Harry and Voldemort than any of the other healers, so I was watching you more than the others at that point, in case you needed protection," Hermione said. "You didn't do anything wrong. You were brilliant. And Harry protected you before a squad could even be told to get to you."

Ginny smiled gratefully, kissed Harry gently on the lips and moved away from him as carefully as she could, then reached out to hug Hermione. "Thanks, Hermione. I've been worried about Michael but haven't had the nerve to ask about him. I wish. . ." Her voice broke and she sniffled. "I wish I could've helped him."

"You did your best. Nobody could ask for more than that," Ron assured her.

Ginny nodded quietly. She stood by Harry a moment to rearrange his covers, then leaned down to whisper in his hear, "It was so good to be in your arms again, love."

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand as she settled back in her chair. "Same here," he murmured. He looked up at Ron and Hermione again. "Were those all? No Gryffindor dead?"

"No, that's not all," Ron said with a heavy sigh. "Cho Chang and Katie Bell also died."

Harry was aghast. "Cho and Katie? Oh, no. Oh, no." They were all silent for several moments, then Harry said, "Cho told me when she joined D.A. that she wanted to fight because of Cedric. I hope he was there to welcome her when she crossed over." Nobody said anything in reply to this. "And Katie. . .she just told me she was accepted as an intern at the Ministry. She was so excited about it. She would've started right after finishing Hogwarts." The room was quiet except for the sounds of sniffles and soft crying as they mourned their friends.

"I have to see the others," Harry said decisively a few minutes later. He gently moved Merlin aside, sat up suddenly and then blushed beet red, clutching his covers to himself. "Erm, Ginny? Could you get me some pyjamas? At least the bottoms. I suppose I can't wear the top yet." All three of his friends were startled into laughter, his flustered, blushing face in stark contrast with the serious wounds he bore, a reminder of the Harry they knew who wasn't a war hero but was still quite often a goofy, gawky teenager.

"Love, you're too weak. You can't go anywhere," Ginny protested through her laughter. "Lie down."

"I need to visit the others. I have to. Please understand," he said, his eyes pleading with his friends. When he got no response, he started to pull the covers around himself, trying to work out how to stand with blankets trailing all around his legs. "I'm going, so either help me or get out of the way," he said stubbornly.

"OK, OK," Ginny said. "Get back in bed before you hurt yourself!"

Harry snorted. "As if there's anything left to hurt!" but he obeyed her, looking exhausted when he sat back down and still struggling to stay decently covered. He was too stubborn to lie down, no matter what any of them said.

Ginny left to get him some pyjama bottoms and quickly returned, smiling at her still-blushing boyfriend. Harry threw the girls out so he and Ron could get him decently dressed. Before long, Harry and Ron emerged, Merlin hovering over Harry's right shoulder, trying to find an uninjured place to land.

"You can sit on my shoulder if you want, Merlin," Ron offered. The bird perched there for a moment, then hopped over to Harry's shoulder, having discovered a spot he found suitable. "I guess he likes you best," Ron said, shrugging. "Are his claws hurting your shoulder?"

"No, he's being very careful," Harry said quietly. "Thanks, Merlin." Harry was already gasping from the effort of walking, but he was determined to visit his injured troops. Merlin was doing what he could to strengthen Harry by sitting on his shoulder and crooning to him.

"Seamus is in here," Ginny said, and the four of them walked to a curtained area not far from Harry's. They parted the curtains, Harry going in first.

"Mrs. Finnegan? Mr. Finnegan?" he asked, seeing the grieving adults by Seamus's bed. "I'm Harry Potter. I wanted to see Seamus for a few minutes. Is it all right with you?"

The Finnegans looked up and saw a tall, handsome boy horribly disfigured by cuts, open sores and various wounds and bruises all over his face and torso, with a huge scarlet bird on his shoulder. He was so weak, he was leaning heavily on his tall redheaded friend. He'd been violently abused by Voldemort. They'd heard snatches of the story, but would never have believed someone could survive what Harry had apparently gone through. Mrs. Finnegan nodded, her eyes wide, while her Muggle husband sat still, shocked into immobility.

Harry moved carefully into the room, then sat gingerly on the bed by his friend. "Seamus? It's Harry. Can you hear me?" he said quietly. "Seamus?" When he got no response from the boy, he unbuttoned Seamus's shirt to look for wounds. Merlin dropped off of Harry's shoulder onto the bed beside Seamus and began inspecting the boy himself.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mrs. Finnegan snapped, instantly defensive of her child.

"I know some healing spells," Harry said simply. "I'd just like to see if I can help him."

"You're no healer," she snarled suddenly, flying into a rage. "You're just a trouble maker. Leading my boy into danger like that. How dare you?"

Ron and the girls stood quietly by the curtained wall. Now Ron stretched to his full height, his face serious and mature, his voice low and forceful. "Mrs. Finnegan, I'm Ron Weasley. Harry and I have shared a dormitory with Seamus since First Year. He's a good friend of ours. Harry wouldn't do anything to hurt him. He isn't a trouble maker, nor did he lead Seamus into danger. I led the troops, not Harry. Seamus volunteered to go. I gave everyone the opportunity to stay behind. Nobody had to go. Seamus fought valiantly. He's a hero. So is Harry. Harry also has a talent for healing. He just healed the spell burns Hermione and I had, and he healed Ginny's earlier." He indicated the girls as he spoke. "If he sees something he thinks he can heal, you should let him. We don't want to hurt Seamus – he's our friend. Please let Harry help him."

Harry, in the meantime, had used Ron's distraction to start working on Seamus. He ran his hands over the boy's torso, sensing for wrongness within him. What he found horrified him. Seamus's internal organs were nearly all horribly damaged. Organs that should have had definite shapes were spongy masses. He was barely hanging on to life. Harry did his best to heal his friend, feeling frantic inside, but to the outside world, working calmly, the picture of intense concentration. Merlin lay on Seamus's stomach, doing what he could to help too.

"What's that dirty great bird doing on our boy? He'll hurt him!" Mr. Finnegan cried when he saw Merlin there.

"That's a phoenix, Mr. Finnegan," Hermione explained. She went on to tell him about the healing powers of phoenixes, including every detail she could think of to keep the Finnegans from noticing Harry working on their son.

"H-h-harry?" Seamus said, finally waking up. His voice caught his parents' ears, and they leaned forward to catch every word he said.

"Hey, mate! Good to see you," Harry said brightly. "C'mon, you need to get well. We have a Quidditch Cup party to throw!"

"We did win the Cup, didn't we?" Seamus said, smiling weakly.

"Yeah. You were brilliant, Seamus. You scored some great goals. The way our team is working together now, next year we'll be miles ahead of everybody!" Harry forced himself to think of Katie Bell as still being alive. He couldn't think about the dead students, not right now. "D'you want cauldron cakes or pumpkin pasties at the party? Ron and I will raid the kitchens."

"Cauldron cakes," Seamus answered with a weary smile. "We won, didn't we? Cool."

"Yeah, we won," Harry said. He could see Seamus was fading. "Seamus, stay with me. I need to talk to you."

Seamus pulled himself back to reality with great effort, squinting to focus on Harry's face. "What is it? What happened to your face?"

"Ah, you know how clumsy I am. Fell over a few times too many, that's all," Harry said, laughing off his injuries before getting serious. "Seamus, do you remember what happened this evening?"

"This evening – after the game?"

"Yeah."

"You disappeared. The Snitch. . ."

"Was a Portkey, yeah. Do you remember what happened after that?" Harry asked, still anxiously using his hands to heal as much damage as he could.

"We. . .there was a battle. Graveyard. You fought . . .You-Know-Who. You were amazing! The stories about you . . . aren't good enough. They don't . . .tell it like it really is."

"Then you can write new ones when you get well, OK?" Harry grinned at him, willing him to get stronger, to heal, to come back to his friends and family.

Seamus laughed weakly. "Me write your stories. That's rich. Dean can illustrate them. Hermione should write them."

"You were there. You can help," Harry insisted. "Seamus, I want to tell you something."

"What?"

Harry's face grew serious. "You were absolutely brilliant out there," he said earnestly. "You showed remarkable courage, and kept fighting even after you were down. I was outnumbered and overwhelmed and losing horribly before the D.A. showed up. I cannot thank you enough for coming to save me, Seamus." By this time, tears were running down Harry's cheeks. Seamus had an otherworldly glow to his face, his eyes fixed on Harry's but losing focus. "Seamus, stay with me! I need you, mate!" Harry cried. "Please! Seamus. . ."

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Does it hurt to die? You've. . .died a couple of times at least. Did it hurt?" Seamus was focused on him again, concentrating on Harry's expression and words.

"No, Seamus, it doesn't hurt to die. The one time I remember well, it felt as if I was in a deep dark lake. I was relaxing into it, comfortable with it, when I heard people calling to me. I was getting annoyed that they were calling me, I wanted to relax, but when Ron said he was going to take my Firebolt to Quidditch practice and I'd better hurry up or he'd ride it, I came back. I don't know why. I honestly don't mind Ron riding my Firebolt. Silly, but there it is."

"It didn't hurt?"

"No, it didn't. I'm not afraid of dying, Seamus, but what does scare me is what will happen to those I leave behind. I'm not ready to let go of them yet. You shouldn't be either. You have so many things to do yet in your life, so many people who care about you. . . ."

"How's . . . Lavender?" Seamus asked suddenly.

"I don't know. Ginny?"

"She's getting better, Seamus. She got hit but it wasn't a bad injury. She'll be fine in a few days," Ginny assured him, hoping she was right.

"Tell her. . .tell her. . ." Seamus whispered so softly that Harry had to lean forward to hear him. "Tell her I think she's beautiful. I don't remember ever saying that to her."

"So get well and tell her yourself," Harry said fiercely, feeling his friend slipping away from him. "You're a fighter, Seamus! You're a Gryffindor! Fight!"

"I'm tired, Harry. I'm sorry I ever doubted you. I'm glad I got to be in D.A. I'm glad I could help you fight the bad guys," Seamus said with a shadow of his cocky grin. "Tell Lavender. . . ." And he was gone.

Harry collapsed in grief, his hands over his face as he cried. "No, Seamus. No!" Ginny came and stood in front of him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He buried his face in her shoulder and sobbed brokenheartedly for a few moments, then managed to master himself and straighten up. He turned to Seamus's parents, who sat weeping quietly, their eyes shocked but accepting the inevitable. "I'm so sorry. He was a wonderful friend."

"We all loved him," Ginny added. "He was so funny, so sweet, always ready to laugh." She sniffled, wiping her streaming eyes on her sleeve.

Ron and Hermione expressed their sympathy too, then Harry's friends drew him away from Seamus's bed. "C'mon, mate. You did your best," Ron said, helping him to his feet.

"Harry?" Mrs. Finnegan said quietly.

Harry turned heartbroken eyes her way. "Yes?"

The woman, who'd seemed so formidable earlier, now spoke very kindly to Harry. "You did do your best. I'm sure of it. I could see your heart in everything you did. You're seriously injured yourself, yet you got up to try to help Seamus. That means a lot to us. He spoke very highly of you, Harry, and you, Ron. You must be Hermione, right? He told us often how helpful you were with school work. And you're Ginny?" Ginny nodded, tears streaming down her face. "He told us he liked you a lot, but he knew you had always cared for Harry. He said he knew he had no chance with you, with Harry around, but that was OK. He was just glad he was able to be friends with you, and to be on the Quidditch team with you, Harry and Ron, as well. Thank you all for being such good friends to him." She sat there wreathed in dignity, the very picture of suffering motherhood. "I'm sorry I was rude to you before, Harry. Please forgive me." Her generosity surprised them. Seamus had always made her sound rather harsh. They thanked her and left, buoyed by her kindness.

As they walked away, their hearts were heavy with the loss of their friend. Harry was tired and leaning heavily on Ron. His head came up suddenly. "Where's Colin?"

"Over there," Ginny said, pointing at a curtained area not far away.

"Let's go," Harry said, turning that way.

"Mate, you need to rest," Ron said, trying to haul Harry bodily back to bed.

"No! These people got hurt trying to help me. I will go and see them, all of them, and help whoever I can," Harry said stubbornly, his eyes flashing dangerously. He pushed away from Ron and started tottering toward Colin's bed on his own. Ron caught up with him in one long stride and grabbed Harry's right arm to help him.

"I'm going where you're going," Ron said determinedly. "I can be just as mulish as you."

Harry smiled at Ron. "Yeah, I know," he said, chuckling softly.

The Creevey family was gathered around Colin's bed. Colin was awake. His face lit up when he saw Harry come in. "Harry! How are you? You were brilliant! I saw. . . ." He had to stop his animated monologue to cough. "I saw. . .I saw your fight with Voldemort! It was amazing!"

Dennis shook his head. He was nearly as excitable as his brother, but he seemed to have a little more sense. "Yeah, he saw it. He stopped and watched, the great git."

"Well, it was pretty amazing," Ron conceded, "but hopefully next time, you'll remember to watch your own back!" He smiled at Colin, pretending to punch him in the arm. "You did well when you were paying attention to your job, Colin."

Colin glowed under Ron's praise. "Thanks, Ron!" He turned to his parents. "Ron's our general. He planned all the tactics and strategies. He's a chess master. He's brilliant!"

Ron's ears were red by this time. He couldn't think of anything to say so he just stood there blushing as he gazed at Colin, his eyes full of unshed tears.

Hermione squeezed his arm. She knew how upset he was to have even one of the D.A. members, who he felt so responsible for, injured, and here he was facing one who was dying, and had just left the bedside of another who'd died. She didn't know how he was managing to be so strong.

"I saw you fighting, Colin," Harry said as he sat on the edge of the bed. "You were brilliant." He turned to the Creeveys. "I have some healing skills. May I try to help Colin?" They nodded mutely.

"Is that Fawkes?" Colin asked, seeing Merlin sitting on the rail at the foot of his bed.

"No, that's Merlin. He just came to me," Harry said, glancing up at the phoenix. "Merlin?" The bird hopped lightly onto the bed and walked around Colin's body, apparently deciding where his healing services were needed the most. "He has healing powers too," Harry said, glancing up at the Creeveys. "If he decides to sit on Colin, don't worry about it. That's what he does to heal injuries. Phoenix tears have healing powers, as well, so if he finds an open wound, he may cry in it. He's done wonders for me already." All this time, Harry was working on Colin, moving his hands different places and sensing for injuries. "Ah. There it is," he muttered, and pressed his hands on either side of the younger boy's chest. He became very still, concentrating with every ounce of energy he had, trying to repair an injury he'd found on Colin's heart. Merlin chirruped and Harry glanced at him, then smiled. "Merlin thinks you're going to be fine," Harry said, "and I have to agree with him. Do you feel any better?"

Colin looked thoughtful for a few moments, then his face lit up. "Yeah! What did you do?"

"I found some damage inside you and fixed it. Merlin's doing the same kind of thing, but his powers are different than mine. Between the two of us, we make about half a healer," Harry joked. He watched the boy closely. Colin had lost a lot of blood and there was damage inside him that Harry had no idea how to fix, but none of it seemed as dangerous as the damage to his heart. He turned to look at his other friends. "Ginny?"

"Yes?"

"Would you go find Healer Pomfrey for me? I think Colin needs to be looked over again."

"OK," she said, and dashed out to find the healer. She returned quickly, Marcus Pomfrey right behind her.

Harry looked at the man seriously, then tried to stand. Ron helped him up, and the two of them led the healer outside the curtained area. "Be right back, Colin!" he called as they left. He turned to Marcus and said, "I found and repaired an injury to his heart. He's lost a lot of blood. He has damage to other organs I don't know how to fix, but Merlin is working on them. Would you mind looking him over again to see what else should be done for him? I just lost a good friend. I won't lose this one," he concluded fiercely.

"Let's see, then," Marcus said, going back to Colin's bedside. He spent a number of minutes examining the boy, during which time he had to move the phoenix several times. Merlin insisted on staying by Colin's hip for some reason. "What are you worrying about?" Marcus asked the bird. "Can he tell you what he's working on, Harry?"

Harry looked at Merlin a moment and listened to his vocalizations. "Something's wrong with a bone. I don't understand more than that."

Marcus examined Colin more thoroughly near his hip and found the boy's pelvis had a hairline fracture they'd missed on previous examinations. "Well done!" he said, patting the phoenix. "Right then," Marcus said to the Creeveys, "he has a broken pelvis, but we can fix that in a jiffy. He has damage to his liver and spleen, but they should heal in a few days with the proper potions. Harry healed a bruise on his heart that we didn't detect. Such injuries are often masked by symptoms from other injuries, so it's easy to miss. But Harry found it and fixed it, so now the most serious problem we face is keeping this energetic young man still long enough to get well." He smiled at the stunned family. Just a short time before, they'd been told there wasn't much hope for Colin, and now he was going to recover?

"You said he's going to get well? Are you certain? Will he be handicapped in any way? What aren't you telling us?" Mrs. Creevey asked anxiously.

"If he continues as he is right now, I expect him to make a full recovery, yes. And given the fact that he's a strong, healthy young man, he should be back on his feet and back to classes within, oh, say three to four days."

"Three to four. . .," Mrs. Creevey breathed.

"Days?" Mr. Creevey added.

"Yes."

"How is that possible? He was so ill, and it takes time to heal from broken bones," Mr. Creevey said.

"Broken bones can be healed in a few minutes. That's not the problem."

"Wait a second – you said a few minutes to heal a broken bone? Did I hear that correctly?" Mr. Creevey asked.

"Yes. Wizard medicine, as you've already seen, is much different than Muggle medicine. And wizards heal faster than Muggles, as well. He'll be on his feet very soon," Marcus said confidently. "In the meantime, Mr. Potter, you should be in bed."

"OK, I'm going," Harry said, standing up and wobbling a bit before Ron grabbed his arm to support him. "See you, Colin. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Creevey. Nice to see you, Mr. Creevey, Dennis." He waved and walked out of the curtained area, the girls following closely behind him and Ron. "Who's next?"

"What?" Hermione snapped. "You're not thinking of. . ."

"Yes, I am. Who's next? Who has the worst injuries other than Colin and. . .who's next?" He couldn't bring himself to say Seamus's name, but he thought he had enough energy to help at least one more person before he collapsed.

"Um. . ."Ginny said, thinking. "I think, um. . . ." Her thoughts were interrupted by Harry collapsing against Ron. She shuddered, her heart racing in terror, but managed to control her voice, giving him a slight scolding with an edge of humour. "Honestly? You need to heal yourself, Harry. You're the next worst injured person."

Harry was gasping in pain. "'K. Let's go." He grasped Ron's arm as strongly as he could, leaning most of his weight on his friend. Together, they managed to get him back to his bed, Ron and Hermione settling him in while Ginny ran after Healer Pomfrey. Merlin flew to Harry's side and nestled up against his belly again. Harry put his hands between his abdomen and the phoenix's warm body and concentrated. "Oh, bloody hell," he said with disgust, then moved his hands to various parts of his abdomen, getting that concentrated look as he worked on himself. He didn't have the stamina to work very long. In only a few minutes, his hands fell away and he groaned, panting in exhaustion.

"What did you find in there, mate?" Ron asked worriedly.

"Lots of gooshey stuff, you know, guts and things," Harry quipped, not wanting to tell them the truth.

"Out with it, Harry," Hermione insisted. "You need to tell the healer what you found."

Harry glanced up at them, then his eyes locked with Ginny's as she came in with Marcus Pomfrey. "I'm fine," he insisted.

"No, you're not," Marcus said. "You've exhausted yourself, for one thing. It's time for more Blood Restoring Potion, and I think some pain killer that will actually put you to sleep for a long time is in order, since you can't seem to stay in bed."

"He just saved Colin Creevey's life, didn't he?" Hermione snapped. "So don't give him such a hard time."

Marcus just smiled at her. "You have stroppy girlfriends, Mr. Potter," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"She's not. . .Ginny's. . ." Harry muttered through his pain. Marcus was examining him and it was not exactly comfortable for Harry.

"I know, Ginny's your girl, but this one's just as stroppy as she is," Marcus said with a chuckle. "I like feisty girls myself. It seems we have similar taste in friends." He kept up the light-hearted banter as he examined his patient, getting most of his responses from Ron and Hermione. Harry was quiet except for an occasional groan.

Ginny was a silent bundle of nerves. She could see the gravity of Marcus's face in a way Ron and Hermione couldn't, since he had his back to them most of the time. Finally, Ginny could stand it no longer. "Did he make it worse by getting up?"

Marcus turned and looked at her seriously. "Actually, no. He's weak, but he's mending. He needs to rest now, although I do appreciate him catching and repairing that bruised heart on the Creevey boy. Harry?" he said, turning back to his patient. "Stay put! Take these potions. One's to rebuild your blood supply, the other will ease your pain and make you sleep. You'll

be out a solid six hours. I'll come to give you more potion in a few hours, but you won't really wake up when I do that. Open your mouth, no arguments."

"Password?" Harry muttered.

"Scar on my sister's left elbow. Open!" Marcus said with a smile. Harry was feisty too, even deathly ill. "Harry, you're a very interesting person. I would love to get to know you better when you're healthy."

"D'you play Quidditch?" Harry said, struggling to stay awake another moment.

"Actually, I do. Shall we play once you're well?"

Harry nodded and smiled, then fell sound asleep.

"I will see him NOW," thundered an authoritative voice outside Harry's curtains. Remus and Ginny woke with a start, both looking at Harry to see if he'd been wakened. Ron and Hermione sat staring at the opening in the curtains with wide, frightened eyes. They knew Harry had broken a lot of laws of the wizarding world, and many students' parents would likely blame Harry for their children's injuries. Was someone coming to charge him with breaking the law, or to berate him for leading their children into danger? Merlin lay snuggled against Harry's back this time, apparently satisfied with what he'd healed in front. Harry was stirring, not quite awake yet.

"You are not on the list of approved visitors," the nurse outside the curtain snapped, but she sounded nervous. Who was trying to get in that could scare that very imposing St. Mungo's nurse?

"I am the Minister of Magic. I *will* see him. I will see him NOW!" Madam Bones cried, shoving the woman aside and trying to enter. She was repelled by a charm Dumbledore had put on the curtains so no unauthorized visitors could enter. "DUMBLEDORE!" she screamed. "Where are you?"

The headmaster strode down the length of the Great Hall, his eyes flashing in fury. "What is the meaning of this? How dare you disturb these patients!"

Healer Pomfrey was right behind him. "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing? I don't care who you are, you will not disturb that boy's rest!"

"Madam Bones," Dumbledore said when he reached her, "what could possibly be so important that you're screaming in a hospital?"

"I need to see Potter," she said sternly. "He's gone too far this time. Leading children into battle! My own niece was injured! She could've been killed!"

"Indeed, we did lose some students," Dumbledore said sadly. "Such are the costs of war."

"Children aren't supposed to fight wars!" she snarled.

"We sent for help from the Ministry," Dumbledore said in a dangerously quiet voice, "but none arrived."

"None? I ordered Aurors to go there when I got your message!" she said, absolutely shocked.

"To whom did you give the order to pass along to the Aurors?" Dumbledore said, his eyes intense.

"Dolores Umbridge."

"Ah. That explains it," Dumbledore replied. "She never passed on the message. I don't believe she's a Death Eater herself, but she is a very evil person. I thought you would have noticed by now."

"I have noticed, but her position is such that she's the one I give those orders to," Madam Bones replied uneasily.

"Then remove her from that position. And keep your voice down, I don't want my students and staff disturbed," Dumbledore said firmly. "Now, if you'd like to see Susan, I'll take you to her."

Their voices faded and Ron, Hermione, Remus and Ginny breathed easily again, glancing once more at Harry. To their great surprise, his eyes were open and his face was twisted in fury.

"Harry? What is it?" Remus asked.

"Umbridge," he spat out. "No wonder we had to fight alone."

"Go back to sleep," Remus said, rearranging Harry's covers and smoothing his hair back gently. "You've had a rough day, lad. You need your rest."

"Has it only been a day? How long has it been?" Harry asked. "And by the way, it's good to see you. Are you all right? And how's Tonks?"

"Yes, I'm fine, and Tonks is healing well. She wasn't hurt too badly, thank goodness. She's in St. Mungo's for another day or so. Let's see, how long has it been? You caught that Snitch in the late afternoon. The battles were over around one in the morning, I believe. It's now mid-afternoon of the next day, so it's been nearly twenty-four hours since you caught the Snitch."

"Bloody hell. What a day," Harry said wearily.

"How are you feeling? You've slept a long time. Are you hungry? Do you need anything?" Ginny asked.

"How are you, baby?" he replied, smiling at her warmly.

"I'm fine. Answer my questions," she prodded.

"I feel better. I'm a bit hungry and thirsty."

"Those are things we can take care of," Ginny said with a warm smile. "I'll get you some food, OK? I think you can only have liquids for now."

"I'd love some of Dobby's pumpkin soup," Harry said wistfully.

"I'll see what the healer says," Ginny said, blowing him a kiss as she left.

"How are you two?" Harry asked, looking at his best friends.

"We're fine, mate," Ron said bracingly. "A bit tired, that's all. You did a good job of healing us. Thanks for that."

"My pleasure," Harry said, smiling at him. "You don't all have to sit with me, you know. That nurse out there sounds like quite a good guard. We have exams coming up soon. Why aren't you studying?"

"We've been so worried about you," Hermione said quietly. "We didn't want to leave you. We've been studying while you slept."

Harry smiled at her, warmed by their concern. "If I check myself out and tell you how I am, will you go study? And take Ginny with you – she has O.W.L.s coming up."

"She won't leave," Ron said. "Everyone's tried to get her to leave. The only time she leaves is like now, when you want something, and somebody she trusts is here to watch over you."

"We brought her books down," Hermione said, indicating a bag by Ginny's chair. "She's been studying when she hasn't been napping, but she's pretty tired too. We all are."

"I guess I'm going to fail all my exams this year," Harry said, suddenly glum. "I'm too tired to study, and my brain isn't working properly anyway. It's all muzzy."

"A lot of that is the potions you're on, lad," Remus said.

"We'll help you catch up as soon as you're strong enough, Harry," Hermione assured him.

"Ah, I see a lot of sleepless nights in my future," Harry said in a misty, Trelawney-type voice, making his friends laugh.

"I know one exam you won't have to take," Remus said, "but don't tell anyone else yet."

"What's that?" Harry said hopefully.

"Defence. You proved yourself out there. I'm talking to Albus about letting all the D.A. and those who fought here at Hogwarts skip my exam."

"That's brilliant!" Harry said with a grin. "Too bad it's my best subject. Defence is the easiest one for me to study."

"Don't complain, Harry, that's the best I can do," Remus said, smiling at his godson.

"Do you mean we don't have to take your exam either?" Hermione said in a small voice.

"No, Hermione, you don't have to take it," Remus replied with a chuckle. He knew what was coming, and right on cue. . .

"Oh, no. I already started revising!" she moaned.

Ron grabbed the end of her long curly hair and tickled her nose with it. "Look on the bright side, 'Mione. This gives you that much more time to study other stuff!" he said with a laugh.

"Well, come on, then, let's go to the library," Hermione said, "since Harry doesn't seem to think he needs all of us to watch him." She started to get up, then looked back at Harry. "You're sure you're OK?"

Harry put his hands on his abdomen and concentrated a moment, moving his hands to the various places that had been most damaged. "Yeah, it's not messy in there anymore. I'm loads better!" he said with a cocky grin. "I'll be able to dance again in a day or two."

Ron snorted. "That's pretty funny, since you couldn't dance before," he teased, and was rewarded by Harry chucking the soggy flannel from his bedside table at him. Ron caught it deftly and put it back in the bowl. "OK, let's go to the library," he said to Hermione, and they left.

Harry fell asleep again, but was soon awakened by the delicious smell of Dobby's pumpkin soup. Ginny had contacted Dobby and he had come to Hogwarts and prepared it himself. He was presently trying to get the St. Mungo's nurse to let him in to see Harry. Ginny went to rescue him.

"This is Harry's house elf, Dobby. Let him in," she told the nurse. "I forgot to put him on the list because he doesn't live here, but he's family too."

"This house elf is family?" the woman said sceptically.

"Yes. Let him in," Ginny insisted. "Harry has another house elf named Winky. If she turns up, let her in too."

Soon Dobby was happily making a mess of trying to feed Harry. He was too excited to be as careful as he should be. "Harry Potter sir wanted Dobby's special soup! Harry Potter sir needs to get his strength back! Harry Potter sir looks awful! Oh! Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter sir! Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!" He started pulling on his ears, twisting them into painfully tight knots, but Harry stopped him.

"What did I say about punishing yourself? I know I look awful. You didn't say anything wrong, Dobby. And the soup is amazing. I was so hungry!" Harry said with a weary smile. "Can you leave some for later? I'm tired now."

"Of course, Harry Potter sir! Dobby will leave it for you with a Warming Charm on it and a Stirring Charm so it will be perfect whenever you want it!" The house elf was practically dancing in his excitement at pleasing Harry.

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said, reaching out and patting the elf gratefully on the shoulder. "Thanks a lot." He yawned hugely and fell asleep again.

A short while later, Professor Dumbledore looked in to see how Harry was doing. "Any change?"

"He seems to be feeling a little better. He ate some soup a while ago, and Merlin has moved from his stomach to his back," Remus said with a tired smile.

"That's a good sign. Phoenixes are amazing birds." Dumbledore hesitated a moment, then asked Remus, "Would you mind if Madam Bones came in to see him? As his guardian, it's your right to refuse her visit."

"Is she coming in to cause him trouble?" Remus said warily.

"No. She has a much better understanding now of what happened. She'd like a word with him if he's awake, but since he's asleep, just sitting with him a few minutes will probably satisfy her. He will, at some point, need to tell her everything that happened, but that can wait until he's stronger."

"All right, then. But if she causes him any distress at all, I don't care who she is, I'll throw her out bodily," Remus warned.

Dumbledore chuckled. "And I'll help. I think she'll be fine." He turned back toward the opening in the curtains and made a small gesture with his hand that would allow Madam Bones to enter. She came in quietly, her fingers knotted in front of her, her monocle hanging by its ribbon. She looked strangely vulnerable without it.

"I'm so sorry for my outburst earlier," she whispered. "I hope I didn't disturb him."

Remus and Ginny were quiet, waiting to find out what she wanted.

Madam Bones approached Harry's bed and gasped in shock at his condition. "Oh, how awful! The poor boy," she murmured.

"You should've seen him before he was cleaned up and started healing," Ginny snapped, not at all pleased to have this woman saying anything less than the highest praise about her boyfriend.

"I can imagine." Madam Bones turned to Ginny. "You're Arthur Weasley's daughter, aren't you?" Ginny nodded. "I think very highly of your father. He's a fine man."

The girl's eyes widened in astonishment. She didn't think any of the upper level people in the Ministry paid any attention at all to her dad except to laugh at his affection for Muggles.

"I heard wonderful things about your Healer Squad, Miss Weasley," Madam Bones continued quietly. "Thank you for all you did."

Ginny still had no clue what to say, so she just nodded.

"Ginny?" Harry murmured drowsily. "Is someone here?"

"Yes, love. It's Madam Bones, the Minister of Magic," Ginny said carefully.

Harry opened his eyes and squinted around. Ginny helped him put his glasses on so he could see. "Thanks," he said.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I apologize for my outburst earlier. I hope it didn't wake you."

He shook his head, still half-asleep and not sure what she was talking about.

"I wanted to thank you for saving my niece's life. Several people told me what happened. It's unbelievable you could manage to block a spell coming at her while you were in the middle of your own fight."

Harry just shrugged a little. He had no idea what to say.

"I'll be nominating you and your group for several awards from the Ministry. And Dolores Umbridge will be fired as soon as I get back to my office. She won't block the lines of communication again. She will also be brought up on charges as soon as I sort out every law she's broken. The next time Hogwarts sends for help from us, you will actually get it," she said with determination.

Harry smiled. "Thanks. Make sure she doesn't get any jobs teaching, even as community service," he said, thinking of the punishment Rita Skeeter had been given. "She's an absolutely horrible teacher."

"I'll remember that!" Madam Bones promised. "When you're stronger, I'd like to hear everything that happened out there. I think it's important that the information get out to the public about exactly what's going on with the Death Eaters and what's being done to stop them."

"That won't look good for the Ministry," Dumbledore said with a wry smile.

"And believe me, heads are going to roll in the Ministry just as soon as I get back, starting with Umbridge," she replied sternly.

"Good!" Harry said with satisfaction, fully awake now.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said hesitantly, "since you seem to be awake. . .could you tell me what happened? The sooner I have the facts, the sooner I can deal with things."

Remus started to object, but Harry touched him on the arm, stilling him. "OK," he said. "What do you want to know?"

"Just tell me what happened."

"That could take some time," he replied uneasily, "and there are parts you should hear from Ron, Hermione and Ginny."

"I'll send for Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger," Dumbledore said.

"They went to the library to study," Remus said.

"Thank you, Remus," Dumbledore replied. He looked at Harry, carefully searching the boy's face, trying to gauge the level of his exhaustion and pain. *Harry's nearly a grown man. Best to let him decide for himself*, he thought with a sigh "Go ahead and start, if you feel up to it."

Harry nodded, and told Madam Bones about the horrible events following him winning the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor. Ron and Hermione soon joined them and filled Madam Bones in on their part of the story. They had brought their Omnioculars with them, and showed them to the Minister.

"Oh my," she gasped as she watched the action in the Omnioculars. "That's. . .that's simply appalling!" She lowered the instrument and looked at Harry – she'd just seen him being whipped by Voldemort, yet getting up and fighting again and again. "I cannot tell you how sorry I am that the Ministry did not respond properly. I see there were a few adults on the battlefield. Two of them were redheads – your parents, Mr. Weasley?" Ron nodded. "Who were the others?"

Dumbledore spoke up. "Professor Lupin and I were there, as well as some friends of ours. We contacted them as soon as we could after the Snitch took Harry away. We knew that, if he was conscious, Harry would be able to tell us where he was, and we'd already agreed that the assaults Harry, in particular, has suffered this year had gone on far too long already. We would fight to defeat these people once we knew where to find them. And so we did. We left people here at Hogwarts to defend the castle, and it was a good thing we did, because it, too, was attacked, as you have probably learned by now."

"I would like to make copies of the recordings in all the Omnioculars," Madam Bones said briskly. "These pictures should persuade any who are still unconvinced, that Voldemort and his Death Eaters are a real danger that must be stopped. There will be no charges against any of you," she added, looking particularly at Harry. She'd seen him cast some Dark spells in the Omnioculars.

"That's a good thing, because I would personally fight any such charges against any of our people," Dumbledore said sternly.

"We'd like to keep our Omnioculars," Ron protested as the Minister started to pocket them.

"I will make copies of the images and return them by the end of the day tomorrow," she promised, "and I won't allow these images to be erased. I'll make extra copies for your records here, as well. Miss Weasley, may I have your Omnioculars?"

Ginny looked resentful, but, at a look from Dumbledore, she dug down into her bag and pulled them out.

"Why didn't you say you had them with you?" Ron asked.

"They're Harry's. I was keeping them for him," she said uneasily. Harry, who was truly exhausted now and had dozed off, opened his eyes and smiled at her when he heard her say his name, then drifted back to sleep.

"What did you record?" Madam Bones asked kindly. She could see something was bothering the girl greatly.

"I was keeping an eye on the action, and on my Healing Squad, sending them where they were needed the most, going down to help them when they had more to do than they could handle. And I recorded a lot of Harry's battle with Voldemort, too."

"May I look?" Madam Bones asked.

"Go ahead." Ginny crossed her arms and looked resigned.

Madam Bones lifted the Omnioculars and spun the "fast forward" dial, zipping through the action, just catching the highlights. When the golden sphere appeared, the Omnioculars locked on it for quite a while, then suddenly moved to a still form on the ground. The next frames showed only a broom handle and rapidly approaching ground, as Ginny dropped the Omnioculars to hang on their strap around her neck as she zoomed down to take care of Michael Corner, since no healers were near him. Once she landed, she had taken off the Omnioculars and propped them carefully on the ground, aiming them at Harry and Voldemort so the action would be recorded. The audio portion recorded her sobs as she watched the battle, and her doing her best to comfort Michael as she cared for him. Then the image was filled with a horrible green light and a flash of red as the phoenix flew across the lens' field of view to protect Ginny. The Omnioculars apparently were knocked over, because the lens simply showed the stormy sky after that, but Ginny's screams of "Harry! NOOOO!" echoed in the room from the audio portion of the recording. Madam Bones lowered the Omnioculars, her face white, her hands shaking.

"That was terrifying to watch," she said, leaning forward to squeeze Ginny's shoulder. "I can't imagine being there." Ginny was a bundle of tension, her knees pulled up to her chest, her face rigid as she tried to control her emotions. She simply nodded at the Minister's comment. "So when you said 'Harry' – where was he? I saw a phoenix coming toward the lens. I didn't see Mr. Potter at all after the golden sphere disappeared."

"Harry is an Animagus. His registered form is a cat. He can also become a phoenix," Dumbledore said simply. "This is something we are trying to keep secret, but a good many people saw him transform during the battle. The longer it can remain a secret, the better. Harry plans to become an Auror, and thinks his alternate Animagus form will be helpful there."

"An Auror?" Madam Bones looked at Harry, who had awakened again when he heard Ginny's screams coming from the Omnioculars. He looked nearly as tense as Ginny. It was wizarding law that all Animagus forms needed to be registered. The Minister of Magic herself had just learned that he'd broken a rather serious law, not to mention all the Unforgiveable and Dark curses he'd used in battle.

"Mr. Potter, I think you will make a wonderful Auror. I will do all I can to help you get through the programme successfully. And I will do all I can to keep your extra Animagus form a secret. I never heard of anyone doing a magical creature before. Well done!"

"Erm. . .thanks," he said quietly, not believing his good luck. He could've spent the rest of his life in Azkaban for many of the things he'd done, but he was being rewarded instead. He breathed a sigh of relief, and reached out to touch Ginny gently on the leg. She, too, had relaxed and smiled at him, taking his hand in hers.

"I've taken enough of your time. I'll let you get back to sleep," Madam Bones said with a kind smile.

"If you need more information, Hermione and I will help you," Ron offered. "Harry's going to be out of it for a while."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I'll be in touch," she said, and left.

The House tables were set up at the front of the Great Hall, leaving the back of the Hall, protected by a Quieting Charm, as a hospital ward for Harry and Colin, the only patients remaining there. Three of the tables were relatively full of students, many of whom still sported bandages. The Slytherin table was much emptier than usual. Draco Malfoy's white-blond hair was noticeably absent, as were the massive lumps of Crabbe and Goyle. The Quieting Charm wasn't really needed around the hospital beds. Most of the students were strangely silent as they sat waiting for the feast to begin. Many were in tears. This was the first time the entire remaining student body had been called together for a meal since the battles. Food had been sent up to the House Common Rooms until there were few enough patients left in the Great Hall to make it possible for everyone to eat together again. Now that they were together, the number of missing and injured members of each house was far more obvious. Now, three days after the battles, Dumbledore had decided a feast was needed. He stood up at the Head Table, and an instant silence fell over the room.

"Hogwarts has suffered terrible losses," he began gravely. "We must honour those who have fallen in battle, or as a result of their wounds. They didn't deserve to die. They didn't want to die. But they were willing to stand up for what they believed was right. Stand and lift your glasses in honour of these valiant warriors, who were also wonderful friends, students, loved ones." Everyone stood silently, goblets in hand. "Katie Bell, Seventh Year Gryffindor."

The students and staff lifted their glasses and intoned, "Katie Bell," then sipped solemnly from their goblets. Sniffles and sobs came from the Gryffindor table.

"Terry Boot, Sixth Year Ravenclaw," Dumbledore said.

"Terry Boot." Weeping and many voices cracking as they spoke through tears came from the Ravenclaw table, sounds which doubled after the next name was read.

"Cho Chang, Seventh Year Ravenclaw."

"Cho Chang."

On and on it went, listing all the dead in alphabetical order. Then Dumbledore went through the list of the wounded. Each time, the gathered people raised their goblets and drank a solemn toast honouring the ones named. Murmured words of comfort from one friend to another made a softly rumbling background to the solemn ceremony.

"It is our choices that make us who we are," Dumbledore said as the staff and students resumed their seats. "Some of our number," he said, glancing at the Slytherin table, "have chosen an unwise path. They are now in Azkaban as punishment for their crimes." A gasp went through the Hall. Many had wondered what had happened to the missing Slytherins, but those who actually knew, such as Ron, Hermione and Ginny, didn't share the information. That was Dumbledore's task, not theirs. "Some of you may not know what happened, so I will tell you. These missing students from Slytherin House chose to become Death Eaters. They led an attack on Hogwarts from within, and did their best to make it easier for our enemies to attack us from outside the castle walls. Fortunately, we were able to round these students up and put them in the dungeons before they caused too much damage. They and the Death Eaters who attacked us have all been charged and found guilty, and are serving sentences of varying lengths in Azkaban. *They chose* to do what they did. Nobody made them. They chose that path of their own free will. Many of you chose to fight to defend Hogwarts and your friends. For that, I highly commend you." He lifted his glass and toasted them. "I cannot say how proud I am of you, and how it grieves me that these other students chose the Dark path. I cannot tell you how it grieved me to send students into battles that should have been fought by adults, but you acquitted yourself magnificently. I thank you, and honour you for your courage and dedication to the Light." He toasted them again, then sat down, looking old and worn. The wonderful feast was eaten in relative silence.

As they finished eating, Dumbledore rose from his seat again. "I know you're wondering about the beds in the back of the Hall. Those beds are occupied by Harry Potter and Colin Creevey. Both were in very serious condition, but Colin should be rejoining us tomorrow. Harry will need at least a few more days to get his strength back, I believe. When he does come among you again, please be kind to him. Don't pester him with questions, and certainly don't touch him – the injuries Lord Voldemort inflicted on him will take longer than a few days to heal completely, so he will be in pain for a while even after he rejoins you. He is heartsick about those who died and those who were injured. *None of this is his fault*. Remember that. An evil, Dark wizard is at fault, not Harry Potter. If I hear of anyone being unkind to Harry in any way, I will deal with that person most harshly." He glared at the students, leaving them no doubt they might wind up as earwigs or worse if they bothered Harry. Several who had enjoyed teasing him at times gulped, reminding themselves they'd better watch their behaviour. "Harry and Colin were still so ill when we moved the other patients out of the Great Hall, I saw no reason to put them through the stress of taking them up to the hospital wing. As some of you have noticed," he said, smiling around at many who wanted to visit both Harry and Colin, "I've put protections around their beds so they cannot be disturbed except by immediate family or very close friends, and even those visits should be minimal." He smiled at Ron and Hermione and the vacant spot next to them, knowing Ginny would not leave Harry's side, feeling he needed protection, and that Ron and Hermione were spending most of their free time with him as well.

"Classes will resume tomorrow. I hope you have made good use of the free time you've had the last several days. I do have some happier news to share. Those who are in the D.A. and those who helped fight the Battle of Hogwarts are all excused from Defence Against the Dark Arts exams. Professor Lupin, who also fought and was wounded in the Battle of Little

Hangleton, believes your real-life experience with defensive spells was a perfectly useful examination, and I am inclined to agree." He smiled as a quiet cheer went through the Hall, as well as calls of "Thanks, Professor Lupin!" and "Hooray for Professor Lupin!" Remus smiled benignly at the students, blushing a bit at their praise. "Also, those who worked on the Healer Squad will be excused from both the Herbology and Potions examinations, since you had to use that knowledge in the field to tend the wounded." Another cheer went up. "And, since we've had such disruption in our schedule, we will push examinations back by a week to give you time to study, so you will be going home one week later than planned. I hope this doesn't interfere with anyone's holiday plans, but in all fairness, a lot of you have been busy recovering from injuries and unable to study. Owls have been sent to your parents informing them of this change in plans. Now, then, I believe I've covered everything. I bid you all good night. Sleep well."

Chapter 35 – Exams

Harry awoke to find Professor McGonagall sitting with him. "Hi, Professor," he said sleepily. "Where's Ginny?"

"Classes have started again," she replied. "Several of us will take turns with Professor Lupin, Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger so someone's always with you, but we have to work around everyone's class timetable." She wrung out the flannel in the bowl of cool water on Harry's nightstand and bent to sponge off his face. "You've been sweating again. Are you feeling any better?" she said with a rare smile.

"Yes. That feels good. Thanks." He moved a bit in his bed, trying to find a more comfortable position. Merlin waited until he was finished moving, then rearranged himself on Harry's stomach. The beautiful bird lifted his head and looked at McGonagall a while, then chirruped something cheerful sounding to Harry before going back to his soothing crooning. Harry snorted with laughter, then quickly tried to stop.

"What's funny, Potter?" McGonagall asked curiously as she sat back in her chair.

"Merlin said. . . ." Harry blushed, still trying not to laugh. "I can't say it."

"Merlin? The phoenix? He said something. . .funny? I didn't know phoenixes could do such things," she said with interest.

Harry looked at her, his eyes dancing, trying hard to stifle his amusement. It still hurt to laugh, for one thing, but he honestly didn't want to repeat what Merlin had said.

"Oh come on, Potter. I haven't had a good laugh in days," the professor encouraged. "What could a phoenix say that you would find so funny?" The corners of her mouth were twitching. Harry's suppressed mirth was making her want to laugh too.

Merlin gave Harry an imperious look, then gazed at McGonagall a long time, his eyes soft and sweet. He chirruped something that finally made Harry lose control and laugh out loud, then groan in pain.

"Ow! Merlin, give over! You're killing me!" he said, doing his best to stop laughing.

Professor McGonagall was laughing too. "Please, Potter, you need rest and quiet. Try to calm down. And I really would like to know what's so funny!"

"Don't blame me, OK? Merlin's the one who said it," he said, his eyes sparkling, his cheeks flushed with the first healthy colour they'd had in days.

"All right. I won't blame you. What did he say?" Professor McGonagall replied calmly, going along with whatever game Harry was playing.

"He says. . .he says you're . . . erm. . ." Harry snorted, trying not to laugh, while blushing at the same time.

"I'm what?" McGonagall said, truly confused.

"He thinks you're . . .erm. . .hot," Harry said, blushing madly.

"What?" McGonagall didn't know whether to laugh or be insulted. "Phoenixes don't. . .a phoenix wouldn't. . ."

"This one does," Harry chuckled. "He didn't mean to be rude. He likes you a lot. And I don't mean to be rude either. It's just the way he said it, it struck me funny. And one of these potions makes me goofy sometimes too. I apologize for being disrespectful, Professor," he said sincerely, while trying to stifle another burst of laughter.

"All right, Potter, you've had your fun," McGonagall said a bit sternly. The Harry Potter she knew would never deliberately insult her. It must be the potion.

"Honestly, it's Merlin. He's. . .has anyone told you about him yet?"

"What about him?" she asked cautiously. She didn't know where Potter was going with this. He was acting quite oddly.

"Does the Quieting Charm keep people outside the curtains from hearing what's said in here?" Harry asked suddenly.

"All but the nurse guarding the opening," McGonagall replied. "She needs to hear you in case you have problems."

"Then lean over so I can whisper to you," he murmured. "It's supposed to be a secret, but I can tell anyone I trust with my other secrets."

Professor McGonagall felt honoured that he included her in his most trusted confidants. She leaned over so he could whisper in her ear.

"He's Merlin. Great Merlin, King Arthur's wizard," Harry whispered.

She stood up abruptly. "Potter, are your potions affecting your mind?" she said in concern. "That's. . ."

"Please, Professor! It's the truth! Lean down, I'll tell you everything." She complied and was rewarded with the entire story of Merlin's becoming a phoenix and finally, after over a thousand years, choosing to bond himself to a wizard.

"How do you know this is true?" she asked incredulously, standing straight again and looking from Harry's earnest face to that of the phoenix, which seemed to have a very un-phoenix-like twinkle in its eye.

"Come closer," Harry whispered. When she leaned toward him again, he murmured, "He's told me some spells to try and the ones I've tried have all worked. Just small things, since I'm not very strong right now, but still, they work. And he's told me other things, about moving Stonehenge, about Avalon and Camelot. When he's crooning to heal me and I'm awake, he's also telling me stories."

"Truly?" Her thin eyebrows were raised in astonishment.

"Absolutely."

"And he made that comment about me?" she said, beginning to laugh like a young girl.

"Yes."

"Was he just trying to amuse you?" she said with sudden scepticism.

"No. He interrupted a story to say that. You'd moved somehow and the light hit your face a certain way and he interrupted himself to say that."

"Well, my goodness," she said, blushing. "Great Merlin," she murmured in awe, gently stroking the bird's feathers. "I'm touched. And honoured." She looked up at Harry. "You should write down the stories he tells you, Potter."

"Nobody would believe them – they're much more fantastic than the ones I've read about him," Harry replied, petting the bird's long golden tail.

"I wish I could hear them," she said quietly, still stroking the bird's scarlet back. "I've always been a tremendous admirer of Merlin. I've read everything I could find about him, many times. He's the reason I became so interested in Transfiguration." As she spoke, Harry could see the young girl behind the old woman's wrinkles. Her face lit with excitement, with the soft light from the candles above them and in his room, she looked far younger than her years. *She must have been a pretty girl*, he thought in surprise. He'd never noticed such things about old people before.

Merlin chirruped suddenly, turning to look Harry in the eye. "What is it, Merlin?" Harry said quietly. "Oh. OK. Like this?" he said, waving his hand in an uneven zigzag. The bird chirped again briefly, then sat looking at Harry expectantly.

"Professor?"

"Yes?"

"Do you really want to talk to him? Would you like to hear his voice in your head?"

"Only the wizard who owns a phoenix can hear him," she said.

"That's only true with real phoenixes," Harry corrected her. He waved his hand as Merlin had told him and murmured a quiet incantation. Merlin stood up abruptly and turned to face McGonagall, crooning at her as he resettled himself on Harry's stomach.

"Oh! Harry, what did you do? I can hear a voice in my head!" McGonagall said in delight. She chuckled. "Is that you?"

"No, it's him," Harry insisted.

"He's funny!"

"Yeah, he is. I did an incantation he told me to do. He'll tell you how to turn it off when he's finished talking with you, I imagine," Harry said with a yawn. "And I can't hear what he's saying to you. If he wants to talk to me, he'll have to turn and look at me. As long as he's looking at you, you'll hear his voice."

"How wonderful!" She was glowing, with the brightest smile he'd ever seen from her. "Thank you, Harry."

"No problem. You two kids behave now, all right?" he said with a chuckle, then tucked his hand under his cheek and fell asleep to the sound of the bird's chirruping and Professor McGonagall's soft laughter and questions.

"Look at this, Harry," Hermione said a few days later. Ron and Hermione had just arrived with armfuls of books. They tipped Harry's as carefully as possible onto his bed so he could start trying to catch up with his classes and prepare for exams. He grunted as the books hit the bed.

"Oh! Sorry, mate," Ron said, straightening the pile of books so they wouldn't slide off the bed.

Harry was still in some pain, but was finally able to sit up in bed for short periods as long as Merlin was nestled against his side, still helping the healing process on his internal injuries. Ginny sat surrounded by books and parchment as she studied for her O.W.L.'s. Hermione handed Harry a copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"What is it?" Harry said, not terribly anxious to see what horrible article had been written about him now.

"I think you'll like this one," Hermione said, seeming to read his mind. "At least, I hope you will."

Harry gingerly opened the newspaper so the front page was exposed. ***"Harry Potter Vanquishes You-Know-Who Again"*** the headline read. A sub-heading read "***Hogwarts Students Best Death Eaters in Two Major Battles"***. The article covered the entire front page and seven additional pages. Most of the front page was filled with a photo from the Omnioculars of Harry facing Voldemort defiantly, casting a spell that made Voldemort fall over, his face contorted in pain. Since it was a wizarding photo, Harry cast the spell that dropped Voldemort over and over. Harry stared at the photo, dumbstruck for a moment.

"Did it really look like that?" he said quietly.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "We had loads of great pictures to choose from. With three Omnioculars going, we had the battle pretty well covered. Luckily, they take pictures well in the dark. I was worried about it being so dark and stormy during the battle, but the Omnioculars seemed to adjust for that."

"Yeah, they make them that way because Quidditch is played in absolutely abominable weather so often," Ron commented, looking over Harry's shoulder to see what he was looking at.

Harry began reading the story. "How did they get this information?" he asked uneasily.

"Do you remember talking to Madam Bones the other day?" Harry nodded. "I was taking notes," Hermione said with a smile. "I thought it was important to get the story straight from you while it was fresh in your mind. I think this article may become a chapter in 'Hogwarts: A History.'"

"It should!" Ginny said, leaning in to look at the article. "It's a great article, and all the staff and most of the students were involved in both battles. Did you include a report on the Hogwarts battle?"

"I asked you about these articles when you were pretty groggy, Harry," Hermione said. "I'll bet you don't remember." He shook his head. "You suggested I ask Luna Lovegood to write the one on the Battle of Hogwarts, so I did. She interviewed loads of the staff and students who were involved, and walked around studying the various sites so she'd be able to describe it well. She did a great job on it. It's on one of the inside pages. Dean did illustrations for it based on what we saw when we returned, and on descriptions given by people Luna interviewed. We got Dumbledore to approve everything so we wouldn't reveal any protective charms that should stay secret."

"What about the phoenix?" Harry asked nervously.

"Dumbledore is telling people it was Merlin and Fawkes who attacked Voldemort. That works out well, since Merlin appeared soon after you got here, and you came back with Fawkes. Only a few people know about your transformation, and everyone is sworn to secrecy. Madam Bones agreed to give credit to Merlin and Fawkes, although she wanted to give you the recognition you deserved. She finally agreed it was in your best interest to keep that ability of yours a secret as long as possible."

Harry finally breathed a sigh of relief. He flipped to the inside of the paper, looking at the pictures before reading the articles. He saw a sidebar bordered in thick black lines. **"The Heroes of Hogwarts"** the title read. The article was written by Ron, listing the dead and wounded and extolling their valour in combat. Seamus and Katie were pictured in their Quidditch robes, the pictures cropped from the Gryffindor Quidditch Team poster. The other Quidditch players who died were also pictured with images cropped from their posters. Seeing Katie and Seamus laughing, the wind whipping their hair, their faces so full of life nearly tore Harry's heart out. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to read the sidebar article completely. Despite his best efforts, his eyes filled with tears as he read. He scrubbed at his face and sniffled before saying, "Well done, Ron. This is really good." Ron just nodded in response, his eyes looking haunted. Writing that article had been nearly as difficult as writing the letters to the families of the fallen.

He glanced through the rest of the articles and found another small one, this time written by Albus Dumbledore. **"The Arming of Hogwarts"** was the title. Dumbledore wrote about how Harry worked many extra hours learning far more spells than Hogwarts normally taught, and taught them to D.A. so they'd be ready for anything. He wrote about Harry's idea for Ron to be D.A.'s general, since he was a chess master, and the vast number of hours Ron had spent in researching historic battle plans and planning his own strategies. Hermione was praised for her researching abilities, for coming up with several methods of communication with D.A. members, enough to cover any contingency, and for pushing Harry to start D.A. in the first

place, as well as being Ron's second-in-command. Ginny was praised for her Healer Squad and all the wonderful work they did to ease the suffering of the wounded, and to transport the injured safely out of the battlefield. Remus was mentioned for his help with Harry's research and training, and in supporting D.A. whenever necessary, as well as fighting in the battle itself. Dumbledore made a point of saying that none of these people mentioned themselves in any way in the newspaper articles, nor did they seek any praise or honours. He felt their work was praiseworthy and he wanted everyone to know who was responsible for the high quality of the students' work in the battle with Voldemort and the defence of Hogwarts.

Harry looked around at his friends. "This is amazing. Nearly the entire paper is just articles about our battles. And such good ones! Well done, Hermione, Ron! Please thank Luna and Dean for me, too."

"If you look at the rest of the paper, it's taken up with editorials about the Ministry's failing to help us, about the dangers of letting children run a war, all kinds of things, from every possible angle," Hermione added. "It's actually quite interesting to read some of them."

"You should frame this or something," Harry said, handing it back to her.

"You should frame it yourself," she countered, smiling at him. "It's all about you."

"Nope. It's about D.A. and everyone's part in the battle, not just about me. That's partly why I like it so much," he said with a smile. "Thanks for being so even-handed."

"I'm glad you like it! You were so groggy when we talked about it before, I was afraid you'd forgotten completely."

"I had."

"Well, at least you aren't angry about it," she said, looking quite pleased with herself. "I'm so relieved!"

"As I said – well done!" Harry leaned toward her and added, "And if they don't make it a chapter in 'Hogwarts: A History,' then I think you should just write your own history of Hogwarts!" Hermione blushed at his praise, but didn't argue with him.

Harry's grumbling stomach woke him. Something smelled fantastic. He was surprised to find himself alone. That was unusual enough in itself, given that he still seemed to be in a hospital bed and someone always sat with him when he was asleep. But what was that wonderful smell? He sat up and looked around, seeing nothing but the curtains around his bed and empty chairs nearby. He picked up his glasses from the bedside table and put them on. Merlin sat preening himself on the foot of Harry's bed, apparently not feeling a need to heal Harry anymore.

"Hi, Merlin," Harry said, smiling at the bird. "So do you think I'm well enough now?"

Merlin gazed at him serenely, one liquid drop of music coming from his throat.

"Great!" Harry replied, swinging his legs carefully over the side of the bed. Hmm, no dressing gown. No slippers. Nobody expected him to be up yet, apparently. He touched the wounds on his chest and left arm, then gingerly reached around and checked the biggest wounds on his back. They were all healing well, were down to a bearable level of pain and all of them were closed, so they didn't look nearly as gross as they had. He took a deep breath, grateful that it didn't hurt to breathe anymore – he'd had some broken ribs along with everything else. He remembered his self-examination and all the things he hadn't told his friends about. Broken ribs. Bruised kidneys, liver and spleen. Ruptured stomach, with infection setting in inside his abdomen from the spilled contents of his stomach. Spell burns going through all the layers of muscle down to the bone in places. And the whip cuts – Voldemort had spelled the lashes so any wounds they inflicted would not heal without tremendous effort, if at all. Without the phoenixes' help, and Harry's use of his own healing powers, those wounds might never have healed. *Add a good bit of blood loss to all those other injuries and little Harry was a very sick boy. Emphasis on the "was,"* he told himself resolutely, carefully stretching his arms and legs, twisting his hands and feet around, flexing his fingers and toes, making sure everything worked. He even tried wiggling his ears to see how his scalp wound had healed. Apparently, everything was in working order, if still a bit sore. His left arm didn't move as freely as it should, but it was covered with scar tissue, so he supposed that was to be expected – for a while, anyway. He smiled and stood up, running his fingers through his hair to try to calm down the serious case of rumpled hair he was sure to be suffering from after all this time in bed. He moved to the opening in his curtains and peeked out. Even his "guard nurse" was gone. That was odd, too.

The House Tables were set up at the far end of the Great Hall. Harry poked his head out of the curtains, gazing curiously at the tables filled with students eating in apparent silence. He could see their mouths moving as if they were speaking. *Ah-ha, there's still a Quieting Charm on my area*, he concluded. He took one step out, trying to see the Head Table. Everyone was there who should be, Remus, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Sinistra, Sprout, Trelawney, the other professors. He took another step away from his enclosure so he could see the Gryffindor table better, and suddenly the welcome sounds of hundreds of people eating, laughing and talking washed over him. He could see red hair in the distance, yes, there were Ron and Hermione. Where was Ginny? Someone across the table from Ron poked him and pointed toward Harry. Ron turned around, his face lighting with delight when he saw Harry. On Ron's far side, a small body appeared, long red hair hanging down past the bench as Ginny leaned back to look around her brother and saw Harry. She squealed with glee and raced the length of the Great Hall, creating quite a commotion among all the tables. People everywhere were standing up and moving in Harry's direction. Harry grinned at Ginny in delight, and then remembered he only had on pyjama bottoms. His cheeks burned with embarrassment, but Ginny had just reached him and he didn't have a chance to find anything to cover himself. He needn't have worried about his modesty. Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly, then stayed there, protecting his modesty, knowing she was doing so, and giggling merrily about it.

"Mate, it's great to see you up!" Ron said, reaching out to clap Harry on the back and jerking his hand back before he could complete the motion.

"Great to be up!" Harry replied. "I'm starving. But I don't have any clothes, no dressing gown or anything," he said, then looked down at Ginny, his hands laced behind her back. He rocked her side to side a little as he spoke. "Did somebody forget somehow, or was this deliberate?" he asked, teasing her.

"Sorry," she said, smiling up at him warmly, "I just left you a few minutes ago. I thought I could eat and get back before you woke up. I didn't know you'd be strong enough to get up today!"

Meanwhile, students from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had surrounded Harry, welcoming him back to their midst while being very careful not to comment on his injuries or touch him in any way. Some of them seemed aghast that Ginny had her arms around him, when he was so obviously badly wounded. They didn't think about how many hours she'd sat by him, studying his injuries until she knew exactly where she could touch him without hurting him. Harry shook hands all around, glad his right hand was relatively well healed, and grinned at everyone, feeling happier than he had in ages.

Ron pulled off his robes, standing there in shirt sleeves and trousers as he carefully draped his robes around his best friend's shoulders. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks!" Harry said gratefully wrapping the robes around himself.

"Here, Harry, this will complete your outfit," Neville laughed, pulling his tie off without untying it, and handing it to Harry. Harry wrapped it upside down and sideways around his head, letting the bottom of the tie hang off goofily over one ear.

"Yeah, that's an improvement," Dean teased. "C'mon and eat, Harry!"

"Wait a sec," Ron said, resting one hand on Hermione's shoulder and pulling off his shoes and socks. He handed the socks to Harry, then put his shoes back on. "They're a bit gamey, but they'll keep your feet warm."

"Thanks, mate!" Harry said, holding onto Ron's arm and laughing as Ginny pulled the socks over his long knobbly toes and up his skinny legs. "That'll do!" Leaning on Ginny just a little, Harry followed his friends to the Gryffindor table and was soon piling all kinds of delicious food on his plate. He grinned, absolutely delighted to be alive and back among his friends. He tried not to think of Seamus and Katie and the others who were no longer there. Ron had told him the day before that Seamus's bed had been removed from their room and the other beds spread out so there wasn't a gaping hole in the room. Harry had grieved for his friends. Now it was time to celebrate being alive, and he did so with great joy.

Early June was warm and humid, but as always, the thick stone castle walls kept the building cool inside. Harry was sitting up in his four-poster, doing some late night revision before exams began the next day, when his curtains were nosed apart by a huge sable collie that leaped onto his bed and bounded around on it joyfully, spilling Harry's ink bottle all over his sheets, his books falling heavily to the floor. Harry sat there in delighted amazement. "Ron? Is that you?" The collie rolled over and showed its belly, its tongue lolling goofily out of the side of its mouth, then rolled onto its belly staring at him with bright eyes.

"Mate, this is brilliant! Congratulations!" he said, laughing as the collie wriggled in pleasure on his bed, snarling up the bed clothes and getting dog hair on everything. "How did you manage it? Change back and tell me!" The collie bowed before him playfully, then stood and shook, its huge fur coat sending hair all over the inside of the bed curtains. "You're shedding everywhere! C'mon, change back or I'll be sneezing all night!" The collie sat down and looked

at him expectantly. "Are you stuck?" The collie leaped forward and licked his cheek thoroughly. "OK, OK! That's actually kind of gross, knowing it's you!" Harry said, pushing the dog away and laughing. He changed Ron back into himself and sat grinning at his friend, sharing Ron's joy in his success.

"Whew, thanks, mate!" Ron said, lying spread-eagled across the foot of Harry's bed, his long arms and legs pushing the curtains out weirdly. "I finally did it, and was having fun with it, but then couldn't change back. It's kind of scary, eerie, even, to be stuck as an animal!"

"Yeah, I know," Harry agreed. "Does Hermione know you can do this?"

"No. I only just managed it," Ron said. "Dunno why I got stuck. Would you watch me do it a few times so you can help me if I get stuck again?"

"Of course!" Harry replied. "Go ahead." Ron sat cross-legged in front of Harry, his always mobile face unusually still and serious. Slowly, his own red mane turned a bit more golden and spread over his body, a wide white ruff appearing around his neck, his arms and legs becoming slender and white, his long nose turning into a long collie snout, his ears becoming long, furry and pointed and moving to the top of his head, which was narrowing rapidly. Soon there was a dog sitting in front of Harry, its eyes as blue as Ron's, but otherwise, a very handsome rough collie with a thick, luxurious coat. "Well done!" Harry exclaimed with a laugh as he reached out to pet the dog. He ran his hand down its head and neck, amazed that the animal in front of him was his best mate Ron, who loved Quidditch, chess, chocolate frogs and Hermione with pretty much equal abandon. "It's just brilliant, mate. You make a handsome dog," Harry chuckled. "Ready to change back?" The dog looked up him brightly, and then its face got a concentrated expression. Soon there was red hair where there had been golden-red fur on the animal's head, and Ron's big feet appeared at the end of the back legs, but otherwise, it was still a collie. The collie looked at him in frustration and a bit of fear.

"C'mon, Ron, you can do this," Harry encouraged him. "Start small. Start with your legs, since you already have feet, then get rid of the tail, that kind of thing. Go on, have a go." The collie looked at Harry in sad frustration. "Been stuck like this before, eh?" he asked with a smile. The collie blinked. "OK, just change your back legs into your own legs. Do just that, then rest before trying another part." The collie looked at its back legs, whining a little as it saw the huge human feet at the end of its slender white legs. It looked back at Harry, its eyes hopeless. "Don't look at me like that," he said sternly. "You can do this." The dog sighed, shook its head a bit then looked at Harry again hopefully. "I'm not going to change you. You can do it," he said. The dog sighed again, then stared off in the distance somewhere, concentrating. Slowly, ever so slowly, human legs emerged from the white fur at the back of the dog. The dog grunted and then lay there panting. "It's not as easy as it looks, is it?" Harry teased. The dog growled a bit, making him laugh. With another sigh, the dog got that concentrated look again, becoming very still for quite a while.

Harry held his breath. If Ron was stuck at this stage, he'd have to change him back himself. They had exams the next day, and Ron couldn't do them as a dog. But if he changed Ron back, Ron would lose some of his confidence and it might take him much longer to truly conquer the Animagus transformation. He was so close to success. If he could just manage to change back on his own. . . . Suddenly, Ron's arms appeared, not a gradual change but an almost instantaneous one. "That's it, Ron! Well done! Do what you just did again! You can do it! Go on, then!" Harry encouraged. One shoulder, then the other, then his back and bum appeared,

the tail disappearing in an eye blink. Finally, the dog's head turned into Ron's and he lay there in his old maroon pyjamas, panting and exhausted but deliriously happy.

"I did it! I did it! I did it by myself, too! Harry, I did it!" Ron cried, rolling around on his friend's bed in glee, much as the collie had done earlier.

"Yes, you did! Now do it again, so you'll be certain about how it works," Harry encouraged him. He made Ron change back and forth time after time until Ron was finally changing rapidly, with no hesitation or problem at all. "There you go," Harry told him finally. "Now can I get some studying done?"

"D'you need help? I owe you a big one for this, mate," Ron said earnestly.

"No thanks, I'm almost done," Harry said.

"Let me at least sort out your bed. Get up, I can do this," Ron said, pulling out his wand and aiming it at the still-wet ink stains on the sheets. *"Evanesco,"* he said, and the ink disappeared. He performed a Bed-Making Charm and Harry's bedding was neat and tidy again, the covers turned down invitingly.

"Wow! Well done, mate," Harry responded. "Thanks."

"Learned that one from Ginny," Ron said modestly. "I was a bit slow catching on to that Bed-Making Charm, and Mum got annoyed with me. Ginny spent a whole rainy afternoon showing me how to do it correctly. She was just a bit of a thing then, about six or seven. She's always been better at Charms than I am."

"Well, you did brilliantly this time," Harry complimented him. "I think I'm going to turn in. I don't honestly think my brain can hold another fact. How do you think our revision went?"

"Hermione's relentless. Thanks to her, I may do decently in the exams, though."

"Me, too. Good night, Ron."

"Night, Harry. Thanks again!"

"Show me!" Hermione said excitedly as they headed to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"OK, come in here," Ron said, leading her, Harry and Ginny into an empty classroom.

"Hurry up! We don't have loads of time, and I want to see it!" Hermione encouraged him.

"Don't rush me! I get stuck if I rush," Ron said, excited but nervous. He glanced at Harry, who gave him a grin in response. Taking a deep breath, Ron's face stilled and his eyes focused someplace distant. Gradually, but much more quickly than before, he changed into the blue-eyed collie. The dog stood on all fours in front of his friends, his tail wagging, tongue lolling happily, looking at the two girls expectantly. They both ooooo'd and ahhhh'd in quite a satisfactory fashion, then knelt next to him, petting him, hugging him, and praising him highly.

The dog nuzzled Hermione's neck, then leaned against her chest as she knelt by his side. She hugged him again, then looked into his blue eyes.

"Can you change back?" she asked.

The dog looked nervously at Harry. Harry grinned and said, "You can do it, mate. Go on." The dog seemed to be holding its breath, it was so still. In a few moments, a very relieved-looking Ron knelt before them, Hermione's arms still around his neck.

"Oh, Ron, that's brilliant!" she said as they got to their feet, discouraged tears in her eyes. "And I still can't do more than a paw!" She stamped her foot in frustration. "I wish I was in Harry's dormitory so I could get as much help as you have."

"He's done most of this on his own, Hermione," Harry assured her. "I only helped a couple of times."

"I'd love to know what I'm doing wrong," she grumbled.

Meanwhile, Ginny was hugging her brother. "I can't wait to see Dad's face when you change in front of him! He'll be so excited! He always wanted to be an Animagus. And the twins! They'll go spare! Wicked! I'm so proud of you!" Ron was blushing madly with all the praise being heaped upon him. Harry was the one to break things up.

"Erm. . .I hate to spoil the moment, but we have exams to get to, so we'd better go eat a good breakfast," he said apologetically.

"I can't WAIT for Transfiguration!" Ron chortled. "Think of all the extra points I'm going to get for this!" He laughed, delighted with his success.

After breakfast, Ginny had to leave them in the Charms corridor. "Good luck, sweetheart," she said as she kissed Harry goodbye.

"You too," he said, kissing her nose as they parted. "See you later."

McGonagall was appropriately excited at Ron's success. He was the only one other than Harry to manage the entire transformation. Several other students had managed partial transformations, but were stuck there and couldn't get any further along.

"Those of you who are of age should practice over your summer holiday. Possibly by the time we meet again in the fall term, you will have made some progress in your transformation. All right, I'll be passing out your tests in a moment. Please put all books, papers and quills away." She passed out the Anti-Cheating Quills with a wave of her wand. She held their tests a moment longer. "Here are your examinations. You have one hour."

For the next hour, the room was silent except for the scratching of quills. Harry was staring at a bumblebee that was buzzing around inside the tall window. He smiled. He saw that bumblebee fairly often and had learned to recognize it. It had a patchwork mark on the bottom left side of its body, a marking it inherited from Dumbledore's scar on his left leg that was a perfect map of the London underground. He wondered why Dumbledore was observing this

exam, but knew the headmaster had his own reasons for whatever he did. He smiled at the bee again, which flew down near him briefly before returning to its spot by the window. Harry shook his head in amusement, then got back to work on his exam. He'd had to stifle a laugh when he'd opened his test paper. Professor McGonagall had given him only three questions to answer, all of them simple, then written a note at the bottom: "I would have excused you from the exam altogether, but that might have raised some questions you don't really want to answer. So answer these, then write a love letter to Miss Weasley with the rest of your time if you'd like. You've already earned an 'Outstanding' in this class. Well done!'"

"I think that went rather well, don't you?" Hermione said brightly as they left the classroom. "I mean, I think I had a problem with question 12 B, but . . ."

"Hermione, we don't want to relive the exam, OK?" Ron grumbled.

Hermione sighed. She wished they wanted to discuss the tests, but they never, ever did.

"How did you do on the Animagus questions, Ron?" Harry teased his friend.

"I think I did OK," Ron said with a cocky grin.

"I thought you didn't want to discuss the exam," Hermione groused testily.

"Well, the Animagus section was interesting," Ron replied, not seeing her grouchy expression. He and Harry launched into a discussion of the Animagus questions, and Hermione listened intently, afraid to interrupt.

When their conversation ran down, she said, "So what did you put for 12 B, Harry?" she asked as innocently as possible.

"Oh, no you don't," Ron warned, "You're not going to get us to talk about the exam!"

"But you just were!" she protested. "I was simply continuing the conversation."

"I honestly don't remember what 12 B was, Hermione, nor what I put for the answer," Harry said with a grin, not bothering to tell her he hadn't even had a "question 12 B" on his exam paper. "Sorry."

Hermione sighed, shaking her head. "Boys," she muttered in disgust.

"Yes?" they both said brightly, laughing teasingly at her frown. They soon had her laughing along with them.

"Professor," Harry asked Dumbledore the next time he saw him. "Why have you been observing my exams? Or are you observing all of them?"

"I'm keeping an eye on all the students," he replied. "Since all the Sixth Year students are tested together in most subjects, some of those who lost parents, or whose parents have been locked up in Azkaban, are in your exams. I don't want them disrupting the examinations for anyone, so I've been watching how things are going. They seem to be taking the situation

much better than I would have expected, but then again, most of them were in the castle when it was stormed by Death Eaters and saw how ruthless they are in battle. Those who didn't know their parents had become Death Eaters were in shock for a while after they found out. We had many counselling sessions and passed out loads of Cheering Charms and Tranquillity Potions while you were in bed and didn't know what was going on in the rest of the castle. These last few weeks have been difficult for everyone."

Harry nodded. "I wondered what happened to those whose parents were Death Eaters. So some of them had no idea?"

"No idea at all," Dumbledore said, shaking his head sadly.

"That's awful."

"That's just one of many things that are awful about the entire situation," Dumbledore replied sadly. "Don't you worry about these things, Harry. None of it is your responsibility. You just work hard at your exams and do the best you can. Are you feeling well now?"

"Yes, Professor, I'm fine." He kept saying this despite the constant pain in his scars. He supposed they were either healing or they weren't. He was just glad to be alive and mobile again.

Professor Dumbledore looked at him seriously for a moment before placing a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm so glad to hear that," he said with a smile. "I'd best be off. The Fourth Year students will be starting their Care of Magical Creatures exam soon and I want to look in on them."

"What shall we do with our free time?" Ron said, stretching luxuriously in the squashy old armchair in the Gryffindor Common Room. "I mean, while other people are taking the Defence exam, we have a free afternoon. We should spend it doing something totally worthless and fun!"

"What do you want to do?" Harry asked, amused. He glanced over at the table in the corner, where Ginny and the other Fifth Years were up to their eyeballs in O.W.L. revision. What he'd most enjoy doing with free time involved Ginny, but she wouldn't be available for days. The Fifth and Seventh Year students didn't get the benefit of being excused from exams, since they had O.W.L.'s and N.E.W.T.'s to deal with.

"I don't know. 'Mione? Ideas?"

"We should be studying," she began.

"'Mione. . ." Ron pleaded. "Give it a rest, OK?"

"What do you two want to do?" she countered curiously. They had been studying hard. A short break might refresh their minds after all.

"Tell you what," Harry offered. "You two find something fun to do on your own. I have an errand to do in Hogsmeade."

"D'you want to go by yourself, mate?" Ron said. "We can go with you, if you want."

"It's not a Hogsmeade weekend. You'd get into trouble," Harry said. "It'll be easier for me to just fly across the forest and run my errand. You two go on, have a fun afternoon," he said, winking at Ron.

Suddenly, Ron caught on. "'Mione, sweetie, I know something fun we can do," he wheedled as Harry waved and left the Common Room.

Harry walked across the grounds in long strides, his broom over his shoulder, enjoying feeling healthy and strong again, revelling in the beautiful weather. "It's a good day to fly," he said as he got near the edge of the forest. He'd considered transforming into a raven for this trip, but with his back and left arm still so sore, he didn't think flying that way was in his best interest at the moment. He flew to the edge of the forest nearest Hogsmeade and put a Shrinking Charm on his Firebolt, pocketed it, then walked cheerfully down the street between the little shops. He stopped at the jeweller's to do his errand.

"Mr. Potter, it's wonderful to see you again!" Mr. Joyero said when Harry entered. "I read about the battles. I'm so sorry for the loss of your friends."

"Thanks," Harry said carefully, hoping the man wasn't going to get maudlin. Harry had been cheerful when he came in – he'd like to stay that way.

"Your battle – I was just amazed at the photos, and the articles. . .my goodness. Well done, Mr. Potter!" the jeweller enthused.

"Thanks," Harry replied, hurriedly changing the subject. "I'd like to look at rings this time."

"So you and the young lady are ready for the next step?" Mr. Joyero said, smiling warmly as he reached for the case of engagement rings.

"Oh, no! Not those rings!" Harry said, mentally kicking himself. He didn't want to be wrong-footed in this. "Erm. . .there's another kind of ring, isn't there? One that's not so. . .permanent?"

"Do you mean just a decorative ring, or a promise ring?"

"What's a promise ring?"

"It's not as serious as an engagement ring, but it shows you love the young lady. If you're serious about each other but feel you're too young for engagement rings, promise rings are a nice thing to do. If you just like the young lady and want to get her a present that doesn't, um, indicate any possible future promises, then one of these other rings would be lovely."

"Possible future promises?"

"If you don't want the young lady to think you're going to propose someday – if you just want to get her a ring because you like her."

"So the promise ring shows I'm promising to propose someday?" Harry said, wanting to be perfectly clear on things.

"That's what it suggests, yes."

Harry was quiet for a while, thinking seriously. He'd heard of such rings in TV ads for jewellery shops and thought that was what he wanted to get, but he'd wanted to hear more about them from the jeweller. *Do I really want to give her the idea I'm going to propose to her someday?* he thought. He pondered that idea for a few moments, then his brain gave him a swift kick in the bum. *Of course you do, you great prat!* "Let's see what you have then," he said, taking a deep, steadying breath. "The promise rings."

An hour or so later, Harry was walking toward Honeyduke's when he remembered something. He turned into Dervish & Banges and found Ben Dervish working behind the counter.

"Mr. Potter! How are you?" Mr. Dervish said with a smile. "I read about your battles. Well done!"

"Thanks. That's actually why I came in here," Harry said, looking around to see if they were alone.

Dervish seemed to understand what Harry was doing. "There's no one else here. What's up?"

"I wanted to thank you for those books," Harry said in a low voice. "What I learned from them saved my life several times. They were a huge help to D.A., as well. We were able to teach them defensive skills we would never have thought of otherwise. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. You used them exactly the way I hoped you would. I'm glad they were a help."

"They were brilliant. So were the books on battle strategies you showed Ron. You should get a lot of the credit for our success, but I know we can't publicize that fact. So I just wanted to thank you again," Harry said sincerely.

"My pleasure. Please let me know if you need more reference material."

"I will. Thanks!" He waved and left the shop, forcing himself to whistle cheerfully again as he walked down the street. As much as he was able, he tried not to dwell on all the horrors of recent weeks. Every reminder brought those memories to the front of his mind, but it was a beautiful day, he was alive and on an enjoyable errand, and he was going to hold onto that feeling as hard as he could. Finally, he walked into Honeyduke's.

"Mr. Potter! I'm so glad to see you!" Mr. Honeyduke cried when he spotted Harry browsing the shelves full of sweets.

"Hi! Nice to see you too," he said with a smile, then got right to business to avoid another uncomfortable conversation. "I'd like to get some Chocolate Frogs and some Sugar Quills and some Fizzing Whizbees," Harry said as he walked to the counter, "and some Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans."

"Tell you what, Mr. Potter. I'm so proud of you students, and grateful too, for what you lot did, I'm going to send you back to school with enough sweets for all your friends. How's that?" Mr. Honeyduke said cheerfully. "And don't even think about touching your money bag. This is my treat."

"Wow! Thanks!" Harry replied, grinning hugely. His jaw dropped when he saw Mr. Honeyduke piling up not a few of each sweet, but full boxes of them, everything Harry had named and a wide variety of other things as well. "Whoa! That's quite a lot of sweets!" he said, absolutely amazed by Mr. Honeyduke's generosity.

"I'll put a Shrinking Spell on all of it. You know how to reverse that, right?" Harry nodded. "Right, then. Here you go!" He shrunk the cases of sweets, reached under the counter for a bag to carry the now-small pile of tiny boxes, filled the bag and handed it to Harry. "I hope you lot enjoy them!"

"Oh, we will!" Harry said with a grin. "Thanks!"

As he walked out of town, he passed the Shrieking Shack. He glanced at it, hoping Ron and Hermione were making good use of it, then wondering when he and Ginny would have a chance to spend some time there. *She'll be finished with her O.W.L.'s in a few days, and I'll only have one exam left then. It won't be much longer.* He felt the ring box in his pocket and grinned, then hefted the bag full of sweets and laughed out loud. He'd have to deliver some of these sweets to the other houses for the rest of the D.A. members, but Gryffindor Tower would have a party tonight!

After everyone had finally trudged off to bed, full to the gills with sweets and good cheer, Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron cleaned up the debris.

"I wonder why this place is always such a mess. The last couple of months, it seems nobody's done any cleaning in here at all. And our fire isn't lit until one of the boys does it in the evening," Hermione commented as they gathered up trash and binned it.

Harry straightened up, astonished. "Don't tell me that you, of all people, have no idea why we're not getting the service we used to!"

"What do you mean?" she asked, completely confused.

"Do you remember leaving knitted hats and socks and things all over the place, hoping to free the house elves?" Harry said seriously, tilting his head to study her face. He couldn't believe she hadn't figured things out yet.

"I still do that. I want all the house elves to be free!" she said insistently.

"The reason Gryffindor Tower is in the bad shape it is these days," Harry said patiently, "is that the house elves refuse to clean in here because of the things you keep leaving out for them. Dobby is the only one who would come in here after you started that. He got everything you knitted, and he enjoys them. But since he's gone, you're still leaving things out and the house elves won't come here to clean, lay the fire, change our linens, pick up the laundry, none of that. Hadn't you noticed?"

Hermione was standing there with her mouth hanging open in shock. "Dobby took them all?"

"Yes. And until you stop putting them out, we won't have any house elf service in Gryffindor Tower," Harry told her.

"So stop doing that, Hermione!" Ginny said tartly. "I'm getting tired of doing my own laundry!"

"And I'm tired of cleaning up the Common Room," Ron added.

"I was trying to help them," Hermione said in a small voice. She looked as if she might cry.

Ron put his arm around her shoulders. "We all know that, and it's a noble sentiment, but one that the house elves themselves don't appreciate. You can't force people – or elves – to think the way you do, you know."

"Oh." Hermione sat down in a chair, finally understanding what they'd all been trying to tell her for ages. "OK. I'm sorry. How can we fix this?" she said, gesturing around the still-messy room.

"I'll mention it to Dumbledore," Harry said kindly. "He can tell the elves that you're no longer leaving out clothes for them, and then they'll probably start working for us again." He smiled at his friend. "We all know you meant well, Hermione. This kind of social change can't be done quickly. And honestly, the elves are very happy with their lives the way they are."

"OK," she said quietly. She sighed, got up and picked up more empty wrappers and boxes to toss in the bin. "This was a lovely party, Harry. Thanks for the sweets."

"No problem," he replied, grinning. "Thanks for helping to clean up."

A short time later, the boys kissed the girls goodnight and were about to go up to bed when Harry said, "Erm, Ron? Wait a second."

"What? Did we miss something?" Ron said, looking around.

"Erm. . .no. I wanted to talk to you about something," Harry said, suddenly nervous.

"What?"

"Sit down." When they were seated across from each other in squashy armchairs, Harry squared his shoulders and forced himself to do what he thought was right. "You know I love your sister, right?"

"Yeah," Ron said with a smile. "I've never seen her happier."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, me too."

"I've noticed. So what's up?"

"Erm. . .I wanted to. . .um. . ."

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ron said, suddenly concerned, leaning forward to look at Harry gravely.

"Nothing's wrong," Harry answered quickly. "I just . . .well. . ."

"What?" said Ron, really starting to worry now.

"You know when I went to Hogsmeade earlier today?"

"Yeah! I can't believe Mr. Honeyduke gave us all those sweets! Well done, mate!"

"Yeah. The sweets were a cover-up for what I really did there."

Ron's forehead furrowed in concern. "Spit it out, Harry. What have you done? Are you in trouble?"

"No," Harry said with a nervous laugh. "Not in trouble." He sighed again. He hadn't thought this would be so awkward for him. If this was hard, how was it going to be with Ginny? He shook his head, disgusted with his cowardice, and hit the problem face-on. "I bought Ginny a ring."

Ron's eyes widened and he gasped in shock. "No way! You're *proposing*?"

"No! At least, not yet. We're too young. It's a promise ring. It means I plan to propose someday." He looked at his best friend, his heart in his eyes. "I love her, Ron, I really do. I can't imagine going through life without her right there beside me. I haven't asked your dad for her hand because I'm not ready to propose, and we're just too young now anyway. D'you think your folks will be upset with me for giving her this ring without asking them first? I don't want to cause trouble with your family or make them mad at me or anything."

Ron thought seriously for a moment. "I can't speak for them, of course, but I think they'll be very happy, Harry," he said earnestly. "They love you. They treat you as if you were already part of the family. I imagine they'll think it's brilliant." He grinned suddenly. "We're going to be brothers! Wicked!"

Harry laughed, relieved at his friend's reaction. "Yeah, that will be cool, won't it?" He stood up, stretched and yawned. "I'm glad that's over! I've been worried about what you'd think, and what your parents would think."

Ron stood facing Harry, looking at him gravely for a moment. "I think it's the best possible thing in the world, Harry. I really do." As they turned to go upstairs, Ron threw an arm around his friend's neck, pulling him close and rubbing his knuckles roughly on top of Harry's head, then ruffling his hair as he released him.

"What's that for?" Harry laughed as he straightened up from Ron's moment of odd affection.

"I just made you a Weasley brother," Ron said with a grin. "Welcome to the family!"

"Don't tell anyone, not even Hermione, about this, OK? Ginny should be the first to know," Harry said earnestly. "I'll give it to her when her O.W.L.'s are finished."

"Cool. I can't wait to see her face. Well done, mate!"

"Thanks."

A few days later, Ginny had finished her O.W.L.'s and Harry, Ron and Hermione only had their Astronomy exam left on their timetable. Harry had his nose buried in his Astronomy notes when he noticed a flash of red going by. "Ginny!"

"Hi, sweetie. How's it going?" She smiled as he stood up to face her.

"To be honest, I could do with a break. It feels as if I had all the planets of the universe tattooed on the inside of my skull," he said with a cheeky grin, pounding his forehead with the heel of his hand. Bumping his head made his fringe move, and his scar caught Ginny's eye for a moment.

"How are you feeling?" she said quietly. His now double-zigzag scar was still livid and hot-looking, but he hadn't complained about it for days.

"I'm fine," he said cheerfully.

"You always say you're fine!" she teased him.

"It's a beautiful day. What are you doing this afternoon?" he asked, his eyebrows raised hopefully.

"Absolutely nothing. I thought I'd lie out under that big beech tree by the lake and just enjoy the weather," she said.

"May I help?" he said, standing very close to her and smiling down at her. He took her hands and pulled them around his neck, wrapping his arms around her waist. Leaning down to rest his cheek on top of her hair, he murmured, "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too. But you need to study!" she scolded, pulling back to look up at him fondly.

"Nope! I give up! Whether you spend the afternoon with me or not, I'm not studying one more star chart." He stuck his tongue out cheekily at Hermione, who was busy giving him a very disapproving look while smacking Ron's hand as he tried to get overly friendly with her.

"Study, Ron," Hermione said sternly.

"I'm trying, but you keep distracting me," he replied, leaning over to kiss her forehead.

"Fine. Sit across the table then," she said, moving away from him. "I'm going to get an 'Outstanding' in Astronomy again this year!"

"I'm sure you will," Ron replied with a sigh. He looked up at Harry and Ginny, who were busy making each other giggle. He sighed again and got back to work, waving sadly to Harry as he and Ginny left the Common Room hand in hand, trying his best to hide the grin that

wanted to burst out of him. If he grinned, he'd have to tell Hermione what Harry was up to, and he was not going to break that promise. Let Ginny be the one to tell them what happened. He could imagine her delight in sharing her news and showing off her ring. With another sigh, he forced his mind back onto star charts.

"Where shall we go?" Ginny asked, skipping along next to Harry's long strides. They were both in a hurry to leave the castle behind them and enjoy some time outside its walls.

"That spot by the beech tree you mentioned sounds nice," he said, smiling down at her. "What gorgeous weather! It should be against the law to keep students locked up inside the castle studying on a day like this."

"You could study outside," she countered teasingly.

"If I tried to study outside on a day like this, I'd be thinking of flying all the time and not concentrating at all," he admitted ruefully. Harry looked around. Only a few classes still had one or two exams left, so the majority of the student body was outside enjoying the day. "Hmm, our beech tree is already occupied," Harry said. "But there are others. Come on, let's go around to the far side of the lake." They finally found a nice shady spot well sheltered from the castle and other students by large shrubs clustered near a huge oak tree. Harry sat down, did a quick Cushioning Charm to protect his still-sore back before he leaned against the tree and pulled Ginny into his lap. "Will this do?"

"Yeah," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him quite thoroughly. They snogged playfully for a while, then just held each other, Ginny's head tucked beneath Harry's chin, completely relaxed and happy.

A few moments later, Harry craned his neck around to look at Ginny, touching her chin lightly to turn her face up to his. "I love you, you know."

"Yeah, I noticed. I love you too," she said light-heartedly. She studied his face, which had become oddly intense for some reason, then kissed his chin, trying to lighten his mood. She couldn't imagine why he'd suddenly become so serious. "Got your dimple."

He took a deep, calming breath and blew it out before saying, "You can have that one. I have another in my pocket somewhere." He dug around in his pocket ostentatiously, laying hands on the jeweller's box after what appeared to be a great struggle. "Ah, here it is. My spare dimple, all tied up with a bow," he said with a nervous grin as he pulled it out. It was an odd-sized box, too big for a ring, too small for a bracelet or pendant. She recognized the wrapping but couldn't imagine what it could be.

"What's that?" she said, feeling butterflies in her stomach. Harry always gave her wonderful gifts. What had he done this time?

"I told you. My spare dimple. So you can keep the one you took," he said, holding the box out of her reach, shaking it a little, teasing her with it. "You want my spare dimple too?"

"Of course! I'm in charge of dimples around here, didn't you know that?" she said, playfully reaching for it. "Why get it out if you aren't going to show it to me?"

"Hmm, I seem to have grown another," he said, running a finger over his chin. "I guess I don't need this one after all." He started to put it back in his pocket, his eyes dancing as he tantalized her.

"Harry! What is it?" she demanded. "You're such a tease!"

"That's one of the many reasons you love me."

"Yes, actually, it is," she said, pulling his face down for a lovely long kiss. "OK, put your spare dimple away then, if you don't want to show me," she said in a nonchalant manner.

He sighed dramatically. "You're no fun anymore. You know all my tricks."

"Just one of the many reasons you love me," she replied with a grin, snuggling into his arms.

"Yeah, you're right. Here," he said, smiling as he handed her the box. Inside were two rings side by side. One was dainty, gold, with two intertwined hearts, each with a stone set in the centre of the heart. One side of the band was engraved with letters that spelled "Harry" and that heart had a ruby, Harry's birthstone, in it. The other side of the band said "Ginny" and had a peridot, her birthstone, set in the heart. The other ring was also gold, much wider and heavier than the dainty one. There was a Gryffindor lion design carved into it with a ruby set under the lion's upraised front paw and a smaller one as the lion's eye.

Ginny's eyes were wide, her mouth hanging open, and she seemed to be holding her breath.

"Ginny?" Harry said carefully, growing a bit concerned about her reaction.

"Uh. . ." she replied, gulping a bit like a fish, knowing it was not her most attractive look but unable to do anything else at the moment.

Harry swallowed nervously, but then his words spilled out in a rush. "I hope you like it. I think we're too young for anything more serious than a promise ring yet, but it was something I wanted to do. I hope it's all right with you. I love you, baby. I just . . . ." He had to stop talking because she was kissing him quite seriously. When she let him up for air, he chuckled warmly and said, "So I take it you like it?"

She laughed through the tears streaming down her cheeks and wrapped her arms around his neck, nearly strangling him. "I love you, I love you, I love you!"

"I love you too, sweetheart. That's why I wanted to get you something special. Is this all right? I can take it back if you don't like it," he said, not really expecting her to reject it.

"Take it back? No way! It's beautiful! Can you put it on me?" She held out her left ring finger expectantly. He took the ring out of the box and said an incantation over it before sliding it on her hand. "What spell did you use?"

"It's a fitting spell the jeweller told me about. The ring is sized to you, and will always fit whatever finger you put it on now. Unless someone says the counter spell, it will never fit anyone else, even if they have the same size finger as you. And it won't fall off during

Quidditch or anything, but it will be easy to remove when you want to take it off, such as when you're making potions and don't want to mess it up, that kind of thing."

"Wow!" She held it out admiring the way it flashed in the soft light that filtered through the tree's leaves. She looked in the box again. "You got yourself one too. I've never heard of a boy wearing a promise ring before." She turned and kissed him again. "You're so sweet."

"Well, I do have an ulterior motive for wearing it," he said with a smile. "These rings have spells on them so we can always talk to each other no matter how far apart we are. If you touch the ruby and say my name, it will show me wherever I am, as long as I have this ring on. If I touch the big ruby in my ring and say your name, I'll be able to see you. We can talk to each other and see each other, and not need a Floo Network. Isn't that brilliant?"

"Show me!" she said excitedly. She took the ring out of the box and waited for him to put the sizing spell on it, then slid it onto his left ring finger. She glanced up at his face as she slid the ring on and saw Harry's face filled with tender emotion. She put her hand on his cheek, loving him more in that moment than ever before. She kissed him softly, then tickled his lips with her tongue. A few breathless moments later, she gazed into those beautiful green eyes, her heart full to overflowing. "I thought I loved you before," she murmured. "I didn't know I could love you so much more than that. I love you, Harry."

"Oh, sweetheart. I love you so much," he said, kissing her forehead and holding her close for another moment. Taking a deep breath, he got back on track. "OK. Where were we before you so rudely interrupted me?" he teased gently.

"You were about to show me how the rings work."

"Oh yeah. They're really cool." He touched the larger ruby in his ring, saying "Ginny Weasley" and there was Ginny's face floating above his ring, with the same dazzled expression Ginny herself was wearing. When Ginny spoke, the image above the ring did, as well.

"That's amazing! I've never heard of such a spell," she said.

"He said he rarely offers it because it's a tricky spell to do, but he wanted to do it for us," Harry said. "Try your ring."

She pressed the ruby on her ring and said, "Harry Potter," and there was Harry's face floating above her hand, with the same "I'm about to kiss you" look the real Harry had. Ginny laughed, and turned to the real Harry and kissed him soundly. "Thank you, love."

"Thank you for accepting it, sweet girl," he said, kissing her again. As they sat comfortably in the shade of the oak tree, Ginny held out her hand admiring her ring, every so often pulling Harry's hand up to look at his.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Harry said when the ruby in his ring flashed red in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees when the wind blew. "These stones have magical properties. I never asked about any innate powers the rubies in the other jewellery I gave you might have, but I did this time. He told me rubies set in gold help the body get well after illness and protect you from depression and nightmares. Peridot, the green stone in your ring, helps you

get over fevers and protects you from enchantments and spells. I don't understand why all wizards don't just cover themselves in rubies and peridots if they're that protective," he chuckled.

"I'd heard peridot was good for illness, but I never heard any of the rest of it. I feel so protected now, with all my rubies!"

"It must be true. My left earlobe was practically the only part on my left side that wasn't injured. Do you think my ruby earring protected it?"

"I don't know," she said in amazement.

"And my right hand was nearly uninjured. I don't understand that at all."

"Maybe your wand protected it," she offered.

"I think it's just that he and I are both right-handed and his attacks mostly hit me on the left side. But let's not talk about that," he said as he wrapped his arms around her more tightly and bent down to kiss her. "I have other things on my mind right now." He took his glasses off and laid them aside, then rubbed noses with her.

"Like what?" she teased, kissing the dimple in his chin again.

"Like the fact that I think we've gone too long between serious snogging sessions," he said, looking at her mouth hungrily.

"I like the way you think," she said, lacing her fingers through his hair and pulling his lips to hers.

A little later, Harry lay on the ground, his head in Ginny's lap. He was studying her face, enjoying the expressions running across her mobile features as she played with his hair.

"Your hair is so silky. It feels so good," she murmured.

"You're just trying to get it to look worse than usual so people will laugh at me," he teased.

"It honestly does seem to have a life of its own," she joked, gently pulling and twisting tendrils until his hair stuck up all over his head.

"Oh, thanks! You just made me look like a punk rocker!" Harry said with a laugh as he lifted his hand to feel what she'd done to him.

"What's a punk rocker?" she asked.

"Someone who plays in certain kinds of Muggle bands. Punk rock is sort of like the Weird Sisters' music. They wear their hair like this. Sometimes they paint it blue or pink, like Tonks does."

"Oh! They do that on purpose?" she said in surprise.

"Yeah. Just like Tonks. How do I look? Would I make a good punk rocker?" He grinned devilishly, enjoying the thought of playing guitar in a punk band. *As if I'd ever have time for such things, even if I had any skill at music,* he thought idly.

"What are you thinking?" she asked abruptly.

"That you have perfect nostrils," he teased.

"What?"

"They're so cute and round and they fit your nose nicely. And you even have freckles under the tip of your nose. You just can't help yourself. You're cute in every direction."

"You're so silly," she said, twisting his hair into soft spirals. "And now you look silly, too," she added with a giggle.

Harry reached up to feel what she'd done to his hair this time and noticed the tan line where his watch used to be. It had been destroyed by spells during his battle with Voldemort. He lifted Ginny's arm and checked her watch. "Rats."

"What?"

"I need to get back to work," he said with a sigh, rolling over and kissing her knee before sitting up.

"Aw. I thought you were taking the afternoon off!" she protested.

"I lied. I just couldn't wait any longer to give you your ring," he said, rubbing noses with her, then standing up and offering her a hand to get up. "Once my next exam is over, we have a date in the Shrieking Shack, OK?"

"We'll have to make sure Ron and Hermione aren't there. . ." she cautioned.

"It will work out, don't worry," he replied, pulling her to him and holding her close. He tipped her chin up and kissed her deeply. "I can't wait," he breathed when he broke the kiss. "All right, time to get back to the books again," he said resolutely and started back to the castle. "Are you going to stay out here and enjoy the rest of the afternoon?"

"No, silly, I need to show off my ring!" she said, skipping along next to him. He laughed and took her hand as they headed back to the castle.

Ron looked up when he heard the portrait hole open. Harry and Ginny entered, both beaming, Ginny dancing along at Harry's side like an overly excited puppy.

"Ron! Hermione! Look!" Ginny exclaimed, running to their table.

Hermione looked up, annoyed at being distracted, but the expression on Ginny's face was so radiant, Hermione had to smile. "What is it?" she asked.

Ginny held her hand out wordlessly, bouncing on her toes in her excitement.

Hermione's eyes popped in amazement. "What. . .?" she stammered, looking from Ginny to Harry to Ron, then back at Ginny.

"It's a promise ring. Harry just gave it to me," Ginny said, still bouncy with pleasure.

"Wow! It's beautiful!" Hermione replied.

Ron leaned over to look at the ring, then grinned up at Harry. "Well done, mate! Welcome to the family!" He got up and gave Harry a huge but careful hug, still mindful of his scars, then turned and lifted his sister off her feet, whirling her around. "Well done, Ginny! Congratulations and all that!"

"Look at Harry's," Ginny said eagerly. "He got one for himself, too. Isn't it beautiful?" she said, holding out his left hand to show Ron and Hermione.

"That's gorgeous, Harry!" said Hermione. "I've never heard of a boy wearing a promise ring before. That's really sweet!"

"Well, as I told Ginny, I had an ulterior motive in getting it," Harry said modestly. He went on to explain about the communications spell on their rings, which astonished Ron and Hermione.

"I've never heard of such a spell," Hermione said, stunned. "That's a wonderful thing!"

"That jeweller knows a lot of spells I've never heard of," Harry said. "Maybe they're specific to jewellery and that's why we've never heard of them." He shrugged. "I'd like to keep that aspect of these rings quiet, OK? As far as anyone else is concerned, I just wanted to show I'm, erm, 'spoken for,' I guess you'd say." He looked down at Ginny, love shining in his face. "Which is the truth, after all," he added quietly. He leaned down and kissed her softly, bending to whisper, "I love you" in her ear before straightening. "OK, I've got studying to do. I'll see you later, sweetie," he said, sitting down in his place at the study table.

"See you later, baby," Ginny said, kissing the top of his head and tousling his hair again, giggling as she did so. "Bye, punk rocker!"

"Thanks so much," Harry said, chuckling. When she disappeared, he ran his fingers through his hair, messing it up differently than she had, but at least it looked more like his version of normal hair.

"Punk rocker?" Hermione queried.

"I told her she was making my hair look like a punk rocker – then I had to explain it," Harry replied.

"So explain it," said Ron.

"The Weird Sisters' sound with Tonks' hair," Harry replied with a laugh. "I'm still stuck on the Horsehead Nebula, Hermione. Can you help me with it?" The three friends went back to work,

doing their best to ignore the squeals from the girls' dormitory as Ginny went around showing off her ring to her friends.

Chapter 36 – The Astronomy Tower

The Astronomy exam was the last one for the Sixth Year Gryffindors. They trudged up the countless flights of stairs to the Astronomy Tower at midnight, yawning and grumpy after many days and nights of studying and exams. With this exam, it would all be over. Then they had a week of free time before they returned to their homes for the summer holiday.

Harry went up the stairs with mixed feelings. He was glad the exams were nearly over, but not that happy about the school year coming to a close. Ginny lived a long way from Privet Drive. He could Apparate out to visit her, or meet her at Grimmauld Place from time to time, but it wasn't the same as seeing her every day. At least they'd be able to talk to each other privately with their rings. The only good thing about the coming holiday was that it was the last time he'd have to live with the Dursleys. With that thought lifting his spirits, he opened the door at the top of the Tower and went in to face his Astronomy exam.

When it was over two hours later, he, Ron and Hermione sighed in relief, along with the other students. As the students packed up their things and put the telescopes away, Professor Sinistra disappeared into her office, her arms full of their exam papers. A few moments later, as the students headed for the stairs, she re-emerged and called out to Harry, "Mr. Potter? Please remain behind afterwards. I would like to talk to you about your grade."

Harry's grades in Astronomy had been absolutely fine, actually well above average this term, so this request sounded rather fishy. "Stay with me," he whispered to Ron and Hermione.

"Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, you are dismissed," Sinistra said imperiously.

"We'll wait for him over here," Hermione said reasonably. They'd be out of earshot, but close enough to help him if something bad happened.

"I said you're dismissed!" Sinistra snarled, behaving very unusually for her. She was normally reserved, polite, businesslike. She'd never shown any temper, even when disciplining Fred and George at their worst. Nobody had ever seen her angry, yet here she was, apparently beginning a towering rage.

"Professor, anything you say to me can be said in front of them," Harry assured her.

"I said LEAVE!" she snapped, her eyes flashing.

"OK, then, we'll all leave," he said, backing toward the door where Ron and Hermione waited nervously, their hands in their pockets gripping their wands tightly. "If you have a problem with my grades, talk to Professor Lupin. He's my guardian."

"I told you to stay and them to leave! Obey me!" she shrieked.

"Not tonight, Professor," Harry said uneasily. "Sorry. I'm exhausted and it seems you may be tired as well."

Sinistra pulled out her wand and pointed it at his heart. "You will not deny me. I've been waiting far too long."

"Sorry?" he said, shocked but already pulling his wand from his pocket.

Hermione and Ron ran forward and began to engage Sinistra in combat the instant Sinistra shot a spell at Harry, which he dodged by dropping and rolling. Harry leaped up, wand in hand, cursing his exhaustion-induced slowed reactions. He was surprised to see Crabbe and Goyle emerge from the professor's office, wands out and ready to do battle as well. A simple Impedimenta charm and an Incarsarus later, Crabbe was out of action, his body wrapped tightly in coils of rope. Harry put a Silencio on him for good measure.

Hermione was battling Sinistra, meanwhile keening, "I'm attacking a teacher, I'm attacking a teacher" under her breath.

"That's no teacher, Hermione," Harry called as he helped Ron fight Goyle, who had resorted to fists rather than his wand. "That's Malfoy."

"Malfoy!" she cried, shooting spells as fast as she could. "Thanks, Harry!"

"I've got him," Ron said as Goyle fell to the floor, Stunned. Ron gave him a good kick in the belly as he shot ropes out of his wand to bind the massive Slytherin. "You help Hermione."

"I'll stay, you go," Harry offered.

"You're a much better fighter than I am," Ron insisted. "Go and help her! I'll be right there!"

Harry didn't need more encouragement. He ran to Hermione's side just as one of Malfoy's spells got past her blocking spell and felled her. The orange spell hit her in the chest, then hung oddly in the air for a moment as she fell, ending just as her head passed through its light, but Harry didn't have time to wonder about that.

"You worthless Mudblood," Malfoy said in Sinistra's voice. "You deserved that."

"And you deserve this," Harry snarled, sending a strong Expelliarmus at Sinistra, throwing her back to the parapet of the tower. Her head hit the wall with a loud crack, and Harry experienced a moment's panic, thinking he'd killed her. But she staggered to her feet, Malfoy's twisted sneer looking quite odd on Sinistra's usually serene face. She aimed her wand at Harry and cried, "*Avada Kedavra*," but Harry had already thrown up a shield in front of him and Hermione's still form. As the spell rebounded toward Sinistra, Harry dropped the shield and sent a spell to deflect the Killing Curse away from her. Sinistra's spell hit the parapet behind her, knocking a several large stones from the battlement and the floor beside it. Sinistra lost her balance and fell screaming off the tower toward the rocky lakeshore one hundred feet below. Harry ran to the parapet and sent a Summoning charm after her, but it was so dark, he couldn't see the falling body well enough to aim the spell properly. Harry leaped off the parapet, changing into a phoenix as he fell, and caught the woman's body a mere dozen feet before she would've hit the ground. Sinistra struggled in the bird's talons, sending curses and spells at it, fighting to be released and drop the rest of the way to the ground so she could run away. The phoenix dug its claws in more firmly and carried the struggling Sinistra back to the top of the tower.

Ginny arrived on her Firebolt, Gryffindor D.A. members in tow. "What's going on? What happened to Professor Sinistra?" she asked her brother, being careful not to draw attention to the phoenix she knew was Harry.

Ron was at Hermione's side. She was awake and on her feet, still a bit woozy but aware of what was going on. He wrapped a supportive arm around her and gazed into her eyes, praying she was attentive enough not to reveal Harry's secret to the rest of the D.A. The phoenix, as if understanding what Ron was thinking, dropped Sinistra with an unceremonious thud and took off toward Gryffindor Tower. Ron turned, while still holding Hermione, and shot a Stunning Spell, an Incarcerous and a Silencing Charm on Sinistra as soon as her body hit the Tower floor. "You scream like a girl, Malfoy," he said scornfully.

"Malfoy?" Neville asked, bending over to look at Sinistra.

"Was that Merlin?" Colin asked excitedly, pointing after the departing phoenix.

"Erm, yeah, that was Merlin, Harry's phoenix," Ron said uncomfortably, hoping Hermione was awake enough to stick to his story. "Harry called him to catch Malfoy – that's Malfoy Polyjuiced to look like Professor Sinistra. Malfoy fought him all the way back up." He looked around and saw that most of them seemed to be satisfied with his explanation. "Thanks for coming, you lot. Let's see. . .Neville, would you. . .oh, I need time to think. Hang on," he said, shaking his head as if trying to clear it. "What do we need to do first?" he asked Hermione, who was now holding onto his arm for support. She was looking around at the gathered D.A. members who stood, brooms and wands in hand, waiting for instructions, a startled expression on her face.

"What happened?" she asked uncertainly.

"I'll explain later," Ron replied, patting her shoulder comfortingly.

"We need to get Professor Sinistra to the hospital wing," Harry said briskly as he came out of her office. He'd changed from a phoenix to a raven as soon as he'd flown beneath the wall and out of everyone's sight, then flown into the professor's office window, where he found her unconscious, bound and gagged. He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably, doing his best to ignore the pain in his still-healing scars. "She wasn't just stunned. I can't get her to wake up." He seemed to notice the others for the first time. "Hey, guys, I'm glad you're here. We could do with your help. Ginny, could you look at the professor?"

"Of course," Ginny said, grabbing her medical kit off her broom. "Are any of you hurt?"

"Hermione took a bad hit," Harry said. "You'll need to check her too, but I can't wake the professor. I'm really worried about her."

"Neville," Ginny said, "You check Hermione's wounds and do what you can. And we'll need to check Harry and Ron too – they never admit it when they're hurt."

"We do, too," Harry protested, but mildly. As Ginny headed for the office, he looked at the Gryffindor D.A. members and said, "Thanks for coming. How did you know?"

"Colin saw the spell fire from the windows of his room. He came to our room looking for you and Ron. We helped him look for you, and when we saw Ginny waiting for you in the Common Room, he told her. She rounded everyone up and here we are," Neville said proudly as he took his medical kit off his broom and walked over to examine Hermione.

"Good work, Colin," Harry said, clapping the younger boy on the back. "Thanks."

"I'm glad I was having trouble getting to sleep!" Colin said excitedly.

"Me too," Harry replied with a grin.

Harry went to see how Ginny was doing with the professor. Ron helped Hermione to a seat by the castle wall so Neville could check her injuries, then went to confer with D.A. members about their prisoners and explain what had happened.

Harry stuck his head out of the office door and said, "Ron, send an Adfero to Madam Pomfrey and Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall. Tell them what happened and that we need to transport four people off this tower – and the tower needs to be repaired. Thanks." He ducked back into the office to try to help Ginny with Sinistra.

"Make that five, Ron" Neville said nervously. "Hermione just collapsed when I touched the injury on her head."

"'Mione!" Ron cried, falling to his knees beside her. "What's wrong?"

"Hurts. Dizzy. Don't know. . .what spell he used. . .odd colour. . .kind of orange, but pinker," Hermione mumbled, obviously in pain. She began gasping for breath.

"Neville? What's wrong with her?" Ron asked, appalled.

"I don't know," Neville replied, working on Hermione frantically. She was writhing in pain and beginning to turn blue.

"HARRY!" Ron screamed.

"What?" Harry said, racing out of the office and skidding to a stop by his friend.

"She's having trouble breathing. I don't know what to do," Ron said, distraught.

"Can you fly?" Harry said, looking into Ron's eyes seriously.

"You can fly. I can't fly," Ron said in confusion.

"Take Ginny's broom and get Hermione to the hospital wing right away," Harry explained, grabbing the Firebolt from where it leaned against the wall with the other D.A. members' brooms.

"Oh. Yeah, I can do that," he said, taking the Firebolt from Harry's hand.

"HARRY!" Ginny called from the office.

"What?" he said as he tried to help Ron arrange Hermione in front of him on the broom.

"Professor Sinistra – she's getting worse. I don't know what they did to her!" Ginny was rarely panicked, but seemed to be getting there now. D.A. members were talking in high, worried voices, not sure what they should be doing to help. It was getting very noisy on the tower.

"Everyone just STOP!" Harry said, spreading his hands out in a quelling gesture. They all stood looking at him. "OK. Ron, that's just not going to work." Hermione was writhing in pain. Her action would make it impossible to fly safely on a broom. "Neville, you and Dean bring Professor Sinistra out here. Lay her next to Hermione. Ron, did you send the Adferos?" Ron shook his head while struggling to calm Hermione, his eyes wide and fearful.

"I'll do it," Harry said. Silvery lights flew from his wand as he sent Adferos to Dumbledore, Pomfrey and McGonagall, telling them what happened, telling them he was bringing patients to the hospital wing and giving them a brief explanation of their condition, and that there were three prisoners on the Astronomy Tower under the guard of some D.A. members.

"Merlin! Help me!" he cried and his phoenix appeared in front of him in a bright flash of light. He looked around at his D.A. members. "All right, you lot. You're going to see something that you may or may not have seen on the battlefield. It is very important that this remain a *secret*. Do I have your solemn word?" He looked around and saw nods of agreement everywhere. "All right then. Here's what we're going to do."

In a few moments, half the D.A. members were standing on the Tower, guarding their prisoners, while the other half were part of a strange convoy. Professor Sinistra and Hermione were both bound to stretchers Harry had conjured. These stretchers were being carried by three phoenixes, Merlin, Harry and Fawkes, who had arrived with Dumbledore holding on to his tail. Dumbledore bound the prisoners more securely and conjured a temporary cell on top of the Tower, before grabbing a D.A. member's broom and following the convoy already on the way to the hospital wing.

Hermione was fighting her bonds, writing in pain, and very difficult to carry. Those on broomsticks would have been hard-pressed to manage her, so the two women's stretchers were bound together and ropes passed up to the three phoenixes, which bore the burden together. Ron, Ginny, Neville and the others flew beside and under the stretchers, trying to keep them steady so they weren't such a burden to the three birds and to prevent the patients from falling. The hospital wing's biggest window was wide open when they arrived, and they flew inside with no mishaps. Harry changed back into himself and helped Ron release their patients. As soon as both women were settled into beds, Harry stretched out on the floor, panting with tension and fatigue.

"Harry? Are you all right?" Ginny said in concern.

"Tired," he said. "That was hard work. There's no way we could've carried Hermione on a broom. She's moving too violently. It was all we could do to carry her, and phoenixes are very strong." He looked up at the two phoenixes who were sitting on top of the curtains around Hermione's bed, watching the activity below them with interest. "Thanks, guys," he said with a weary smile. He lay back on the stone floor, spread-eagled, still panting.

"I think you need some Pepper-Up Potion," Ginny said. "I'll ask Madam Pomfrey about it when she's done with them."

"K," Harry said, taking off his glasses and throwing his arm over his eyes as he rested. "How are they?"

"I can't tell. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore look very concerned about Hermione," Ginny replied.

"Did someone tell her about the orange spell?"

"Yes, Ron told her everything."

"Then all we can do is wait," he said, sounding exhausted. "I just need to rest. You go on and help Madam Pomfrey."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, baby, go on," he insisted.

Professor McGonagall soon arrived. "What happened?" she asked. "Why's Potter on the floor? Is he hurt too?"

"He says he's just tired," Neville replied.

Harry began moaning, his head rocking back and forth, his arms and legs moving restlessly.

"Harry?" Professor McGonagall said, stooping next to him, her face furrowed in concern. "Harry, wake up. Are you all right?"

He finally opened his eyes, looking blearily around him. "What? Professor?" He started to sit up, then grabbed his head, falling back to the floor with a thump.

"What's wrong?" McGonagall cried, frightened by his pallor.

"Scar. . ." he whimpered.

"Harry?" Ginny cried, dropping to her knees beside him.

"He says his scar hurts," McGonagall said.

"I'll bring some cool water. Hang on!" Ginny said, racing off to get a basin of water and a flannel. When she returned, she held the cool, damp flannel to his scar, which was so red it looked bloody.

Dumbledore came and knelt beside Professor McGonagall. "Let's move him to a bed where he'll be more comfortable," he said briskly. He levitated the moaning boy carefully onto a bed, then sent an Adfero to Remus. "His godfather should know he's here," he said in explanation.

"He's angry again," Harry murmured, his face screwed up in pain.

"Voldemort?" McGonagall said.

"Yeah. He just learned this plan didn't work. He's furious."

"Were you just asleep before, or are you injured?" Ginny asked.

"Asleep. I dreamed – he's torturing Lucius Malfoy because this plan didn't work either. They must have had someone observing the fight on the Tower, or else Malfoy was supposed to report in when he was done, I don't know which. Malfoy needs some Veritaserum so we can get to the bottom of this," Harry growled, beginning to regain his strength.

"Do you have any spell burns, injuries, anything like that?" Ginny insisted.

Harry looked at her, then at Professor McGonagall, his eyes furious. "Malfoy was beating the crap out of me when I was carrying him back up the tower," he said with quiet, angry intensity. "He threw in a few spells too, but spells don't affect phoenixes the same way they do humans. I don't know what spells he was trying to cast. I was too busy trying to fly and not drop his stupid bum on the ground, the great prat."

"You're beginning to sound like yourself again," Ginny said with a relieved smile. "You must be feeling better."

"Yeah," he replied, sitting up and shifting back so he was sitting up, leaning against his pillows. "A bit. Head still hurts. And my arms and chest are sore. And my back hurts. Those muscles haven't regained their strength yet, and I did a lot of flying tonight."

"Let me see," Ginny insisted, already opening his robes and unbuttoning his shirt as she pulled it out of the waistband of his trousers. His chest was covered with spell burns and livid bruises. "Oh, baby! How did you manage to fly in this condition?" she said, aghast.

"Dunno. It needed to be done," he said, looking down at his chest with surprise. "Huh. I didn't know that stupid git had it in him," he commented, then put his hands on his chest to start the healing process.

"Harry, are you all right? What happened?" Remus cried rushing to his godson's bedside.

"I'm OK, Remus. Don't worry."

"How can I not worry when I hear you're in the hospital wing again?" Remus said, shaking his head.

"I'm all right, really. It's Hermione who's hurt," Harry said, his eyes filled with worry. "Malfoy got her with some weird kind of spell."

"Oh, no," Remus said, looking toward her bed. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, Madam Pomfrey seems to have it well in hand," Harry assured him.

Remus seemed to deflate suddenly, sitting down and putting his face in his hands. When he'd heard Harry had been attacked on the Astronomy Tower, he'd panicked. He thought he'd seen

something fall from the tower when he glanced out of his window earlier, but it was just a glimpse of something scarlet and black fluttering in the moonlight, like the Gryffindors' black robes with their scarlet linings. He'd forced himself to be logical. There was no reason for a Gryffindor to be falling off the Tower. Their exams must have been finished quite a while ago, so the Tower should be empty. He'd kept trying to convince himself he had imagined what he saw, but his heart had stayed constricted in fear he'd tried vehemently to deny until he'd received Dumbledore's Adfero. Now Remus wrung his hands together, trying to calm his pounding heart. He'd raced all the way to the hospital wing, regretting again that no one but a house elf could Apparate on Hogwarts grounds. Harry was fine. Hermione would be fine, he was sure of it. *Calm down, it obviously wasn't Harry falling off of the Tower,* he scolded himself.

Meanwhile, Madam Pomfrey had her hands full trying to take care of Hermione and Professor Sinistra. She went to her fireplace and called St. Mungo's asking for help. Her brother soon stepped out of the fire, medical kit in hand.

"Now what?" he said in an exhausted voice. "I've been working all night as it is."

"I'm sorry, Marcus, but neither Albus nor I can't identify the spells that were used on these two," she said, indicating Hermione and Professor Sinistra. "Every so often, Miss Granger can't get her breath. Her head is injured, too. She remembers a spell that was orange with a pinkish cast to it, but she didn't hear the incantation. We don't know what happened to Professor Sinistra, but we can't wake her up."

Marcus bent to examine the two women. "We need to take them both to St. Mungo's for treatment," he said seriously. "There's a specialist in Dark spells there who will know what to do."

Arrangements were made to transport both of them immediately and soon the only patient left in the hospital wing was Harry, and he'd healed most of his wounds already. Madam Pomfrey gave him some potion to heal his other injuries and ease the pain from the abuse his still-healing back muscles had gone through from flying in his bird forms. Ron was bereft, his heart breaking that Hermione was in St. Mungo's and he hadn't been allowed to go with her.

"We'd like to hear the full story of what happened," Professor McGonagall said as Harry buttoned his shirt and obediently drank the potion Madam Pomfrey handed him. Dumbledore came to stand beside her and Remus.

"Harry, can you tell us what happened?" Dumbledore prompted.

Harry nodded. "There isn't much to tell, actually," he began. He explained what he knew, and Ron filled in the gaps.

"It was you!" Remus cried when Harry got to the part where he had to dive off the Tower to save Malfoy's life. "It *was* you! I was walking past my window and saw something black falling from the Tower and flashes of scarlet – all that just for a second. It looked like a Gryffindor's robes and I told myself, 'Harry can't be falling off the tower. His exams are finished and he's back in his dormitory.' But it was you, wasn't it?" Remus's face had drained of all colour and he had to sit down hard. "I could've done something. I saw it happen," he muttered, shaking his head disconsolately.

Harry reached out and squeezed his godfather's arm. "Remus, I'm fine. I did jump off the Tower, but as a phoenix – well, I turned into a phoenix partway down, I suppose. I changed while I was falling. I guess that would explain the black – my robes – and the scarlet – the phoenix. And you do know I'm quite fond of dives," he said with a cheeky grin. "It was kind of fun, except for the part where I caught Malfoy and saved his stupid neck, and then he fought me all the way back up."

Remus put his shaking hand over Harry's. "I knew something was wrong. I knew you were in danger. I sensed it. But I didn't act on it. I didn't send you an Adfero to find out where you were. . ."

"I'm fine," Harry insisted. "Don't blame yourself. I'm fine."

"Next time, I'll act on my instincts, OK?"

"Yeah. That'll be great," Harry agreed, smiling at his godfather. He turned back to Dumbledore. "I'd like to know how Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle managed to get out of Azkaban, onto the grounds and up in the tower, and with Polyjuice potion."

"As for the prison escape," Dumbledore said, "Voldemort, as you might expect, engineered it. He managed to blast a hole in one wall and free some of their comrades before the Aurors could stop them. The Aurors managed to stun or kill several of the prisoners trying to escape, but they were hesitant to kill students, so Draco and his friends made good their escape. As for how they got on the grounds, we will be using Veritaserum on Draco Malfoy soon, so we can get to the bottom of this. Azkaban has been secured again, and the binding spells that prevented the walls from being breeched have been reinforced with new spells. Since the Dementors joined Voldemort, he's learned every secret of the prison, so breaking people out was easy for him, even without eyes. Being blind doesn't make him powerless, unfortunately." Dumbledore looked very old and tired. "I'm so sorry this happened, Harry. You shouldn't have to be on your guard all the time within Hogwarts. It hasn't been a very safe haven for you this year, I'm afraid."

"It's not your fault," Harry replied kindly. "And as you have reminded me several times this year, it's not my fault either."

Dumbledore smiled briefly, then his face saddened. "I wish there was some other way than sending those boys back to Azkaban, but I simply can't take the risk of keeping them here. I considered keeping them in our dungeons and trying to turn them around, get them away from Voldemort's influence, but I shouldn't put the rest of the students at risk. So, I'll be sending them to Azkaban in the morning." He looked at Ron, whose face was like stone as he tried not to cry over Hermione being taken to St. Mungo's. "I will make arrangements for the three of you," he said, pointing to Ron, Harry and Ginny, "to go to St. Mungo's to visit Miss Granger in a little while. We need to give the healers time to work on her."

"Will she be all right?" Ron asked desperately.

"I believe so," Dumbledore said, his eyes filled with compassion. "It's very late. Why don't all of you go back to your dormitories and try to rest? I'll send for you as soon as I know something." He turned to the D.A. members standing quietly around the hospital wing. "I cannot tell you how proud I am of all of you," he said. "You saw an emergency and went to

deal with it right away. Well done! However, in the future, remember to notify some staff members as you're getting ready, so we can get there quickly as well, all right?" he added with a smile. Seeing their nods, he wished them good night and sent them off to bed.

A short time later, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Dean, Colin, Dennis and the other D.A. members who'd flown with them trudged into Gryffindor Tower, dragging their feet in exhaustion. They arrived to find the Common Room full of excited Gryffindors, who'd heard parts of the story from the group who'd stayed on the Tower with the prisoners. They wanted to hear more details. Ron and Harry looked at each other. Neither one felt like talking.

"Harry, tell us what happened!" several voices cried.

"It's late! We're tired. You've already heard everything, haven't you?" he replied in exasperation.

"Please?"

"Not tonight, all right? We're knackered," Harry said, pushing Ron toward the dormitory stairs.

"Where's Hermione?" someone asked suddenly.

Ron's shoulders began to shake as he fought his grief. Harry put his arm around him and led him upstairs, calling over his shoulder to Ginny, "Fill them in, OK? So there won't be more questions in the morning?" She nodded. "Thanks, sweetheart."

"I can't lose her now," Ron moaned as he sat on the edge of his bed. "I can't. I was beastly to her about revising so much. I was teasing her horribly the last few days, and griping. I haven't told her I love her in ages!" He looked at Harry, heartbroken sobs wracking his body. "I need to talk to her! She can't. . .she can't. . ."

"She's going to be fine, Ron," Harry said stoutly. "You'll see. She's tough. If she could survive that purple curse last year, she can certainly manage that wimpy little orange curse that Malfoy threw. Draco Malfoy!" He spat out the name. "He's not a powerful wizard. His spells are nothing. She'll be fine, you'll see." He grabbed Ron by both shoulders and shook him, none too gently. "Buck up. *She will be fine*. D'you hear me?"

Ron nodded mutely, tears still streaming down his face. He seemed to collapse in on himself, bent over by grief. Harry pulled him into his arms and let his friend cry himself out on his shoulder.

"We've been through too much of this stuff to let it get us down, mate," Harry assured him. "She'll be fine. You'll see." He wished with all the power within him that he was right.

Harry noticed Merlin sitting on top of his four-poster. "Merlin? Could you do me a favour, mate?" The bird flew down and sat next to him on Ron's bed. "Would you go to St. Mungo's and watch Hermione Granger? Come tell us how she's doing when you know something, all right?" With a flash of light, the bird was gone.

Ron sat up and looked at Harry, his eyes despairing and lost. "I don't know how Ginny's managed, all the times you've been so sick or hurt, when we didn't know if you'd pull through. I don't know how she does it. I just can't."

"She's a Weasley, mate. So are you. Weasleys are made of stronger stuff than most people, you know," Harry assured him.

"How do you know that?" Ron said, sniffling like a little boy.

Harry grabbed a handkerchief from Ron's wardrobe drawer and handed it to him. "I know because my best mate is a Weasley, and the girl I love is a Weasley, and a lot of my dearest friends are Weasleys. Top drawer, every one. Strong people. Stout hearts. Good souls." He was running out of platitudes, but at least he'd managed to distract Ron. "Loads of freckles. Red hair. Fly like maniacs." His over-the-top descriptions of the Weasley family had finally caught Ron's attention, both amusing and touching him.

"Thanks, mate," Ron said, wiping his eyes and blowing his nose.

"No problem. You know, Ginny has cried over me a lot – she doesn't let the rest of you see it. She has a soft heart inside that fiery spirit of hers. Just like you," Harry said, poking Ron playfully in the shoulder.

Ron smiled a bit, managing at last to get some control over his emotions. "I should have asked for some Dreamless Sleep potion," he said mournfully. "I won't sleep a wink tonight."

"Why don't you change into the collie? Maybe you'll feel better," Harry suggested.

"Could you do it for me? I don't have the energy to manage it," Ron said sadly.

"Absolutely," Harry replied. Seconds later, the beautiful sable collie sat by Harry, its ears drooping and its eyes sad. It rested its chin on Harry's shoulder for a moment. Harry wrapped his arms around the dog's neck, letting the dog lean on him for a while. "I've got to go to bed, mate," he said quietly after a few minutes. "I'm shattered. D'you want to sleep on the foot of my bed like Sirius used to?" The collie pulled its head off of Harry's shoulder and looked at him hopefully. "Well, come on, then." He got up and moved to his own bed, stripping to his boxers and climbing in as quickly as possible, too tired to dig out his pyjamas. The collie turned round and round and round for a while before flumping down on the bed. "G'nite, mate," Harry whispered. The collie whined in reply.

Neville and Dean saw the collie on Harry's bed and asked no questions when they came to bed a short time later. They each patted the dog on the head quietly, trying to let Harry sleep.

"Sorry, mate," Dean said, scratching the collie behind the ears, then going to bed.

"She'll be fine, you'll see," Neville said, patting the dog nervously on the head. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more for her." The collie raised its head and licked Neville's face, making him giggle. "That's kind of gross, since it's you, but I guess you're saying it's OK, right?" The collie blinked, which was good enough for Neville. He was relieved. He had been afraid he'd be blamed for Hermione's condition, but there really wasn't anything he knew how to do for her. He appreciated Ron's forgiveness. "Thanks. Good night."

Hours later, Harry was awakened by a solid thump next to his pillow. He woke with a start, reaching for his glasses, but there was something big, soft and feathery in the way. "Merlin?" A soft croon answered him. "How is she?" More crooning, which was accompanied by the dog's whines. "Ron – Merlin says she's better. She woke up a little while ago," Harry said, joy in his voice. The dog began bounding around on the bed, until a highly put-out Merlin retreated to his perch. The collie's celebration was making Harry ache all over. "Ron! Ron, please stop! That hurts!" The collie was instantly still. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot I was the one who changed you. Hang on – you do want to change back, don't you?" The collie blinked. "OK then." Instantly, the gangly redhead was sitting on the foot of Harry's bed.

"She's better? He really said that?"

"Yes, he said that. I wouldn't lie to you about that kind of thing," Harry said, looking a bit aggrieved. "Please don't bounce! I'm still sore."

"Sorry, mate!" Ron said, getting off the bed. "Sorry, Merlin! Thanks for bringing the news! I didn't mean to bounce you off the bed."

Merlin merely ruffled his feathers and raised his head imperiously, showing Ron that he was being deliberately ignored. Ron climbed into his own bed feeling as though there might be some hope in his life after all.

"I'm telling you, he's a fan after the battles," Harry told Ron as they walked down the street of Hogsmeade the next day. "I'll bet he gives you a discount."

"I really hope so. I wish I hadn't bought so many chocolate frogs on our last trip here. I just don't have that much money," Ron worried. They entered the jewellery shop, Harry confidently and Ron hanging back nervously.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Weasley! How nice to see you both," Mr. Joyero said. "What can I do for you today?"

"My girlfriend loves her ring, and Ron wants to see something similar for his girlfriend," Harry replied, prodding his friend closer to the counter.

"A promise ring, Mr. Weasley?"

"I'm not sure," Ron said nervously.

Harry said, "Excuse us a moment, please?" and pulled Ron back toward the door. "You don't want to give a promise ring unless you're certain you want to promise what it implies. I thought that's what you wanted."

"I thought so too, but now that it comes to it, I'm not so sure," Ron said, looking a bit green.

"Then don't rush into anything. Get her something else, not a ring," Harry advised him calmly. Ron nodded and began looking a bit better.

As they approached the counter again, Harry suggested, "What about another charm for her bracelet? Or just some flowers?" He looked at the jeweller and explained, "She's not feeling well."

"Ah, I see," said the jeweller. "I remember the charm bracelet you purchased for her. Did she like it?"

"Yeah, she liked it a lot," Ron said, finally beginning to relax somewhat. He had been so convinced he wanted to buy her a promise ring, but now that they were in front of him, he wasn't so confident. It would kill him if she rejected it. *Better to give her something without quite so much of a commitment behind it until we're both ready, right?* he told himself.

"So, another charm for the bracelet? Or perhaps some nice earrings? You purchased a pendant for her for Valentine's Day, didn't you?" the jeweller offered, seeing Ron's discomfort and indecision.

Ron nodded. "What's left other than rings?" he said miserably.

"Let's see some earrings," Harry suggested. The jeweller pulled out a tray full of gorgeous earrings, some in silver, some in gold, some in both metals. Some had beautiful gemstones inlaid in them. Others were lacy confections of metal.

Ron looked overwhelmed. "I just don't know," he said. He reached out and gingerly touched a pair of earrings, each of which was a lovely heart shape made of swirls of filigree silver. A small sapphire gleamed a rich, deep blue amidst the swirls of metal. "Those are pretty," he said quietly. "What kind of stone is that?"

"Those are sapphires," the jeweller. "The birthstone for September."

"Hermione's birthday is in September," Ron mused, pushing the earrings this way and that watching the metal and stone catch the light. Ron gulped, mentally counting his money. "How much?"

The jeweller looked at Ron and sighed. Here was the commander of Dumbledore's Army, worried about having enough money to buy his girlfriend a bauble. "One galleon, three knuts," the man said, hoping his wife wouldn't hex him for giving another hefty discount to these boys.

Ron's face lit up. He had the money and twelve sickles left over! He could afford these earrings! "I'll take them!" he said with a grin.

"Would you like any charms on them?" Mr. Joyero asked carefully.

"Oh. How much?" Ron asked, nervous again.

"Five sickles," the man said, giving Ron yet another huge discount. The ecstatic look on Ron's face was all the reward the jeweller could ask for. Soon, the deal was done, the earrings charmed with good health charms and beautifully boxed and wrapped. Two very happy young men waved merrily at the merchant as they left his shop.

"Did you give those boys a huge price cut again?" his wife snapped as she entered the shop from the workroom in the back.

"Did you see his face? He's the commander of Dumbledore's Army. The girl he's buying it for is his second-in-command as well as his girlfriend. They deserve a reward for all they've done. I'm glad I was able to help him out," Joyero said, still smiling at the memory of Ron's glowing face as he paid for the jewellery and still had a little bit of money left over.

Ron and Harry were still standing outside the shop. Ron had opened the box to admire the earrings in the light. "They're beautiful, aren't they?" he said.

"Yeah, she's going to love them," Harry replied with a grin. "You'll get a BIG kiss for that present!"

The jeweller's wife saw the boys talking, and the light in their faces. She also saw the battle scars still vivid on Harry's face in the bright sunlight. "You did the right thing," she said slowly, sliding her arm around his waist. "I'm proud of you."

"Those young people are fighting a war none of us should have to fight," he said seriously as he pulled her close. "They're protecting us, our children, our way of life, not just themselves. We should do whatever we can to help them out. This was something I could do to help them. I'm glad you understand."

"C'mon, Harry, let's go," Ron said urgently, racing out of the dormitory. He, Harry and Ginny were going to meet Remus in the corridor by the Fat Lady's portrait and use a Portkey to go and visit Hermione in St. Mungo's.

"Coming!" Harry said, tucking in his shirt tail as he ran to catch up with Ron. Ron had been in a tizzy ever since breakfast, when Remus had told them they could leave after lunch to visit Hermione. Ron had got ready right away, and spent the remainder of the morning pacing and driving Harry and Ginny round the bend with questions about the time, about how he looked, about everything he could think of. At one point, Harry had threatened to turn him into a hedgehog if he didn't relax a bit, but the threat had no effect. Hermione had been in the hospital for two days. The first day, she and Professor Sinistra had both been in critical condition, but now they were both improving.

"Everyone ready?" Remus asked as the three teenagers gathered closely around him. They nodded, making sure they were each touching the old tin cup that was their Portkey.

After the familiar jerk behind his navel, Harry closed his eyes to avoid seeing the spinning colours that accompanied travel by Portkey. He managed to land on his feet, just stumbling a bit when Ron fell into him, but he had to catch Ginny, who Ron knocked over completely.

"This way," Remus said, leading them down a hallway. They turned into a room halfway down the hall and saw Professor Sinistra in the first bed. Hermione was in the bed closest to the window, her parents sitting by her bedside. She appeared to be asleep.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm much better now. I'm so sorry about what happened. I can't thank you enough for rescuing me, Mr. Potter," she said with a rare smile.

"It wasn't just me," he said modestly. "There were a lot of us involved. I'm glad you're OK." He followed Ron and Ginny to Hermione's bed. Remus stayed behind to talk to Professor Sinistra. He thought too many visitors at once might tire Hermione out.

"Hello, Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger," Ron said respectfully. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected," Mrs. Granger said, obviously quite upset. "What in the world is going on at that school? How did this happen?"

"Erm. . ." Ron began, then looked to Harry for help. He just wanted to sit and hold Hermione's hand, maybe kiss her when she woke up if she was up to it. He didn't want to have to explain the war going on in the wizarding world to his girlfriend's Muggle parents.

"I'll do my best to explain things to you, if you want me to," Harry offered. "Perhaps we should go to the lounge at the end of the hallway so we don't disturb Hermione and Professor Sinistra?"

"What happened to you?" Mrs. Granger asked suddenly, staring at the livid scars on Harry's face.

"Erm. . .long story," he replied, blushing and dropping his eyes. He did his best not to look in any mirrors these days. He thought he looked like a monster with so many scars all over his face and body, but his friends insisted he looked fine. He knew the scars would heal eventually, and he was grateful people at school didn't stare at him anymore, but the Grangers, of course, were shocked by his appearance. He took a deep breath and blew it out to calm himself. Ginny squeezed his hand supportively, knowing what he was going through.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have. . .I don't know what I was thinking," Mrs. Granger said, upset that she'd embarrassed her daughter's friend.

"It's OK. I know I look pretty gross," he said with a shrug.

"Do not!" Ginny said stoutly. Harry looked at her, a smile tickling his mouth, but said nothing.

"How is she?" Harry asked kindly.

The Grangers looked sadly at their daughter. "She's not asleep, she's unconscious. She woke up once not long after she got here, then lost consciousness again and hasn't come round since," Mr. Granger said despondently.

"What do the healers say?" Ginny asked.

"They said we just have to wait and see," Mr. Granger replied. They had one child, just one, and she'd turned out to be a witch. OK, they could cope with that, but she kept being involved in odd accidents, so it seemed, and she'd managed to avoid telling them much about these incidents so far, to keep them from worrying about her. This time, she'd been seriously enough injured that they'd been called to the hospital. The Grangers hadn't left her side for

more than a few minutes since they'd arrived. They were confused and more than a little angry that such things went on in a *school*, of all places! They sighed, looked at each other, and stood together. "All right, Harry. Let's go to the lounge. I'd like that explanation," Mr. Granger said.

As they left, Harry touched Remus on the shoulder. "Would you mind coming with us? I could do with some help," he murmured. Remus told Professor Sinistra he'd see her later and followed Harry, Ginny and the Grangers down the hall to an enclosed lounge with couches, vending machines and ancient magazines and newspapers. The room smelled of fear and sorrow and joy and relief, from all the people who'd sat there waiting for news about their loved ones.

"Would you like some coffee?" Harry asked kindly, heading for the flask on a table with baskets full of cream and sugar. At their nods, he poured coffee for each of the Grangers and served it to them, offering them cream and sugar. Any delaying tactics he could think of were welcome distractions, but he finally ran out of options and had to sit down and talk to them.

"You wanted to know how this happened. It would be helpful to know what you know about the things going on in the wizarding world right now," he began, sitting across from them and rubbing his hands together to relax himself.

"We know there's a monster named Voldy-something who has started some kind of terrorist attacks on people. We don't know why he's doing this, nor why Hogwarts is involved," Mr. Granger began.

"Or why *Hermione* was involved!" Mrs. Granger added, sounding rather desperate.

"Um. . .what exactly has Hermione told you about me?" Harry asked nervously.

"That you're a sweet boy, a good friend, a very powerful wizard. . .what else, dear?" Mrs. Granger said, looking at her husband.

"That you're the best Seeker Hogwarts has seen in a century – whatever a Seeker is. Something to do with sports?" Mr. Granger offered.

"Yes. Has she ever told you about how I got this scar?" he said, pointing to the one on his forehead, since he still had others on his face.

The Grangers looked at each other. They'd always made an effort to not look at his scar. "Um. . .we've never asked her. We thought you probably got hurt when you were little," Mrs. Granger said, spreading her hands and shrugging.

"Oh no. This is going to take longer than I thought," Harry said. "Um. . .Remus?" he began, then turned back to the Grangers. "Oh, have you met my godfather?" They shook their heads. "I'm sorry. This is Remus Lupin. He's our professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts." The adults shook hands. "And you know Ron's sister, Ginny Weasley, right?" Harry said. The Grangers nodded at her.

"Harry, it feels as if you're killing time," Mr. Granger observed wisely. "Why don't you just tell us the story from the beginning so we'll understand how our daughter became involved in this, and how she was hurt."

"Yeah, you caught me out. I was killing time. I can't believe Hermione told you so little about me," he said ruefully. "When we first met, she knew more about me than I did."

"Wait a minute," Mr. Granger said. "You're not that little boy who defeated a great Dark wizard, are you?"

"Yeah, that's me," Harry said. "So you have heard some of it, then?"

"I thought that was a folk tale," Mrs. Granger said. "How could you defeat a grown wizard when you were little? How old were you?"

"Just over a year old. And nobody knows exactly how I defeated him. It was Voldemort. You said you'd heard of him." They nodded. "He sent a Killing Curse at me and it rebounded on him. It destroyed his body, but part of him continued to live. He inhabited various people and animals to stay alive until he could generate a new body a couple of years ago. A prophecy made before I was born said I would be the one who would defeat him, so he's been trying to kill me all my life."

"Is that what that prophecy said?" Ginny asked in surprise. "You never told anyone."

"I told Ron not too long ago. It's not the kind of thing I really want to talk about," Harry said, hanging his head.

"Tell us, Harry," Ginny said. "You may as well. The Grangers need to know everything."

He looked at her, studying her eyes deeply. "Everything?"

"Everything," the Grangers said together.

Harry sighed, pushing his glasses up and rubbing his eyes with both hands before looking at the Grangers, Ginny and Remus again. "It's not pretty," he told the Grangers. "It's pretty ugly, actually."

"Just get on with it. We want to get back to Hermione," Mrs. Granger urged.

"But we also want to know everything. Don't leave anything out, Harry. We need to know," said Mr. Granger.

"OK. The prophecy said that I would be born and be the only one who could defeat him. I have to kill him, or he has to kill me. There's no way around that."

"You have to kill somebody?" Mrs. Granger said, aghast.

"Do you really want to know everything?" Remus asked her warningly. "Because if you do, Harry is going to have to go through all kinds of torment remembering a lot of awful things."

"They deserve to know, Remus, but thanks anyway," Harry said, resigning himself to what he had to do. "Killing Voldemort won't be the first time for me. I've been fighting him for years. In the last year, it became a full-fledged war. I've fought in several battles and killed people. Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Remus have all fought too, although Remus is the only one of them who's killed anyone." He turned to Remus and Ginny. "I think I'm right in that, aren't I? Ron and Hermione directed the battle, and Hermione wasn't in the battle in France, and you were a Healer in the latest battle, Ginny."

"It wasn't for lack of trying that I didn't kill anyone," Ginny said fiercely. "I'm just not as powerful as Harry, and he won't let the rest of us learn the Killing Curse and other fatal curses."

"I'm the one who has to kill – I don't see any reason for the rest of you to have to do that. It's not easy to live with," Harry said in a low voice, his face like stone. "And it doesn't take a Killing Curse to kill someone. The first person I killed deliberately died from a simple Expelliarmus spell – she just fell back and hit her head." He hoped he wouldn't have to explain that, as an eleven-year-old child, he'd accidentally killed Professor Quirrel. The rest of his story was bad enough without admitting he'd killed someone when he was still a little kid.

"You killed a WOMAN?" Mr. Granger said in horror, looking at Harry as if he was some kind of monster.

Harry did his best to control his emotions. "She killed my godfather," he replied stoically. "Remus only recently became my godfather. She tortured Neville Longbottom's parents into insanity. They've been in St. Mungo's mental ward for most of Neville's life. They don't recognize their son. The woman I killed has sent people after me to kill me numerous times this year. She even spelled Hermione to try to kill me, and that one almost succeeded, because I trust Hermione so much."

"She . . . What did she do to Hermione?" Mrs. Granger was horror-struck.

"She put Hermione under a spell that made her do things she didn't want to do, including putting poisoned capsules in my skin," Harry snarled, angered by the memory.

"What happened to Hermione?" Mrs. Granger said.

"We removed the spell from her. She was fine after that," Harry said with a shrug.

"How did you survive the poison?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Magic," Harry replied shortly. Then he shook his head, fighting to get past his anger and do the right thing for his friend's parents. "Hermione is my best friend. She's a sister to me. I truly love her that way. I'm sorry to get angry while trying to explain this stuff, but it's *hard* for me. I hope you can understand. I'm as upset about her being hurt as anyone." He sighed. "All right. Here's the story from the beginning. Just let me tell it and then you can ask questions at the end, OK?" They nodded mutely. And so Harry began telling the story of his life, how his parents had been murdered, how Voldemort had tried to kill him, his shock at learning he was a wizard, his meeting Ron and Hermione and becoming friends with them, Hermione telling him a lot about the story of his life, since she'd read up on him and he didn't know anything about himself. He told about the troll they'd encountered in their first year at Hogwarts, and

how clever Hermione had been in the potions part of the path to the Philosopher's Stone. He hit every important point of every story, making sure to emphasize how wonderful Hermione was as a friend and a witch, and that he'd tried to keep her out of harm's way but she just insisted on being part of every adventure. When he got to the battle on the Astronomy Tower and told how Malfoy had sent a Killing Curse at her after hitting her with the orange curse, her parents shocked faces dissolved into tears.

"That one didn't hit her, though. I shielded the two of us, so it rebounded on Malfoy. I had to send a blocking spell to deflect it so it wouldn't kill him." Harry went on doggedly, telling how phoenixes had carried the stretchers to the hospital and about Healer Pomfrey saying both patients needed the specialist at St. Mungo's. "And that's everything. Now, if you have questions, I'll answer them the best I can." He was exhausted. Telling the story had taken a long time, and he'd had to relive a lot of horrible old memories. He hadn't even noticed when Ginny had stood behind him, put her arms around him and rested her head on the back of his neck, trying to comfort him, or when Remus had taken hold of his arm to let him know he wasn't alone. He hadn't noticed it then. But he noticed now. He turned his agonized face to Remus, then Ginny, forced a small smile on his face and whispered, "Thanks."

"If you have questions, I'll do my best to answer them," Remus offered. "I think Harry's been through enough. He's been very open with you, which we all feel you deserve, but it's very hard for him to relive these things, as I'm sure you can understand."

"The only question I can think of is why? Why do people follow this awful man? Why hasn't he been captured and put in jail? Why haven't any adult wizards captured or killed him?" Mrs. Granger said, her face distraught.

"The answer to all of those questions is, Voldemort is the most powerful Dark wizard the world has seen for a century or more, possibly longer," Remus explained. "Albus Dumbledore is the most powerful wizard in the world today, but he's getting older, and it's not his destiny to deal with Voldemort – it's Harry's, for some reason. Harry is already – close your ears or you'll get a big head, Harry," he said with a teasing grin, hoping to make the boy smile at least a little, and Harry didn't disappoint him. A small sad smile crossed his face as Remus went on. "Harry's already the most powerful wizard Hogwarts has seen since Voldemort came to the school over fifty years ago."

He paused, seeing the Grangers still didn't understand. "Being a powerful wizard isn't just a matter of knowing the most spells. If that was the case, Hermione would be the most powerful witch in the country, I imagine – and she's very nearly there, anyway," he said with a smile. "She's brilliant and knows more charms and spells than most adult wizards. But magical power, like any other talent, is an inborn thing in many ways. Hermione is a very powerful witch and quite brilliant. She wasn't born to be a fighter. I suspect she will be a teacher at some point, or a researcher. She will be wonderful at whatever she chooses to do, and whatever she does will benefit a lot of people, I'm sure. Ginny, here, is a very powerful witch, too, but she's powerful in other ways than Hermione is. Ginny plans to be a healer – like a doctor, you know – and her talents lean that way. She's spirited and brave, an absolutely brilliant fighter when she has to be, but she wasn't born to be a fighter, she was born to be a healer, I think.

"Harry was born to defeat Voldemort, apparently. It's not a fate his parents would have chosen for him. They were my best friends, James and Lily, and they were both powerful wizards.

But when Harry was born, somehow they knew. I don't know if they heard about the prophecy or just realized how powerful Harry was. Even as a little baby, his magic was amazingly strong. They did everything they could to protect him. They went into hiding. They put protective spells on Harry. They gave their lives trying to save him. This young man has been through more hell in his sixteen years than most adults will see in their entire lives. And he has more to face.

"Most people would collapse under the burdens he bears. He just gets stronger and stronger. One of his great strengths is his friends. Ron, Hermione and Ginny all contribute something important to Harry's life. They often save him from harm, and they're always there to help him recover when he's hurt. These four young people make a powerful team. Harry needs a team to help him defeat the Dark forces of the world.

"I'd follow Harry anywhere he led me, and he's less than half my age. If just anyone could capture Voldemort, it would have been done long ago. If just anyone could kill him, it would have been done long ago. But not 'just anyone' can do it. Harry, young as he is, bears the burden of having to rid the world of this monster. I wish I could do it for him. But I can't, so I'll just stand beside him and fight the very best I can to help him. That's what Hermione was doing when she got hurt." Remus seemed to run down then.

A sad smile crossed Harry's face. "You didn't say what you think I'll be when I grow up – if I live that long."

"You'll be the finest Seeker any Quidditch team has ever seen," Remus said immediately. "And when you're tired of playing Quidditch, you'll either coach it or you'll become an Auror, I suspect. You'd also be an excellent teacher. You've done wonders with the D.A."

"Quidditch coach, huh?" Harry mused. "I hadn't thought of that one. Sounds like a lot more fun than chasing Voldemort all over the world. And Ron? What do you see him doing?"

"I think. . .he's so brilliant at strategies and so on, I honestly think he'll be the head of some big corporation – or Minister of Magic," Remus said with a grin.

Harry laughed out loud. "You'll have to tell him that. He'll get a kick out of it." Glad to find something to smile about, Harry turned back to the Grangers. "I'm sorry the story is so awful, but you asked for 'everything' and that's what we've given you. Actually, we left out some details here and there. I could tell you about my awful aunt, uncle and cousin, or about some of the monsters Hagrid thinks are cute, but they didn't seem to be a necessary part of the story."

The Grangers smiled timorously, unsure what to think. This handsome young man with his fading scars and his livid lightning bolt scar was a killer. He'd killed a lot of people – he had no idea how many, so he'd said, but he thought it was probably well over a dozen by now. Yet those killings were in self-defence in time of war, so it was OK, wasn't it? And Hermione! What had she got herself into, becoming friends with these people? Still, if you were in a war, having powerful friends on your side was a good thing, right? They glanced at each other, not certain what to say or do next.

"Um," Mr. Granger began, then had to stop and clear his throat. "Er. . .why are children fighting the war? Where are the soldiers? The armies?"

"Wizards don't have soldiers or armies as such," Remus explained. "The Ministry of Magic has Aurors, who are similar to policemen, I guess you would say, or spies, depending on their jobs. But there was a problem at the Ministry and they didn't get Aurors sent out in time to help at the battles. This event on the Tower the other night was over with so fast, not even the Hogwarts staff or the D.A. members who saw it happening got there in time to help with the fighting." He looked at his watch, then at his godson and Ginny. "Why don't we see how Hermione is? I know you two wanted to visit her for a while before we go back. We don't want to tire her," he added to the Grangers, "so we won't stay long. That is, if you don't mind us visiting her."

The Grangers were quiet for a long moment. They looked from face to face among the three wizards gazing at them. Harry looked exhausted and heartsick, yet hopeful that they would understand his story. Ginny looked worried about Harry more than anything, and wore an expression that said she'd attack anyone who gave him a hard time. Spirited indeed. Remus looked tired, but also had a look that said, "Be unkind to this boy at your own risk." If so many people were so devoted to this young man, and they knew Hermione was very fond of him as well, he must be just as wonderful a person as Hermione always said he was.

"I'm sure she'd like to see all of you," Mrs. Granger said finally. "Please, enjoy your visit." She looked at Harry, who still looked worn out. She reached out and touched his hand gently. "Harry? Thank you. I know that must have been hard for you. I don't understand completely why Hermione was injured, but I do know she didn't do anything to cause it, nor did you or anyone except that Malfoy boy and that Volde-whosit. I hope the Malfoy boy has been arrested."

"He has," Remus assured him.

"Good. Then enjoy your visit. And try to keep us better informed about what's going on at Hogwarts, all right?" she added to Remus.

"We'll send you an owl whenever there's news to share," he promised.

When they returned to the room, they found Ron in tears.

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, rushing to her brother's side. Harry stood on his other side and patted his shoulder, while looking down at Hermione, who was still unconscious.

"She's. . .she didn't know me," he said brusquely.

"What?" Ginny said.

"She didn't know me. She woke up for a short time a while ago and she didn't know who I was."

Chapter 37 – Rooms of Requirement

"She didn't know you?" Ginny repeated, stunned.

"*No!*" Ron sobbed, turning and burying his face in his sister's shoulder.

Harry rubbed Ron's back, not knowing what else to do. "It will be all right, mate. It's probably a temporary thing. She did have a head wound, after all."

Ron sat back and looked at Harry. "You think?"

"Yeah. She'll be fine soon," Harry assured him.

"Would you look at her?" Ron asked Harry, his eyes wide and anxious.

Harry looked up at the Grangers, who didn't seem to know what to think about what was going on. "Um. . ."

"Harry, please!" Ron begged.

"OK, if her parents agree," Harry said quietly. He looked up at the Grangers. "Remus told you I'm a powerful wizard. One of my skills is healing. I'm not a trained healer, but I have a talent for healing some kinds of injuries. Would you mind if I tried working on her?"

"Will it hurt her?"

"No. What happens is, I can sense a 'wrongness' where there's an injury, and sometimes I can heal it, or at least make it better. There are no potions involved, and nothing invasive, just me laying my hands on her and concentrating my magic inside her. Maybe I can do something to help her this way," he said modestly.

"You can heal people?" Mrs. Granger said in shock.

"Sometimes."

"Then why didn't you heal her right away?"

"I didn't know what was wrong with her, and our nurse was right beside us, and . . ." he ended lamely.

"Harry was injured, too," Ginny snapped indignantly, defending him. "He collapsed on the floor! The nurse and healer were both busy with Hermione and Professor Sinistra, and Harry had to heal himself! By the time he'd done that, the healer from St. Mungo's was already making arrangements to move them here."

"Oh," Mrs. Granger said in a small voice, intimidated by the fiery redhead's flash of temper. "OK."

"I'm sorry I yelled," Ginny said more quietly. "I know you're worried about her. I am too. She's my best friend."

"I know she is, dear," Mrs. Granger said with a small smile.

"So may I?" Harry asked again.

"Yes, please. If you can do something to help her, we'd appreciate it," Mr. Granger said. He and his wife held on to each other nervously as they watched the young man work.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and tenderly smoothed Hermione's curls away from her face. "Hi, Hermione. It's Harry. How are you?" he said quietly. "I've missed you. We all have. We've finished school now, and we're having a good time just hanging around, wading in the lake, feeding the squid, lying in the sun. It's great. You should be there with us." As he spoke of inconsequential things, his hands moved over her face, head, neck and torso. Finally, he put his hands on either side of her head and began rubbing her temples with his thumbs, still chatting away as if they were sitting at lunch in the Great Hall. "Ron misses you terribly. He has a present for you. You really should see it, it's beautiful. He spent a lot of time looking for it. I think you'll like it, but you have to wake up now and talk to him or he won't give it to you." His hands were sensing something resembling clouds inside her head, dark and stormy with pink and orange edges here and there. He was doing what he could to dissipate those clouds so Hermione's own clear, shining mind could break free. "Ginny's here, too. She's missed you a lot. She's had to have her girl talks with me since you've been gone, think of that! I had to listen to her prattle on about Parvati's new robes that she got for her birthday." He chuckled and winked at Ginny, who smiled back at him. "I didn't mind listening, mind you, but I couldn't give her the kind of opinion she was looking for – the kind you'd give her. And she tried doing her hair a different way this morning. I like it down so I can play with it, but she likes trying different things, and I think they're all pretty. She wanted your opinion, but you weren't there." He'd run out of chatter and decided to say something that might bother her enough to wake her up and get her back to normal, much as Ron had done when Harry was sick and Ron said he was taking Harry's Firebolt out to play Quidditch if Harry didn't wake up. All the while, Harry rubbed her temples with his thumbs. "C'mon, Hermione, wake up! We're all going to fail our exams if you don't wake up and help us study!" She lay quiet, still and unresponsive.

Harry glanced up at his friends and shrugged. "It was worth a try." They nodded sadly.

He continued to concentrate on the cloudiness in her mind, working in silence for a while. "There," he said suddenly, a small smile crossing his face.

"What?" Ron said hopefully.

"The clouds in her mind have finally thinned a bit," Harry said with satisfaction. He sat back and shook out his hands, then pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes tiredly before putting his hands back on either side of Hermione's head. What he was doing took a lot of his energy. "It's time to wake up now, Hermione," he said in a firm voice. "You can do it. Wake up!" With a small gasp, Hermione woke up.

"What? Where?" she whispered, her eyes darting around frantically.

"Hi, Hermione! Welcome back!" Harry said with a huge grin. "Your parents are here. Ron and Ginny and Remus are here too. How are you feeling?"

"Huh? Who?" She looked at all the loving faces around her, recognizing her parents. "Hi, Mum. What happened to me?"

"You were in an accident," her mother said quickly, not knowing what else to say. "You're going to be fine."

"Hi, Dad," she said, reaching out to her father. She looked back up at Harry, studying his face with fierce concentration. "I know you."

"Of course you do! We're best friends!" he said, hoping her memory was coming back.

"You're. . .the Boy Who Lived. I've read all about you!" she said with a smile. "You're Harry Potter!"

"Yeah. And we've known each other for years now. Do you remember?"

"I've always loved you, you know, ever since I first read about you," she said, blushing a little.

"OK, that's enough of that," he said uncomfortably. "Ron's here," he added, moving off of her bed so she could see Ron, who sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Who? Who are you?" she said, looking at Ron closely. "What's wrong with you? You've been crying."

"Don't you remember me?" Ron said, his face showing how hurt he was. "You're my girlfriend. We've been friends for years and years, and this term we've been going out together." He leaned closer to her, one finger gently touching the curls splayed across her pillow, and whispered. "We love each other. Don't you remember?"

"No," she said in a small, scared voice. "I remember him," she said, pointing at Harry. "I remember kissing him. In an empty classroom."

"Oh no," Harry groaned. "She's remembering when she was under Bellatrix's spell."

"She kissed you?" her mother said.

"That was the time she put poison under my skin. I told you about that," Harry explained patiently.

"Poison? Why would I poison you? I love you!" Hermione said, her eyes going quickly from alarmed at being told she'd tried to poison him, to dreamy and love-sick as she gazed at Harry.

Harry looked at Remus. "What do we do now?"

"I'll go and get that healer who specializes in undoing Dark magic. He may be able to help her more now that she's awake," Remus said. He patted Ron on the shoulder and leaned down to whisper, "She'll be all right soon. Don't let this bother you, OK?" in his ear before leaving. Ron nodded, his face still heartbroken.

"Harry, I know you love me," Hermione said, her eyes bright.

"Erm. . .I love you as a friend – as a sister, even. But Ginny's my girlfriend," he said, lifting his arm to pull Ginny close to him, keeping her wrapped tightly in his one-armed embrace. "You know that. She and I have been together nearly all term."

"Well, longer, if you count the time we were pretending to be going out to keep the fan girls away from you," Ginny added, looking up at Harry with eyes full of love.

Harry reached up with his left hand to tuck a strand of Ginny's hair behind her ear. His ring caught the light. Seeing this, Hermione's eyes flew to Ginny's left hand, the thumb of which was tucked into Harry's front belt loop, her arm around his slim waist. She moved a bit, and her ring sparkled. Hermione's eyes widened in horror. "Your rings. . .are you married?"

Harry smiled and blushed. He glanced at Hermione, but then he looked down at Ginny, his love for her showing plainly in his face. "No, not yet. These are promise rings."

"Promise rings?" Hermione said, her face confused.

"They mean. . . ," Harry began, gazing into Ginny's eyes and saying what had never been said aloud before, "they mean we're engaged to be engaged." He blushed again as he said this, but smiled delightedly at Ginny, who was beaming up at him.

Hermione burst into tears. "NOOOO! You love me! I'm sure you do! I love you, Harry! How can you do this to me?"

He sighed and looked at his best friend seriously. "You were put under a spell by Bellatrix Lestrange that made you break up with Ron and try to seduce me." He glanced up guiltily at her parents as soon as he said this, his cheeks flaming red with embarrassment. His eyes roved to Ron's, taking in his heartbroken expression, then quickly back to Hermione's confused face. "You were kissing me and scratching me, remember? You put poison capsules in my skin that made me sick. It was a spell. Dumbledore and I had to break you free of it." He looked at Ron as he realized what needed to be done. "That's it. We need Dumbledore here so we can fix this again."

"But it was fixed before and she's right back there again, in the middle of that spell!" Ron cried. "How can that be?"

The healer arrived just as Ron said this. "From what Professor Lupin just told me, she's showing signs of a Dark spell she was under earlier this year, yes?" Harry nodded. "And the spell that hit her the other night was orange with a tint of pink, I was told?" Harry nodded again. "All right. What we have here is a spell cast by an inept wizard."

"Malfoy," Harry snarled.

"The spell should have been pure orange. The tint of pink showed the spell was inexpertly cast. As such, the spell he cast could very well have re-started a spell she was under before."

"Professor Dumbledore and I took a spell off her months ago," Harry insisted.

"What kind of spell was it?" Bradford asked.

"A love spell," Harry replied promptly.

"Some part of it must have been lying dormant within her. It's helpful to know what kind of spell that was. We took care of her recent spell damage as well as we could with her being unconscious. With this new information, it will be a simple matter to cure her." He looked up at Harry's sceptical face. "I know how to treat this, don't worry," the healer assured him.

"Where's Healer Pomfrey? I'd like to talk to him," Harry said.

"If you go to the desk in the corridor, they can send for him," the healer said, bending over Hermione's bed.

"Remus," Harry said in a low voice, "do you trust this bloke?"

"He's the one who's been treating Hermione," Remus said. "At least, that's what I was told."

"I'm going to find Healer Pomfrey and get a password for him. A lot could go wrong here if he isn't who he says he is," Harry whispered. "I'll be back in a minute," he said to the others, and left the room. A short time later, he returned with Healer Pomfrey in tow.

"Bradford," Marcus said, "May I have a word, please?"

"All right," the other healer said. He left Hermione's bedside and conferred with Marcus on the other side of the room. Bradford laughed and answered Marcus's question readily, and then they returned to Hermione's bedside. "Mr. Potter, after the year you've had – I read all about it in the *Daily Prophet* – I don't blame you for being cautious."

"He's Bradford, all right," Marcus said with a smile. "I'm sorry we didn't have a password set up to start with so you'd be assured your friend was safe."

"That's OK," Harry said with a shrug. "I just wanted to be sure."

"No problem," Marcus said. "She's awake now? That's wonderful." Bradford filled Pomfrey in on what was going on with Hermione. "I'd love to watch you work on her," Marcus said. "I'm trying to learn more about curing Dark spells."

"Stay and watch," Bradford invited. "All right now, Miss Granger, this won't hurt a bit." He pulled a large quartz crystal out of his pocket and held it inches away from her body, tracing the outlines of her body with the crystal, then moving over the rest of her body in a grid-like pattern. He held it flat in his hand, using a spell similar to the Point Me spell Harry had used in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. They all watched the crystal point him to areas of injury or illness. Once it pointed him in the right direction, he held the crystal over the indicated areas. The crystal glowed orange twice, once by her chest, and once by her head. The crystal's orange glow when it was by her head had a pinkish edge to it. Bradford turned the crystal different ways and the pink actually concentrated and shot out of the crystal, hitting the wall and making both healers jump back. "Hmmm. Interesting," Bradford murmured.

"What was that?" Mr. Granger asked nervously.

"That was an echo of an extremely powerful enchantment," Bradford explained. "You said someone put a love spell on Miss Granger in the last few months?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "At least, I think it was a love spell. Bellatrix Lestrange put an enchantment on her to make her break up with her boyfriend," he gestured at Ron, "and seduce me, in order to poison me. Remus researched it, and found it was called the Black Widow Curse."

Bradford raised an eyebrow at this explanation, looking from Harry's earnest face to Ron's grieving one. "The Black Widow? That's a rare one. And those two are in love, right?" he said, indicating Hermione and Ron. Harry nodded. "I see. Then Lestrange had to use a very powerful spell to overcome it. That's probably why there are still remnants of it in her system." He moved his crystal over Hermione's body a while longer, then turned to look at Harry again. "Lestrange is a Death Eater, right?"

"She was. She's dead now," Harry answered cautiously. "She was one of Voldemort's most valued people."

"How do you know this?" Bradford asked conversationally, going back to examining Hermione.

"Voldemort told me once, and Bellatrix told me another time."

Bradford straightened up and looked at Harry, his eyes wide. "You've talked to him? In person?"

The question caught him off guard – he had no idea what to say other than, "Yes, of course!"

Remus stepped in. "Harry has faced Voldemort five times before this school term, and twice this term. Voldemort is a braggart and likes to taunt his victims while he's attacking them. Harry doesn't stand still for the attacks like most people do. He fights back, which seems to amuse Voldemort until Harry gets the better of him or escapes. So yes, they converse. In person," he said sternly, his tone warning the healer to watch his step.

Bradford stood looking at Harry in amazement for a few moments. "I've read all the reports, you know. I've read everything I could find on You-Know-Who and. . ."

"Say the name," Harry snapped. "Voldemort. Fear of the name increases fear of the thing itself."

"OK," the healer amended, "V-v-voldemort. I've read everything I could find on him, and on you, Mr. Potter, trying to learn as much as I could about Dark magic so I could heal people who are victims of it."

Harry was livid now. "Why were you studying ME if you wanted to study Dark magic? I'm no Dark wizard!"

"I know that! I'm sorry. I just meant. . ."

"Can we please get back to Hermione? You lot can have your little chat later," Ron snarled suddenly.

"Yes. Yes, of course," Bradford said. He examined Hermione a bit longer, then turned cautiously to Harry again. "I do need to talk to you about these spells she's under. You witnessed both spells?"

"I saw the effects of the spell Lestrange put on her, yes, and I saw Malfoy cast his spell the other night."

"How was this love spell removed in the first place?"

Harry explained how he and Dumbledore had removed the spell, and that they'd seen it leave her body.

"What did it look like?"

"It was misty-looking, like, um. . .like fog at sunset, grey with a rosy glow to it."

"Ah-ha. That's it, then," Bradford said, his eyes gleaming in satisfaction.

"Do you know what to do?" Ron asked fearfully.

"Yes, I know what to do. She just has an echo of the spell that's been awakened by the badly cast spell that hit her."

"How can that be? We took the spell off of her," Harry said, confused.

"It left her more susceptible to other spells, just as your resistance might be down after certain kinds of illness. That's what I mean by an echo. It's difficult to explain, but I can take care of this now that I know what happened before. I'll have her fixed up in no time." He and Marcus moved to the door, talking quietly. They looked back at the gathered people around Hermione's bed and waved. "We'll be back in a few minutes," Bradford said cheerfully.

"D'you trust that guy?" Ron asked Harry.

"I don't know. It's just creepy that he's been studying me while researching Dark magic," Harry grumbled.

Before long, the two healers returned, bearing two flagons of potion and a small crystal ball. "All right, Miss Granger. Take these potions, and then we'll see how you are," Bradford said.

"What potions are those?" Ginny asked.

"One is an anti-love-enchantment potion, the other neutralizes that orange spell."

"What was that spell, anyway?" Harry asked.

"It's a very dark spell called the Effrondrement Hex. It makes the victim's organs collapse, starting with the lungs. It's a slow, painful death, because the spell partially collapses the

lungs first, then keeps them working just enough to keep the victim alive while the other organs decompose within the living body, simply so he can suffer longer. A nasty spell indeed. That's why she was having trouble breathing at first." Seeing the horrified looks around him, he hastened to add, "The wizard who cast this spell did it wrong, so her organs weren't truly decomposing. They were just not working properly. We got that problem corrected right away. It was this love spell that was complicating things so she wasn't healing quickly."

"She's going to be all right, though, right?" Harry asked anxiously.

"If you hadn't brought her to the hospital wing as fast as you did, and then transferred her here so soon, she'd be in much worse shape. She's young, healthy and strong, so she will be herself very soon. But the best thing for her was the fact that the wizard who cast the spell did it poorly."

"I never thought I'd say 'hooray for Malfoy,' but in this case. . ." Harry said with a grim expression.

"Yeah," Ron agreed morosely. "If I ever see that git, I'll kill him," he said quite seriously.

"Not if I see him first," Harry replied darkly. He sensed a sudden tension in the Grangers. They were horrified. Harry had, after all, killed people before. He looked up at them and tried to smile. "I was kidding, you know. Ron needed cheering up." Forcing himself to be calm, he tried to behave as if he was still the innocent boy they'd thought he was until a short time ago. He watched them, keeping his face soft and friendly, until they relaxed a bit. *Ah well, I suppose that, to them, I'll always be the murderous nutter their daughter hangs out with*, he thought sadly.

A few minutes after Hermione took the two potions, Bradford held the crystal ball over her.

"Oh, please, you're not into Divination, are you?" Hermione said with a sarcastic sneer.

"Hey, she sounds more like herself already!" Harry said with a delighted laugh.

"No, I'm not into Divination, although I can tell your future easily enough," Bradford said with a chuckle as he studied the crystal ball.

"Whatever do you mean?" Hermione sniffed disdainfully as she watched the man use the crystal ball.

"I mean, your future holds you getting completely well by tonight, and having a lovely snogging session with your boyfriend Ron, here, to make up for breaking his heart when you told him you loved Harry."

"What?" She looked astonished for a moment, then shook her head. "Well, of course, I do love Harry dearly, but he's like a brother to me! But I'm in love with Ron. He's my boyfriend," she said, looking past the healer and seeing Ron sit up suddenly, his face alight with joy. She glanced up at Harry and saw with great surprise that he was equally happy. "I didn't. . .did I?"

"Welcome back," Harry said, grinning hugely. He glanced at Ron, who had taken Hermione's hand in his and bowed his head over it in relief. He pressed his forehead to the back of it, then

turned it over to kiss the palm tenderly. He lifted his face and looked at her, his heart in his eyes. He couldn't speak, but he didn't need to. She squeezed his hand and smiled at him, her eyes full of love.

"Do you remember me now?" Ron said after a long moment, his voice breaking with emotion.

"Yes, of course, I remember you! I don't understand what happened, but I'd never forget you, dear Ronny," she said softly.

Ron sighed and held her hand to his cheek. Now wasn't the time for involved explanations. "It's good to have you back," he said tenderly.

Ginny had stood up to look into the crystal ball, which the healer was still holding over Hermione's body. "What's that telling you?" she asked Bradford.

He held it where she could also see inside the sphere. "Do you see the movement inside the crystal?"

"Yes."

"What's it look like to you?"

"Clear, light, thin clouds."

"Well spotted! That means there are no Dark spells on her. When I used the crystal point, you saw how it flashed colours, right?" Ginny nodded. "That showed me the type of spell she was under, and where it hit her. Something went wrong with that spell and it hit her in more than one place. Mr. Potter said there was only the one orange spell, right, Mr. Potter?" he said, turning to look at Harry, who nodded. "So the crystal lighting orange in two locations means the spell was badly aimed and inaccurately cast, which is good, in this case. If he'd done it well, she would have suffered a very painful death with no way to stop it." He stopped and smiled at Hermione, who had gasped when she heard this. "You're going to be fine, Miss Granger, don't worry," he assured her. "So, back to the crystals. This crystal ball is more of a general diagnostic tool than the crystal point. It scans her entire body and shows me if she's ill or injured anywhere, things the crystal point might have missed. The crystal point is specific for spell damage. It shows me where she's been hit with spells and what kind of spells she's suffering from. So between the two of them, I find your friend to be in very good health!"

"Wow, that's cool," Ginny breathed. "I haven't seen a healer use crystals like that before."

"It's something I learned in Rumania, actually. I've travelled all over studying how to heal people who have been attacked with Dark spells. Rumania, Albania, China and the Middle East, as well as northern Africa, are rich in lore for combating Dark spells."

"They are?" Harry said with interest. "Maybe I should go there to study," he said to Remus. "Where's the Auror's school, anyway?"

"In London. And I think the Auror's school should come first, then these overseas studies," Remus suggested. "That way, you'll have a better understanding of what you learn there."

"I agree," Bradford said. "Going there without more schooling than Hogwarts can give you – you'd probably get confused about a lot of things, because those places are also the centres of Dark magic in the world. It's easier for you to learn to combat those spells if you have more of a background before going to these places, both for your education's sake and your safety. They are not safe places to visit unprepared."

"Still. . .," Harry said thoughtfully. "It sounds interesting." He saw the concerned look on Remus's face and added, "But I won't just rush over there, don't worry."

Remus smiled. "That's good to know. Tell you what, Harry. You and I will plan a trip to Rumania. We can visit Charlie and the dragons, then do some research while we're there."

Harry's face lit up. "Over the summer holiday? This summer?"

"Maybe. I'll have to see how my schedule works out, and what Albus thinks about it. It will be useful for my teaching, as well as for your study, but we do need to keep you safe, and you're education isn't complete yet. Healer Bradford was right about it being best if you're fully prepared before going to such places."

"But if I'm with you. . . ," Harry said, wheedling Remus a bit. He relented when he saw the twinkle in Remus's eye. Remus knew exactly what Harry was doing and was amused by it, but he was also very protective of his godson. They wouldn't go on a trip like that until Remus felt it was safe enough to do so.

Remus looked at his watch. "We've been here quite a while. We're going to tire Hermione out, and her parents would probably like more time with her. Let's go back to school, all right?" He stood and shook hands with the Grangers and the healers. "Thank you for allowing us to spend so much time with Hermione. It was very nice to meet you."

"Thank you for coming," Mr. Granger said as he shook hands all around, "and for being such good friends to our daughter."

"Will you be coming back to school, or going home with your parents?" Ginny asked Hermione.

Ron's face fell at Ginny's words. "'Mione? You're coming back to school, aren't you?"

"School's finished for the year, isn't it?" Mrs. Granger said. "She can rest better at home."

"Oh, no! I don't want to miss the Leaving Feast!" Hermione said anxiously. "Please let me go back to school, Mum! Please?"

"Well. . .," her mother said cautiously, "if the healer says it's all right."

"It's fine, as long as she gets enough rest," Bradford said, amused at the glee on Hermione and Ron's faces.

"When can I leave here?" she asked Bradford.

"You'll be released this evening, if you rest well all afternoon and promise not to do anything too strenuous the next couple of days."

"Define 'strenuous.'" Hermione said. "What am I not allowed to do?"

"Don't run any races. Don't lift anything heavy. Try to get as much rest as you can," the healer replied.

"OK, I can do that," she agreed with a smile, her eyes twinkling as she glanced at Ron. "Get out of here, you lot, so I can get back to school sooner!"

Ron glanced at her parents uneasily, blushed madly, then took a deep, steadying breath and leaned over her bed to kiss her goodbye. She wrapped her arms around him and held the kiss for a long moment, then pulled him down into a hug. "I love you," she whispered in his ear.

"I love you too. Get well!" he said, kissing her again before straightening up. With a final wave, Remus, Harry, Ginny and a still-blushing Ron left Hermione's room.

"What do you want to do this afternoon?" Harry asked Ron and Ginny as they entered the Common Room after returning from the hospital.

Ginny held Harry's hand in both of hers, looking up at him with sparkling eyes. "I know what I'd like to do."

"You two go on," Ron said.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said with a grin. "'Mione will be back soon. You guys go and have fun."

"Right!" Harry replied. "Be right back," he said to Ginny as he raced up to his room and retrieved the Invisibility Cloak.

Soon they were racing along the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack, laughing and teasing each other as they ran. Harry lifted the trapdoor carefully, checking to make sure the Shack was empty and undisturbed, then helped Ginny the rest of the way up the ladder. He picked her up and threw her over his shoulder, making her snort with laughter after her initial grunt when she landed on his shoulder. He raced up the stairs to the bedroom, deposited her unceremoniously on the bed, then pulled off her shoes and socks, tickling her toes and kissing the top of each foot, making her giggle. He took off his socks and shoes and flopped down next to her, his long knobbly toes tickling the soles of her dainty feet as he propped his head up on his hand. His other hand had its own job to do. Soon it was trailing his fingers softly around her face, gently stroking each cheek, sketching the arch of her nose, the flare of her nostrils, the curve of her lips, the roundness of her chin before wandering down the front of her throat, tracing her collarbones delicately, then heading further south, carefully wandering around the lovely mounds of her breasts. Her breath was already coming in gasps.

"What brings you here, m'lady?" he teased, trying to move slowly, deliciously, so they could enjoy themselves as long as possible. His heart was already pounding, his breathing quickened as his excitement rose.

She could only stand such torture so long. She wanted to play too, not just be the plaything. "What brings me here? You!" she cried, jumping on him and rolling him onto his back, then straddling his chest. She pushed his hands over his head and down to the pillow. "I've got you now, Potter. You can't get away from me," she laughed, then leaned down and tickled the end of his nose with the tip of her tongue. "Got your nose," she teased.

"And you're welcome to it!" he replied amiably. "What else would you like?"

"Hmmm. That dimple looks tasty," she said, licking it delicately before kissing it, then chewing on it a bit. She raised up and looked at him, her eyes full of love, then removed his glasses and set them on the bedside table before going determinedly back to work on his dimple.

"Hungry, are you?" he laughed.

"Yes," she replied, attacking his ear next. She nibbled that a while, releasing his hands so she could balance herself better. She found that releasing his hands had other benefits as well.

He slid his hands up her back over her t-shirt, expertly undoing her bra through the fabric. "Ah, what's this?" he joked as his hands found their way under her shirt and onto her breasts. "Lovely little mountains. Or are they lovely melons? Either way. . . . Hmm. Nice." His hands cupped her breasts gently, slowly gliding over their soft mounds, tantalizing her to the point of interrupting her exploration of his other ear.

"What do you think you're doing, sir?" she said with a throaty chuckle. "Oh! Yeah," she sighed as his hands continued their gentle investigation of her anatomy. She moaned in pleasure, then had to sit up as he pushed her t-shirt over her shoulders. "Yeah, let's get rid of that," she agreed, pulling it over her head. "And let's get rid of yours, too."

He sat up and let her take his t-shirt off slowly, her hands and lips tracing delicious patterns on his body as she did so. She sat up and pulled him off the bed, undoing his belt and zipper, pushing his jeans and boxers down more urgently than she'd done with his shirt. He finished undressing her, then stood still, watching as she covered his body with kisses, her tongue tickling his chest and ribs, then his belly button, while his hands fondled her breasts.

"I've neglected your back," she said suddenly, darting behind him and renewing her kissing exploration of his body. "Mmmm, you're so tasty," she said with a throaty chuckle as her lips ran trails of fire down his back. She knew he was self-conscious about his scars, and that they continued to be painful. They were still so livid, still raised up in huge welts, ugly trespasses on the beauty of his body. She kissed them gently, giving them the same consideration she was giving the rest of him, letting him know she loved every inch of him.

How can she stand it? he wondered uneasily. *They're horrible. I know what I look like.* "You don't have to do that," he said in a tense voice. "They're gross."

"They're part of you, and I love you," she countered, giving the biggest scar a long, lascivious lick. "Am I hurting you?" she said in sudden concern.

"No. But they're hideous. I don't see how you can do that." He shivered. "Don't, Ginny. You shouldn't have to even look at them."

Suddenly she was standing in front of him, shaking a finger under his startled nose. "You cannot tell me what I should and shouldn't look at, Mr. Potter! I will kiss what I want to, so there!" She studied his face a moment, seeing the anguish in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," she said immediately.

"No, it's not. . .I'm not. . . ." He didn't know what to say.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked quietly.

"No."

"Did it feel good?"

A reluctant smile spread across his face for a brief moment. "It felt fantastic. But it grossed me out, knowing what you were seeing, what you were kissing, how ugly they are."

"Shouldn't it be my choice to decide if I want to kiss something or not?" she said reasonably, gazing steadily into those sad green eyes. They were standing apart, not touching, streaks of sunlight filtering between the boards over the windows painting their bodies in wide bands of light and shadow. She reached out a tentative hand and touched his chest, tracing the outlines of the muscles there, tenderly touching the scars that began on the side of his chest and wrapped around his left side, then following them to his arm, gliding down softly until she reached the thick cords of the whip scars there. She kept watching his eyes as her fingers traced the scars then kept moving down to his hand. She brought his hand up to her breast, then moved closer to him, both of her hands now softly stroking his chest, moving around to his back, following the scars when she encountered them. The front end of one scar was at her eye-level. She kissed it gently, then licked it playfully, her eyes twinkling as she got back in play mode.

"Are you positive you want to do that?" he said uncertainly, his hand still hesitantly on her breast just as she'd left it. "It doesn't make you sick?"

"What sickens me is that it happened. The fact that they're there, it's horrible, yes. But you, Harry, you are not horrible. You are not ugly. You are beautiful all over. And you're MINE and you will OBEY ME!" she demanded suddenly, then burst into giggles at his startled expression. She stamped her dainty foot, making her vivid hair dance enticingly across her ivory breasts.

"Obey you?" he said, a bemused look on his face, rekindled desire sparkling in his eyes, his hand beginning to explore the delights of her breast again.

"You heard me, mister!" she said in as commanding a voice as a petite girl who's stark naked could muster. "You will obey me without question!" She lifted his other hand to her neglected breast and leaned into him, moaning with pleasure.

"And what might your commands be, m'lady?" he murmured, kissing the top of her head as she leaned against his chest.

"Stand still and let me have my way with you," she said, dancing away from him, making both of them moan at the loss of contact.

"Now what are you going to do?" he protested. "I thought. . ."

"Just you wait. I have plans for you, my handsome knight!" Her eyes danced with mischief.

He stood obediently where she had left him, watching in amusement as she studied him, walking around him looking him up and down, as if planning her attack – which was exactly what she was doing. She moved behind him again and ran her hands over his back, his arms, his bum, the lovely length of his legs, then did the same thing with kisses, licks and little nips here and there. She soon had him gasping with desire. She ducked under his arm and nibbled the side of his ribcage, knowing what his reaction would be.

"That tickles," he said, with a giggle and a shiver, exactly as she'd expected.

"Good!" She slid the rest of the way under his arm and stood in front of him, then started the process all over again on the horrible scars on his chest and arm.

Harry thought one of the best parts about her being in front him was that he was more able to participate and not just be the object of her play. He ran his hands over whatever parts of her he could reach while standing upright, savouring the delightful contours of her body, the lovely heaviness of her breasts, her narrow waist, the sweet swell of her bum. Watching the flame of her hair glide sinuously over her ivory skin as she moved nearly drove him wild. Feeling its silken masses against his skin was delicious beyond all imagining. Finally, he simply couldn't stand upright any more. He wrapped his arms around her and fell back on the bed, laughing as her hair fell in a rich scarlet curtain around them, cutting off the filtered light from the boarded up window as well as any bed curtains. He smiled up at her. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?"

"I could ask you the same question, luv," she murmured, then bent to kiss him. Their tongues danced around each other, exploring the delicious territories of each other's mouths, while their hands did the same on their bodies. He rolled her onto her back, chuckling as he pushed her hair out of her face. "I love your hair," he murmured, smoothing the long red tresses off of her shoulders and breasts. When he flipped the last lock aside, he sat back a moment, admiring his creation. Her hair was fanned out around her like a glorious aurora, her body white against its rich colour. "I love you, you know," he said, his heart pounding as he studied her every perfect curve.

"Not just my hair?" she teased.

"Not just your hair. Every beautiful inch of you," he said, his hands wandering over the contours of her breasts, her narrow waist, the angular bones at the top of her hips.

"I love you, too," she said, reaching up for him, "and you're too far away."

They spent the afternoon revelling in their love for each other, playing silly games, tickling each other with their hair, and finally sleeping for a while. The shadows in the room were getting long when Harry woke up. His head was on Ginny's stomach, his hand happily resting on her breast. He saw she was watching him as she twirled tendrils of his hair around her fingers. "Hi," he said.

"Hi yourself. Good nap?"

"Yeah," he replied with a goofy grin. "You?"

"Delicious."

"Hmm. That's nice," he said, beginning to massage her breast again.

"If we keep this up, we'll miss supper," she warned while thoroughly enjoying his attentions.

"And that's a problem because. . .?" he teased.

"You're the one who's always starving. Miss supper if you want!" she said with a chuckle, running her fingers through his hair, then cupping his head in her hands, pulling him up to kiss her.

"You know," he said as he broke the kiss, "I could get used to waking up like this very easily."

"Me too."

He propped his head on his hand and looked down at her, his fingers tantalizing her wonderfully once more. "I wish we were older."

"Me too. Will we always live in London?"

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know. The house will be nice once we fix it up," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, but it's in a terrible neighbourhood. And kids need room to play outside – so do I, for that matter. I'd rather live in the country, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," she said, glowing with pleasure at his being willing to talk so seriously about a real future for them. "How many kids do you want?"

Harry looked surprised at her question. "None at the moment, why?"

"I just wondered. None at the moment works for me, too, but in a few years? You were the one who said the house in London didn't have room for kids to play outside." Her eyes twinkled with merriment. She didn't think he'd even been aware of what he was saying – it was his heart talking, with his brain nowhere in the loop at all, something she cherished whenever it happened. He was letting his heart talk more and more as their relationship grew,

not being as cautious and pessimistic about his life expectancy and future as he'd once been, and it thrilled her.

His crooked grin spread across his face. "I did, didn't I?" he said with a chuckle. "OK, then. Let's see. You have two years left at Hogwarts. I have one year plus three in Auror's training. You have what, three years of Healer training? So it's about five years before I can change that ring on your hand for something more permanent."

"Five years. Seems like forever."

"Yeah. It will be hard, not being at school together. I don't know how I'll manage without you," he said seriously.

"Same here. That last year at Hogwarts will be awful for me."

"I'll come to visit as often as I can," Harry promised. "Oh, and on the kids question? As many as you want. I'd love to grow my own Quidditch team," he chuckled.

"Seven? That sounds possible," she said with a grin. "But it could be five, if we both played too."

"However many you want, sweetheart – I'll leave that up to you," he said, nuzzling her breast.

"Mmm, that feels so good," she murmured, revelling in the beguiling sensations he was stirring up in her body.

"Shhh!" he whispered urgently, quickly getting to his feet and listening hard. The hair on the back of his head had prickled, warning him of danger. He picked up his glasses and put them on, then looked toward the boarded-up window. His wand was in the pocket of his jeans, lying in a heap on the floor several feet away.

"Are Ron and Hermione here already?" Ginny groaned, rolling out of bed.

"No. Somebody's outside. Be quiet. I'll go look." He moved carefully to the boarded up window and peeped through the cracks to the overgrown garden outside. Lucius Malfoy stood there, looking at the house curiously. "Get dressed," Harry hissed, keeping his eyes locked on his enemy.

"Who's out there?" she whispered, dressing as fast as she could. She'd barely pulled her jeans up when he gasped, grabbed her in his arms and turned his back to the wall just as the wall of the Shack exploded into the room. As the debris continued to fall, Harry whirled around. Lucius Malfoy stood there smirking.

"Ah, Potter. I had a feeling that it was you. Nobody else would use a haunted house as a trysting place," he said snidely.

"What do you want?" Harry said as he turned to face the man, keeping Ginny carefully behind him. She'd managed to pull on her t-shirt by now, but he stood naked and unarmed before his enemy.

"I see the Dark Lord marked you well," Malfoy said as his eyes roved over Harry's scars.

"That's more than he can see now," Harry quipped. He could see his impertinent reply had angered the man.

"Why aren't you dead yet?" the man sneered.

"How do you know I'm not? Maybe I'm a ghost," Harry replied tartly. "Why are you here?"

"It's just another tedious meeting, really, because my son apparently failed in his mission," Malfoy said in a bored voice, his eyes studying the nude young man before him. *No wand in his hand, no place to hide one. Perfect!* he thought.

"Apparently."

"But I won't! *Avada Ke. . .*"

Harry spread his hands wide and formed a golden sphere around Malfoy. He grunted with the effort of holding the massive yet delicate spell. The Killing Curse bounced from wall to wall inside the shield, a panicked Malfoy doing his best to dodge it or block it, but it finally hit him and he fell to the ground, dead. When Harry was certain the man wasn't going to move again, he dropped the spell and the sphere dissolved in a glittering mist of golden light. His body was covered with sweat as he panted from the effort it had cost him to hold the spell strongly enough to contain the man and his spells.

Lucius Malfoy lay sprawled in an awkward position, his silky white-blond hair splayed untidily around him. His face was frozen in a mask of terror. Harry glanced around outside, then dropped to the ground beside the body. He nudged it with his foot, then gave it a swift kick with his heel in the man's groin. "I guess he's really dead," he said when there was no reaction. "Toss me my wand, would you?" he called up to Ginny.

"How about some clothes, too?" she said with a nervous laugh, then crossed the room to get his wand out of his jeans' pocket.

"In a sec." He caught his wand deftly and turned Malfoy's body into a single bone, then conjured an airtight box to seal it in. "OK, clothes now." He dressed and held his arms up to Ginny. "Come on, jump down here to me. I'll have to repair the wall and I can't do it from inside. We'll fly back."

"OK," she replied, making sure they hadn't left anything in the room and dropping into his waiting arms. "Why do you suppose he was here? And how did he know we were here?"

"I forgot to put the Silencio on the room. I remembered that when I felt his presence outside. I'm sorry, sweetheart." He hugged her briefly, kissed her on the forehead and handed her the box. "Don't lose this."

"No problem," she said, holding the box gingerly. "But why would he come here?"

"Dunno. Probably meeting someone here. He's met Draco here before. Nobody ever comes here except for us, you know. Everyone still thinks it's haunted, so I suppose Malfoy thought

it would be a safe place to meet, as long as they were outside the house." As he spoke, Harry studied the shack's damaged wall, trying to decide how to fix it.

"Do you think anyone heard the explosion? Maybe people are coming," Ginny said worriedly, looking toward the village.

"It's possible, but given the number of explosions we make while learning some new spells, I suspect it will be ignored. Dumbledore, Remus and I do most of our really noisy practice just through the woods there, not that far from here."

Harry lifted his wand and did a Reparo charm on the wall, the best way he could think of to repair it at least temporarily. "I guess that will hold it for now. It looks pretty much the same." He looked around on the ground, found Malfoy's wand and pocketed it along with his own, then Vanished the remaining debris littering the grass. "I guess that's it, then," he said, glancing around one more time. "I'm going to change into a phoenix. Grab my tail. We need to see Professor Dumbledore."

"OK," she agreed, pocketing her wand and holding the box tightly.

Suddenly, Harry pushed her to the ground, pulling out his wand at the same time. "Someone's coming," he whispered, the hair on the back of his neck prickling in warning again. He did a Disillusionment Charm on both of them and they lay perfectly still, completely exposed except for the camouflage given by the charm. Crabbe and Goyle, the fathers of their classmates, came stumping up the hill.

"Where the bloody hell is he?" Crabbe grumbled as they reached the top of the hill. They stood at the edge of the garden, looking around.

Harry and Ginny held their breath. If the sunlight hit them the wrong way, and if these two dunces were bright enough to understand what they were looking at, Harry and Ginny would be in trouble.

"We're late. He probably got tired of waiting and left," Goyle replied. "That's like him, the great wanker. No patience at all."

"Yeah. C'mon, let's go to the pub. Maybe he's there."

"Even if he's not, I'd rather be in the pub than here," Goyle said with a chuckle. "I could do with a pint."

"Yeah," Crabbe rumbled as they turned and went back down the hill toward Hogsmeade.

Harry and Ginny stayed still, waiting until the voices of the two Death Eaters faded in the distance. "That was close," Harry whispered as they stood up and he removed the Disillusionment Charm. "OK, hold on tight. I'm going to flash us there rather than flying."

"Flash?" Ginny said, not understanding, but he had already changed. The phoenix took flight and circled her head. She reached out and grabbed its tail, holding on for all she was worth, wondering what this "flash" thing was. An instant later, she knew. After two bright flashes of light, one when they disappeared and the other when they reappeared, she was standing just

outside of Dumbledore's office at the top of the spiral staircase, still holding the tail of the phoenix. The door opened just as Harry changed back into himself.

"Ah, I thought I heard someone out here," Dumbledore said with a smile. "To what do I owe this very pleasant surprise? Do come in. Biscuit? I was just about to have tea."

Ginny and Harry followed him into his office and sat down. Harry took the box from Ginny and laid it on the table next to the tea things.

"What's that?" Dumbledore said curiously.

"It's Lucius Malfoy," Harry replied, the adrenalin rush finally dissipating, leaving him feeling drained and exhausted. He leaned forward and rested his head in his cupped hands.

"Harry? Are you all right?" Dumbledore said in concern, leaning toward the boy.

"I'm fine – just tired, and a bit sore. My back and arm are still bothering me a bit," he said dismissively. "That really is Lucius Malfoy – or what's left of him," he insisted. He told Dumbledore what had happened, leaving out the part about his and Ginny's afternoon of passion.

"Were either of you injured?"

"Harry has cuts on his back," Ginny said quickly. "They don't look bad, but there are splinters of wood in them."

"Really?" Harry said, sitting up suddenly in surprise.

"Don't lean back against the chair," Ginny warned. "You're hurt."

"I didn't realize," he commented, reaching around to touch his back. "Ow! You're right."

"Let's see," Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry stood up and turned around. His t-shirt had spots and splatters of blood on it in several places. Harry tried to lift his shirt but stopped, gasping in pain, when the fabric caught on a shard of wood

"That's good enough, Harry," Dumbledore said. "You two go to the hospital wing. I'll take care of Mr. Malfoy."

"What are you going to do? Give it to the Ministry?" Harry asked.

"I'm going to turn him back into himself and go through his clothing to see if there's any information that could be helpful to us. I'll decide what to do with his body later."

"That's a good idea," Harry said, turning to go. "Oh, here's his wand," he added, handing it to the Headmaster.

"Harry – how did you make that sphere turn outwards?" Dumbledore asked when the kids reached the door.

"Isn't it supposed to?"

"I don't know. You're the only one I know of who casts that spell. I saw it in your Dark Magic books, but I don't recall any mention of turning it outward. I wondered what you did differently, and why."

"Oh." Harry stood still a moment, remembering the scene. "Merlin and I have been talking about different things it might be possible to do with that charm. He's been helping me strengthen the walls, for one thing, but I hadn't tried turning it outward before. Basically, I wanted to keep Malfoy away from Ginny. A shield inside the Shack wouldn't protect her, because he could demolish the house around us. So I wanted the shield to be outside, and I wanted to capture him, as well. That's what I was thinking when I cast it. And I held my hands differently." He held his hands out in front of him, his arms spread wide, fingers opened and separated but cupped as if touching a huge ball in front of him. "Sort of like this, rather than like this," he said, spreading his arms to either side of him, his hands flatter than before.

"Can you show me how you did it?" Dumbledore asked, his face curious.

"OK," Harry said with a shrug, then produced a sphere around Dumbledore. He dissolved that and produced a sphere around himself and Ginny, then dissolved it.

"Remarkable. Well done, Harry!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "Thank you. I'll send some house elves to repair the Shrieking Shack. Now run along and get your back taken care of. I'm sure Madam Pomfrey will set you right in no time."

"'No time' is about all the time I want to spend there," Harry replied with a grin.

A short time later, Harry and Ginny entered the hospital wing. "Hi, Madam Pomfrey! I missed you!" Harry teased.

"Did you now?" she said with a smile, "or are you hurt again?"

"I've got some splinters," he admitted, turning around.

"You'd better just Vanish his shirt," Ginny cautioned. "It's catching on the splinters."

"All right," Madam Pomfrey said, then Vanished Harry's shirt as she'd suggested. "Oh, my. What have you been up to this time? It looks like you've been near an explosion."

"I was," he said. He came up with a story about a spell gone wrong as his excuse for the splinters.

"Miss Weasley, are you hurt?"

"No, he pushed me behind him to shield me from it," she said.

"Are you certain nothing got past him?"

"I've got some dirt on my jeans, but no splinters. I'm fine."

"It's probably a good thing he's so much bigger than you are, or I might have two patients instead of one," the nurse commented dryly.

In a few minutes, the splinters, shards and chunks of wood were removed and the wounds treated with ointment. "Take this potion, Potter, it will ease the pain."

"It won't make me sleep will it? I don't want to waste any of my last days at school sleeping!"

"No, it's the non-drowsy formula," she assured him with a smile. "How are you feeling otherwise? Are your scars bothering you at all?"

"They ache or twinge from time to time. My left arm's still stiff, but it's nothing I can't handle. It's a bit painful to fly in my Animagus forms, but I guess that's because the injuries are so recent, right?"

"I imagine so. It would probably be best if you didn't fly that way for a while. Give your back and arm more time to heal, all right? Try not to abuse yourself so."

"I'll do my best," he assured her, which wasn't exactly a promise. He knew that, if necessity arose, as it had when Malfoy fell from the Astronomy Tower, or when he needed to get both himself and Ginny to Dumbledore quickly today, he'd still use his Animagus forms to do what had to be done. He Summoned another shirt from his room and put it on when it arrived, giggling with Ginny at the thought of it flying down the corridors and bumping into people on its way there. When he was dressed, he and Ginny went to the Great Hall for supper.

"Hi," Ron said as they sat down across from him. "Nice afternoon?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Wonderful!" Ginny said.

"Except for the ending," Harry added wryly.

"Huh?"

"You tell him," Harry told Ginny, heaping piles of food on his plate. "I'm starving and wounded and need to be coddled."

Ginny leaned her head on his shoulder, taking his fork and feeding him rather messily. "Coddle, coddle," she giggled.

"I can feed myself, thank you," he chuckled, taking the fork and digging into his food.

"You're wounded again? What. . .?"

Ginny told Ron the whole story.

"And now house elves need to restore the Shack to the way it was," Harry added. "I did a Reparo on it, but it needs more repairs than I knew how to do. And I suspect there are spells on it that will need to be replaced."

"Oh," Ron said glumly.

"When's Hermione getting here?" Ginny said, knowing why her brother was suddenly so down.

"Soon. I was hoping. . ."

"Ron – three words – Room of Requirement," Ginny said.

"Every Sixth or Seventh Year in D.A. uses it now that they know about it," he grumbled.

"You're the general. Order them out!" Harry teased.

"You two will think of something," Ginny said bracingly.

"Ron," Harry said, as sudden inspiration hit. "The tunnel to Honeyduke's."

"But. . ."

"You can borrow the Cloak if you want," Harry assured him. "A Cushioning Charm, a Lumos on your wands, and you're set."

Ron's face lit up. "Thanks, mate!" Just then a pair of slender hands came around his head and covered his eyes.

"Guess who?" Hermione said. Ron pulled her hands down and kissed them, then helped her to her seat beside him.

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

"No, and I'm starving!" she said, cheerfully tipping food onto her plate.

"Welcome back," Harry said.

"Are you feeling all right now?" Ginny asked.

"I'm fine, and thanks for the welcome! It's so good to be back!" she said happily. "What have you three been up to?"

Ginny filled her in on what had happened up at the Shack.

"You killed Lucius Malfoy?" Hermione gasped.

"More like he killed himself," Harry replied with a shrug. "And Crabbe's and Goyle's dads are loose in Hogsmeade, unless Dumbledore's had them picked up. They were going to a pub there, the great lumps. They should be easy to catch. They're probably drunk by now."

"I hope they've caught them," Hermione said. "I can't believe how these people keep getting out of Azkaban."

"Those three were never captured after the Battle of Hogwarts," Ron said darkly. "Lucius Malfoy stayed behind to command, and kept Crabbe and Goyle with him as protection. As soon as the tide of the battle turned, they ran, the big cowards."

"I hope they find a way to seal up the prison so nobody escapes again," Ginny said vehemently. "We shouldn't have to fight the same people over and over! And he spoiled a wonderful afternoon!"

"He didn't spoil it completely, baby," Harry said, wrapping his arm around her and kissing her temple. "I, for one, had a lovely time."

"I did too," she said with a smile, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Oy! Get a room!" Dean Thomas teased as he walked by.

"Yeah. What he said," Harry agreed with a laugh, looking at his three friends fondly.

Chapter 38 – Questions

Ron and Hermione lay wrapped contentedly in each other's arms, their bodies highlighted by the soft glow from their wands, the Cushioning Charm making the tunnel as comfortable as possible. "Oh, I almost forgot," Ron said, reaching across her for his jeans.

"What?"

"I bought you a present."

"What is it?" she said, her eyes sparkling.

"It was a get-well present, but now that you're well, it's an 'I'm glad you're well' present," he said, handing her the pretty little package.

"Oh, Ron!" she said nervously. It was remarkably like a ring box. *I don't know if I'm ready for this*, she thought. *I don't want to hurt his feelings, but I shouldn't accept it unless I'm ready, right? Oh dear, what am I going to do?* She looked up at him and saw the expectant, eager light in his eyes. She took a deep breath and bravely opened her gift, squealing in delight to see it was earrings, not a promise ring or something more serious. "They're beautiful! What kind of stone is this?"

"Sapphire," he replied with a smile, savouring the joyful look on her face.

"Oh, that's my birthstone!" she said excitedly. "Look how the blue glows in the light. What a beautiful colour!"

"Ravenclaw colour," Ron commented with a chuckle. "I almost chose rubies instead."

"I love these! Thank you!" she said, rolling on top of him and kissing him soundly. When she broke the kiss, she stayed on top of him and rested her head on his shoulder, the earrings still clutched in her hand, a happy smile on her face. "We'll have to go to Hogsmeade and get my ears pierced."

"OK. We can go tomorrow. It's late now, the shops will be closing."

"OK," she murmured, relaxing against him, enjoying the feeling of his hands lightly rubbing her back. "Mmmm, that feels good."

"To me, too." He kept rubbing her back with one hand, while playing with her curls with the other. "I was so scared," he murmured, kissing her forehead. "I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm fine now," she said, lifting her face far enough to kiss his chin, then relaxing again.

"You feeling all right?"

"Never better. But I'm tired," she said, trying to stifle a yawn.

"The healer said nothing too strenuous, and to get lots of rest," he said, a worried frown creasing his forehead. "Maybe we overdid it."

"No, we didn't!" she said with a laugh. "I'm just tired. And I am resting, right here." She lifted her head and looked at him. "Are you comfortable, or do you want me to move over?"

"Stay right where you are," he said, still gently rubbing her back. Before long, he heard soft little whistles coming from her nose as she slept. He smiled, holding her tenderly. *Does life get any better than this?* he thought as he, too, drifted off to sleep.

Hours later, they emerged into the darkened castle. "Oh, we're going to get into so much trouble," Hermione worried. "It's well after curfew."

"That's why we have the Invisibility Cloak," Ron replied quietly as he spread the Cloak over both of them. They huddled together, hurrying down the hall toward Gryffindor Tower when they heard a sudden, loud yowl.

"Mrs. Norris!" Hermione hissed.

"Bloody hell," Ron grumbled, wondering again if Filch's cat could see through Invisibility Cloaks. He and Hermione moved toward the wall, but not quickly enough.

"What is it, my sweet?" Filch said as he followed the sound of her cry. "Students out of bed?" He hurried around the corner and ran right into Ron and Hermione, knocking them over. Hermione pulled her wand and cast a Stunning spell on him before he could catch them.

"Whoa! You're attacking staff right and left, now! Good going!" Ron commented as they pelted down the corridor.

"It was just a small spell – he'll wake up soon," she replied anxiously, hoping she was right. As they neared Gryffindor Tower, they pulled off the Cloak and kissed before telling the Fat Lady the password.

"Mr. Weasley. Miss Granger," came the silky tones of Severus Snape. "What are you two doing out of bed at this hour?"

"Erm. . ." said Hermione.

"Um. . ." said Ron.

"And you're both Prefects. Shame, shame, shame."

Ron's temper exploded. "Prefects are allowed out after curfew. And your wonderful Slytherin Prefect attacked a teacher and three students, nearly killing Hermione and Professor Sinistra!" he snarled. "Shame, indeed!"

"That will be twenty points from Gryffindor for being out of bed after curfew – each. And another twenty points for your cheek, Weasley."

"Sixty points!" Ron howled, exasperated beyond measure. "We're Prefects! We're allowed!"

"One more word and it will be a hundred," Snape sneered.

Ron did his best to stifle his anger. "Good night, Professor."

"Good night, Professor," Hermione said meekly.

"Good night," Snape answered, then swooped down the hall, his black robes billowing.

When they walked into the Common Room, they sank onto a couch. "Sixty points," Ron moaned. "Ravenclaw's so close to us this year, that may cost us the House Championship."

"It could cost us our Prefect badges," Hermione murmured. Then she giggled suddenly. "I wonder how many points he'd take off if he caught us, um. . ."

"Doing what we've been doing most of the evening?" Ron said, grinning at her.

"Yeah."

"Probably several thousand," he said with a chuckle. "Thank goodness for Harry's cloak."

"Oh no!" Hermione said suddenly.

"What?"

"What if Filch and Snape compare notes? They'll work out that it was us who stunned Filch! Oh no. . . ." she moaned.

"Don't worry about spilled potion," Ron said wisely. "Either clean it up or live with the mess."

"That sounds like your mother talking," she said with a wry smile.

"Yeah, she says that a lot." He stood up and held out his hands to her. "C'mon, time for bed."

She stood up and wrapped her arms around his waist. "It was a lovely evening."

"Yeah. Good night," he said, leaning down to kiss her.

"Mmmm. Night," she said, pulling back from him and going slowly up the stairs. He watched until she was out of sight, then practically danced up the stairs to his dormitory. When he got there, he bounced on Harry's bed, waking him.

"Whassup?" Harry said muzzily.

"I just had the best evening ever!" Ron chortled.

"Good. Glad to hear it. Night," Harry said, turning his face back into his pillow.

"No, really! The best!" Ron said, still bouncing the bed.

Harry turned to face his friend. "So she liked the earrings, eh?"

"Yeah," Ron said excitedly.

"And she thanked you *very* nicely?"

"Oh yeah!" Ron's face was glowing, he was so happy.

"Good. Now go to bed and dream about it," Harry said, turning over on his side and trying to get back to sleep.

"Harry?"

"Mmmm?"

"Thanks."

Harry turned and squinted at him. "For what?"

"For pushing me to let Hermione know I cared about her in the first place," he said earnestly. "For sharing your Invisibility Cloak and the Shrieking Shack with us. For reminding me about that tunnel. For helping me find nice presents for her and getting me a discount from the shop. For lots of things. Thanks, mate."

"Always happy to be of service," Harry replied with a sleepy smile. Ron bounded off of Harry's bed and over to his own, where he bounced happily for a while before changing for bed and settling down to sleep. He'd tell Harry in the morning about being caught by Snape and their encounter with Filch. He didn't want to dim the happy radiance that had suffused the entire evening with memories of those gits.

"Harry?" Ron called softly across the room some time later.

"Mmm?"

"Tomorrow's the full moon. Are we going out with Remus?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. Good night."

"Night."

At breakfast the next day, Ron and Hermione told Harry and Ginny about their run-ins with both Snape and Filch.

"You hexed Filch?" Harry whispered in amazement, his face split in an ear-to-ear grin. "Way to go, Hermione!"

"I just hope he and Snape don't talk to each other about last night," she said nervously. "If they do. . ."

"We're doomed," Ron finished for her.

"No use crying over spilled potion," Ginny began.

"Yeah, Ron said that last night when we got back," Hermione said, smiling up at him.

"Sixty points, though," Ginny sighed. "There goes the House Championship."

"Not necessarily," Harry said philosophically. "A lot can happen between now and the Leaving Feast."

"That's true," Ginny said with a shrug, then smiled. Harry was in such a good mood today for some reason, and Ron and Hermione were still floating on the joy of being back together after Hermione's brush with death. What did a few points matter when the people you loved were happy and healthy and you only had a few more days together before being separated for the whole summer holiday? She leaned against Harry for a moment, rubbing her cheek on his broad shoulder affectionately.

He smiled down at her tenderly for a long moment, then looked up at the celestial ceiling, which showed a clear blue sky with only a few thin clouds scudding along in a brisk breeze. "What shall we do today?" he asked, rubbing his hands together briskly. "It looks like flying weather to me!"

"You want to play some pick-up Quidditch?" Ron said eagerly.

"Yeah! Gin, you want to play, don't you?" Harry said, turning to her.

"Absolutely! Wonder who else we can talk into playing?" The four friends discussed various options, then went around asking other friends if they wanted to play. Before long, two teams made up of a combination of Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were headed out to the pitch. Harry was the captain of one team, Ron captain of the other. They played all morning, both teams playing remarkably well together despite being a mixture of three houses. Harry's team won two games due to his catching the Snitch. After some ribbing from Ron, Harry made Ginny Seeker and he played Chaser – and they still won. Ron's team finally won a couple of games and they called a halt, everyone having had an excellent time. Even Hermione had enjoyed herself. She and Dean Thomas and a few others who weren't so fond of flying did hysterically funny commentaries on the games, making each other laugh rather than following the games well.

When everyone landed, Ginny turned to Harry and said, "Want to race?" Since they had the only two Firebolts in school, they should be well-matched. Soon the other teenagers were egging them on, urging them to race five times around the pitch and see who the better flier was.

"Sweetheart, you're lighter. You'll beat the pants off of me," Harry whined playfully.

She stood on tiptoes, pulling on his sleeve so he would bend down, and whispered in his ear, "That's OK with me," making him blush furiously and her giggle.

"All right, if you want to be that way about it, let's go!" Harry said, mounting his broom. Ron held up his hand in front of the two of them and acted as starter.

"Ready? Set? GO!" Ron called, and everyone watched in momentary awed silence as the Firebolts zoomed away at breakneck speed. Ginny was as reckless a flier as Harry. They were well-matched except for Harry being so much bigger than she was. They circled the pitch once in a fast but civilized manner, then Harry started zooming up and down in dives and climbs, flying circles around Ginny with a cocky grin. He was simply a much better flier than she was, but that didn't matter to either of them. She grinned back and leaned over her broomstick, urging it to greater speed, leaving him behind with an amused look on his face. The watching crowd was screaming themselves hoarse.

"C'mon Potter!" she called. "You're slow as treacle!"

Harry leaned over his broomstick and caught up with her and they sped across the finish line together to thunderous cheers from their friends. Hot, sweaty, tired and happy, the fliers parted in the corridor and went to their separate dormitories to shower and change.

"It was fun flying with mixed teams, wasn't it?" Harry said as he and Ron dried off after their showers.

"Yeah, it was. Sometimes I think the House system isn't the best idea. I got to know some people from other Houses better today. That was great."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

In the Great Hall that evening, Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs mingled much more freely than they normally did, laughing together about the good time they'd had in their games. After a fun afternoon wandering around Hogsmeade and getting Hermione's ears pierced, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were enjoying a relaxing supper. The boys would be going out to run that night with Remus, and were eating with gusto to have enough energy to keep up with the werewolf. They were lingering over their pudding and talking about inconsequential things when a boy approached them and nervously said, "Hi, Harry."

"Hi," Harry said, not sure who the boy was. He hadn't played Quidditch with them today. He didn't think he knew him.

"Um. . .can I have a word?" the boy asked quietly.

"Yeah. Sit down. What's your name?"

"Alex McCullough. I'm in Ravenclaw. Fifth Year," the boy said as he sat down next to Ron and across from Harry.

"You're in Herbology with me," Ginny said, smiling at him.

"Yeah," the boy said, smiling at her. "You're awfully good at it. You should've been a Ravenclaw." He suddenly looked startled, glancing nervously at Harry before saying, "I didn't mean anything by that."

Harry shrugged. "These two girls are brilliant. Both of them should be in Ravenclaw, they're so smart. I'm just glad they're Gryffindors – we need all the brainy people we can get! I don't

blame you for wishing they were in your House, though," he said with a smile. His friendly comment hadn't loosened the boy up. He sighed, then looked at the boy curiously. "You said you wanted to talk to me. What's up?"

"Um. . .could we. . .I mean, would you mind. . . ." He glanced nervously at Ron, Hermione and Ginny, then straightened his shoulders determinedly, looked earnestly at Harry and said, "Could we speak privately?"

Harry frowned uncertainly. "What's this about?"

"Please, Harry, if I could just speak to you for a few minutes. . . ." Alex's voice trailed off, and he started to get up. "Never mind."

"No, it's all right," Harry said suddenly. "D'you guys mind?" he asked his friends.

"We won't be far away," Ron assured him, studying the Ravenclaw dubiously. He, Hermione and Ginny all stood up and moved a few seats down.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" Harry asked patiently. He could see Alex was making himself do something that was very hard for him. *Speaking to me shouldn't be that scary*, he thought. His senses were all on the alert. Could this boy be planning to attack him? It seemed unlikely, but he would never have expected to be attacked by Hermione either.

"Why are they so protective of you?" Alex asked unexpectedly, nodding toward Ron, Hermione and Ginny, all of whom were watching him and Harry closely.

"They're my best friends. We look out for each other."

"No, there's something more than that in how they act toward you. It's as if they *have* to protect you – as if you need to be looked after," Alex said, choosing his words carefully.

"Have you noticed what a buggered up term I've had?" Harry said, trying to make light of one of the very serious problems in his life, and not succeeding very well. "You're right, they're trying to protect me. If you tried to attack me, they'd hex you into oblivion before your next heartbeat if I didn't do it first."

Alex blanched, leaning away from Harry and looking as if he would run at a moment's notice.

"I didn't mean to scare you. You asked, I answered. Now, what did you want?" Harry said in as reasonable a voice as he could manage. He'd been having so much fun with his friends, and now this boy was spoiling his evening. He sighed, hoping that whatever Alex wanted wasn't going to be difficult to handle.

Alex sat looking timidly from Harry to his friends and back. Finally, he managed to speak again. "Erm. . .are the stories about you. . .are they true?" The boy was so nervous, his hands were shaking.

Harry's face hardened a bit. "Which stories?"

"The ones in the history books, in the newspapers, magazines – those stories."

"The ones by Hermione Granger that were in the *Daily Prophet* are true. The interview by Rita Skeeter that appeared first in the *Quibbler* last year, then later in the *Prophet*, was true as well. Most of the other stuff you read about me is made up, especially the junk in the magazines and tabloids. The stuff in the history books is probably true. I've never read any of it, but Hermione's told me about it. Why?"

"Is it true that you've. . .um. . .killed people?" Alex's face blanched and he trembled visibly after asking this.

Harry squelched his instant flash of anger as well as he could. The kid was scared of him, it was obvious. Why he would be asking such questions was beyond Harry, but honesty was the best policy most of the time. And besides, what he'd done was public record, so there was no point in denying it. "Yes. Why?" he said in a quiet, tense voice.

The boy gulped. "My, uh. . . my dad. . . ." His voice seemed to fail him, and his shoulders sagged as his face saddened.

"What about your dad?" Harry's heart clenched. Was this one of the people whose parents he'd killed? None of them had approached him after Dumbledore's stern warning. Was this the first in a long line of them, now that the school term was nearly over? He hoped not.

"He's. . .he's dead." Alex stifled a sob and rubbed his eyes frantically.

Harry's nerves were taut, conscious of a possible threat, but his heart softened. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I know what it's like to lose a father." He reached out and patted the other boy's arm kindly. "How's your mum doing?"

"She's OK, I think. It happened a while ago. She waited until I'd finished my O.W.L.'s to send word about it, so I would do as well as possible on them," he said, swallowing hard as he fought the tears attempting to escape his control. "I missed his funeral."

"I'm sorry," Harry said again, at a loss for anything better to say. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, he asked, "So why did you want to talk to me?" He dreaded the answer.

"Because. . .because. . .um. . . . You said you've killed people," the boy said, gazing earnestly into Harry's eyes. "Did you. . .did you kill someone who looked like me? Same colour hair and eyes, but his nose was crooked and he was taller than me."

"Not that I remember," Harry said, instantly regretting sounding so casual about it. "Was your dad a Death Eater?"

"Apparently." The boy's shoulders sagged as if under an unbearable burden.

"You didn't know about it?"

"No. My mum didn't, either."

"I wish I knew what to say to help you," Harry said sincerely. "When did he die?"

"During the Battle of Little Hangleton."

"Oh," Harry said, understanding at last why the boy was asking these questions. "There were a lot of Death Eaters there. They usually wear masks. Some of them took their masks off, or I recognized their voices, so I knew who they were. But a lot of them didn't, so I have no idea who they were. I didn't identify any bodies there. I was badly hurt, so I was brought back to Hogwarts right away. It wasn't like the battle in France where I was the one who identified the bodies. I can't tell you anything about how your father died. I'm sorry."

"Why did he have to die?" Alex cried in anguish.

"I can't answer that. All I can tell you is, when someone is trying to kill me – and all of them were – I fight back. I was in a kill or be killed situation. I had my hands full fighting Voldemort, but there were Death Eaters surrounding the two of us shooting spells at me too, most of the time. I shot back at them to protect myself whenever I had the chance. I don't think I killed anyone then, but I was too busy to find out how badly hurt they were. They finally backed off when Voldemort's spells kept missing me and hitting them. He killed a lot of the Death Eaters himself that way."

"What do you mean, his spells missed you?" the boy said in disbelief. "I thought he was the greatest wizard of the age."

"Albus Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of the age," Harry corrected sternly. "There's a big difference between a powerful wizard and a great one. Voldemort's a powerful wizard, yes, but so is Dumbledore. Dumbledore is also a great wizard, because he uses his power for the good of other people. That's the measure of greatness. Lots of wizards can be powerful, but if they use their power for their own good and don't care who gets hurt along the way, they're not 'great' by any measure. Voldemort is a monster. He's the most powerful Dark wizard in a century or so, but he's not the most powerful wizard alive today, not by a long shot. And his spells missed because I'm good at dodging and blocking spells. He'd shoot at me and I'd duck and roll, or jump out of the way, or throw up a shield or a blocking spell," he ended with a shrug, as if dodging curses hurled by Lord Voldemort was a minor annoyance.

"So it's possible Voldemort killed him?"

"Yes. It's also possible he was killed by me, by Professor Dumbledore or Professor Lupin, or by some of the other adults who came to help us. Or he could have died from crossfire, like Seamus Finnegan did, just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Harry's eyes filled with tears as he thought of Seamus, but he fought the sadness back angrily. "It was a battle, Alex. You were here for the Battle of Hogwarts. You've seen how battles go – although you lot here had a well-guarded castle to protect you, and we were all out in the open."

"No, I didn't see it," Alex said, hanging his head.

"What do you mean? Where were you?" Harry said in shock.

"I'm no fighter. I was in the library and just stayed there. I'm interested in research. I'm not good at defensive spells." The boy kept his eyes lowered, ashamed to look Harry in the face. He'd read about the tall boy seated in front of him fighting to save the world from Voldemort and his kind. In spite of his fear, he was in awe of Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley, brave souls who willingly flew right into the face of danger on a regular basis.

"Then you should join D.A.," Harry said reasonably. "You can improve your defence skills and learn how to fight."

"I don't want to fight."

"Do you want the Dark wizards to take over?" Harry said, his temper rising. "Are you going to lie down and let them run all over you? What will you do when you're faced with a choice between their side and ours?"

"I don't know," the boy said meekly.

Harry sat up straighter. He'd just had an insight. "Is that what happened to your dad? He was forced to become a Death Eater?"

"I don't know. It's possible, I suppose."

"What did he do for a living?"

"He's. . .he was an accountant."

"For Gringott's?"

"No. For the Ministry of Magic."

Harry sat deep in thought for a moment. "You know, that could be why they went after him. They're always trying to recruit people who work for the Ministry so they can try to destroy us from within. Voldemort can put spells on them to force them to fight for him, or he can coerce them other ways to cooperate with him. Your dad may not have wanted to fight at all, much less for Voldemort."

"So maybe he wasn't a bad person?" Alex said, his eyes brightening with hope.

"Do you remember him as a bad person?"

"No. He was kind, gentle, loved books and music. His idea of a pleasant evening was to sit and listen to the wireless while reading. He always had our big ginger cat on his lap. He was a good dad," Alex said, his voice breaking.

"It sounds as if he was a very nice man," Harry said generously. "I imagine he was forced to join. That would be Voldemort's way. If he sees someone he wants as a Death Eater, he gives them a choice – 'join of your own free will, or I'll do something awful to you or to the people you love. But if you join me, nothing bad will happen.'" Harry made a disgusted noise.

"How do you know that?"

"He's tried to get me to join him, but I won't. That really pisses him off," Harry said with a sneer.

"How can you be so . . . so . . ." Alex was aghast, and at a loss for words as well – a rare condition for a Ravenclaw.

"Whatever my attitude – and I can't label it myself, either, so don't feel bad – it helps me survive," Harry replied with a shrug.

"Were you serious when you said I could join D.A.?" Alex asked humbly.

"Of course! I think it would be good for you, and we can always use good researchers to help us find new spells to learn," Harry said generously.

"You don't mind that my dad was a Death Eater?"

"I mind Death Eaters who attack innocent victims. Your dad doesn't sound like that sort. But even if he were, it's not *your* fault if he turned out badly. You need to live your life the best way you can, for your own good. Don't worry about what your parents may have done that wasn't right. Just do the best you can yourself. That's what people will judge you by, not on who your parents were."

"How did you get so wise?" the boy said in awe.

"Me, wise?" Harry laughed. "That's funny."

"No, I mean it. How did you manage it?"

Harry had to stop and think about that for a minute. Finally, he said, "I have no idea. I've had a hard life in many ways. Maybe that made me grow up faster than some other people, I don't know. I'm still much too impulsive, too arrogant, too opinionated, and too disrespectful of rules for my own good. But I just keep plugging away, getting through each day as well as I can manage. I think that's all any of us can do, honestly."

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were still watching the conversation intently. Harry had leaned back, relaxed, his arms crossed comfortably across his chest, the anger that had flashed briefly a short time ago just a memory. The other boy's face had gone from nervous tension to active, serious interest in the conversation.

Alex was quiet a moment. "What's it like?" he said hesitantly.

"What?"

"To kill someone."

Harry sighed. He'd hoped that part of the conversation was over. He glanced around and saw that there were quite a few people paying attention to their quiet chat. He sighed again, then leaned forward and put his elbows on the table, his face in his hands, his shoulders sagging, the very picture of depression.

"I'm sorry, Harry. You don't have to answer if you don't want to," Alex said anxiously.

Harry sat up, his face sad. "It's a reasonable question. We're at war, and at some point, you might have to kill someone. I can understand why you asked. It's just a tough question to answer." He looked at his hands for a few minutes. His hands were strong but slender, with long, elegant fingers that were capable of thrilling the girl he loved or killing an enemy with

equal swiftness. When he was alone, he sometimes looked at his hands and marvelled at what they were capable of. They scared him somehow, such awesome power was hidden in their wrinkles and whorls. He looked over at his friends and saw wariness on Ron's face, sympathy on Ginny's and Hermione's. He glanced around at the people sitting in their area. All conversation had stopped. Everyone was looking at him, listening to him, waiting to learn what it was like to take the life of another human being. *Why me?* he thought, not for the first or last time.

He went back to staring at his hands as he said, "I can't answer for anyone else. I've killed several people now, maybe more than I'm even aware of, since some of my spells missed Voldemort in that battle as well. The first person I killed in battle richly deserved it. Killing her was an accident, but when I found out she was dead, I was frustrated. I'd wanted to fight with her longer, hurt her more before she died. She killed my godfather and tortured and killed lots of other people. The other people – in the heat of battle, fighting for my life? I didn't think about them at all except as 'good – that's one less to fight.' After that battle in France, it tore my guts out to know I'd killed people. I was badly injured after the Battle of Little Hangleton, so I didn't spend much time thinking about who I might have killed, except for regretting not managing to kill Voldemort. In both cases, the people I killed were trying to kill me and my friends. I won't lie down and let such things happen," he said fiercely, finally looking up and glaring at Alex. "I will fight to protect those I love. I will fight to protect the good people of the wizarding world. I won't fight without a good reason. I won't just go kill somebody for fun – it *isn't* fun to kill somebody, and if you think it is, you'd better think about what kind of person you want to be, because you're headed for the Dark side. We're at war. When the war's over, I hope I never have to fight anyone again. But if I have to, I will." He started suddenly, pulling his wand and whipping around because he'd sensed someone close behind him. Ginny, Ron and Hermione all ducked, knowing his lightning reflexes. He laughed shakily. "You lot know better than to sneak up on me."

"Sorry, mate," Ron said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Thought you needed a friend."

"Thanks," Harry said, looking at each of them in turn as they surrounded him, the girls seated on each side, Ron at his back. "I didn't mean to scare you." He turned back to Alex. "Have I answered your questions?"

"Um. . .yeah," Alex said nervously.

"Are you going to join D.A.?" Harry said, trying to get back to a normal frame of mind.

"I'm not brave like you. If I'd felt someone was sneaking up on me, I would have thrown my hands up and surrendered right away. I can't see me going into battle willingly. I just can't see it."

"You think I'm brave, do you?" Harry snapped. "I'm scared to death most of the time when I'm fighting. Just now, I sensed someone creeping up behind me and I was terrified, but I pulled my wand to protect myself in spite of being scared. In battle, I'm fighting for my life against powerful enemies, and I'm usually outnumbered. Being brave is overrated. I just do what has to be done, the best I can manage, and hope that my luck holds out. That's all anyone can do. If you want to try D.A., you're welcome. I think it will do you good." Harry stood up and held out his hand. "It was nice to meet you, Alex. I'm sorry about your dad. You're lucky though," he said as he shook the boy's hand.

"Lucky? Why?"

"You have fifteen years or so of memories with your dad. I have two tiny memories of mine, and one of those is of my parents being murdered. I'd give anything to have memories like you have." He released the other boy's hand and turned away, looking back once to say, "I hope you have a nice holiday. And I hope to see you in D.A. next term."

"I'll be there, Harry. Thanks."

As the full moon rose, Ginny and Hermione leaned out of the Common Room window, watching the darkened grounds for movement. "There they are," Ginny whispered, pointing toward the far side of the lake. The moonlight caught the white ruff of the collie running with the werewolf and the wolf.

"Look at them go," Hermione murmured, smiling at the sight.

Ginny laughed. "The Marauders ride again." Just then, the full moon cleared the forest and shone brightly across the grounds, casting long shadow behind the three animals. They stood still, looking suddenly like statues, then the three of them bayed at the moon. The sound of the wolf's and werewolf's howls sent goose-bumps up the girls' arms, the sound of the collie's cry pale in comparison. They howled again, then took off at a run for the forest, disappearing in the darkness. "I guess they'll have a lot to tell us in the morning," Ginny said, stretching and yawning.

"Yeah. I'm tired. See you in the morning," Hermione said, standing and heading for the dormitory stairs.

"Good night," Ginny said, gazing out of the window a while longer. When the three didn't reappear, she, too, went up to bed.

"So did you boys have fun last night?" Ginny asked quietly over breakfast.

"It was cool!" Harry said with a grin.

"Yeah," Ron agreed.

"What did you do?" Hermione said.

"We ran all over the grounds and through the Forbidden Forest," Ron began. "We saw Dad's old car once. It's still running wild out there. The Centaurs chased us for a while, but we got away."

"The Centaurs chased you?" Hermione said, aghast. "Why?"

"They don't like werewolves. I suppose they don't like wolves either. I don't know what they think about collies, or why one would be with a werewolf and a wolf," he said with a grin.

"What else did you see?" Ginny asked.

"We found a whole herd of unicorns," Harry said, grinning at the memory. "The foals were asleep until we came along. Then the mares got everyone moving and the stallion came and challenged us. We got out of there in a hurry!"

"Harry tried to talk to the thestrals we saw, but they apparently aren't fond of wolves either," Ron said with a snort. "Or maybe they just don't speak wolf."

"Why didn't you change into a thestral so you could talk to them?" Hermione asked.

"It would be dangerous to change when Remus is in werewolf form. If I mucked the change up somehow and became human. . . ." He spread his hands and shrugged, knowing that was all the explanation needed.

"Good morning, lads!" Remus said, clapping Harry on the shoulder as he walked by. "Did you rest well?" he added, a twinkle in his eye.

"Rest? What's that?" Harry said with an exaggerated yawn.

"That's what we did toward the end of the evening, in case you didn't notice," Remus reminded him.

"Really? I was asleep. I guess I missed that," Harry teased, and was rewarded by Remus ruffling his hair playfully.

"Thanks, boys. It was a lot of fun."

"For us, too, Remus," Ron said. "Too bad we can't do that over the holidays."

"Yeah, I can't see us running around Surrey or London or Ottery St. Catchpole. Too many people," Remus agreed. "Next term, we'll do it again."

"Cool!" Ron enthused. Remus waved to the group and went on to the Head Table to eat his breakfast.

"I wish I could do an Animagus transformation," Hermione sulked. "You lot have so much fun with them."

"You probably need to change animals," Harry suggested. "Are you still working on a cat?"

"Yes."

"With no progress?"

"*No*," she said with disgust.

"What animals do you know really well? What animals do you like particularly well?" Harry asked.

"Cats."

"Other than cats."

"I don't really like a lot of animals. I'm not a pet kind of person, except for cats."

"Maybe that's the problem, then," Harry said reasonably.

"You're kidding!" she said, appalled. "It can't be that simple."

"Why not? Remember when I couldn't turn the kitten into the monkey because I liked the kitten too well?" She nodded, her eyes wide. "I think it's possible you have a similar problem. There's something in the back of your mind that's blocking the change, perhaps." He thought a moment. "What's the most important thing in your life?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think your being so clever is so important to you, it's possible you're afraid you won't be as smart if you're an animal," Harry said wisely. "Could that be it?"

Hermione sat with her mouth hanging open, a protest on her lips, ready to argue several very logical points to prove Harry wrong. Then her mouth snapped shut as she considered what he'd said. She studied her hands a while, deep in thought. A few moments later, she looked up at him, her face astonished. "I think you're right! I'm afraid of the transformation!"

"So what can you do about that?" Harry said. "Or do you honestly, truly, deep down in your heart want to transform? There's nothing wrong with not being able to do the Animagus transformation. It's not something you really have to do to be successful in any kind of job, for instance. I mean, it will be handy for Ron and me as Aurors, but you don't want to be an Auror, so it's not necessary for you to be an Animagus." He stopped and thought a minute, studying her disappointed face, and realized she wasn't ready to give up yet. "You've been beating yourself up over it ever since McGonagall first started teaching it to us. Maybe if you relax about it a bit, it will work for you. And you may need to pick a different animal, since the cat isn't working for you."

Hermione sat quietly thinking about what he'd said. Then her face brightened and she replied, "Thanks, Harry! That gives me a new way of looking at it. That's great. Now I just have to work out what sort of animal to become."

"What's wrong with an otter? That's what your Patronus is," Ron suggested.

"An otter would be fun, but they can't keep up with running dogs – I couldn't run with you," she said.

"Think about different animals and see what suits you," Harry said reasonably, "just stop worrying about it. You don't have to become an Animagus."

"But I want to! I'll work on it this summer. I'll research loads of animals and find one that suits me." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, "I think being a phoenix would be brilliant."

"But you don't like to fly," Ginny teased.

"Yeah, there is that," Hermione agreed with a sigh. "Which animal will you try when you learn it, Ginny?"

"I'd like to be a horse, I think," Ginny said promptly. "And that's what my Patronus is."

"You don't have to be what your Patronus is," Harry reminded her. "Ron's Patronus is a bear, but his Animagus is a dog."

"They're similar in shape, anyway," Ginny said with a grin. "I like horses. After riding the thestrals, I think it would be brilliant to ride real horses, or to become one as an Animagus. I can't wait to start trying!"

"Don't start trying until McGonagall or Harry explains it to you really well," Ron warned, "or you might get stuck! Harry's had to change me back before. Being stuck as an animal is scary!"

"Harry's already started showing me how to do it," Ginny said cheekily. "I can almost make a cat's paw already!"

"Really?" Ron said, impressed. "Show us!"

Ginny struggled and grunted and took a long time to manage it, but eventually her left hand was covered in ginger fur and her fingers were a lot shorter, with leathery pads on the palm of her hand and each fingertip. "There!"

"That's great, Ginny!" her brother enthused.

"Doing that as a Fifth Year is pretty amazing," Hermione said with a smile. "Good job!"

"Thanks!" Ginny said with satisfaction, stroking the soft fur on the back of her arm as the conversation continued.

"Harry, do you feel your own intelligence when you're the animal?" Hermione asked.

"It's odd. You have the animal's mind, as well as your own, the animal's instincts as well as your own, but the animal's mind and instincts seem to take over at times, especially when you need to react quickly. It's an interesting experience," Harry said, smiling.

"Yeah, sometimes it can be confusing, which instinct to follow, y'know? Sometimes the collie wants to do something and I don't think it's a good idea so the two of us are fighting each other! It's weird!" Ron said with a grin.

"Ooo, I don't like the sound of that at all," Hermione said uneasily. "I trust my mind. I don't know what I'd do if I had a second mind inside my head arguing with me!"

"You'd win, hands down – or paws down," Ron said with hoot of laughter at his own joke. "Seriously, once you get used to it, it's not bad at all." He draped his arm around her shoulders and started playing with her hair. "With your hair, you could be a chocolate poodle. The collie sort of evolved from my hair colour, y'know. Harry and I were talking about it and it all just

fell in place. Apparently Ginny's cat is evolving from her hair colour, as well," he added, smiling at his sister who was still examining her partial cat's paw.

"A chocolate poodle? One of those horrid little toy dogs?" Hermione said, wrinkling her nose.

"Poodles come in all sizes," Ginny said reasonably. "The big ones are about as big as a collie, but they don't look so big because their hair is usually shaved off on most of their bodies. I've read lots of books about dogs and cats and so forth. I used to think I wanted to be a healer of magical animals, but I think Harry needs me to be a human healer," she said with a grin.

"Don't base your career choice on my needs," Harry said, reaching over to stroke her cheek gently, then twining a lock of her hair around his finger. "You need to do what makes you happy."

"I think I'll enjoy being a healer," she replied. "I like helping people."

"And you're good at it," Harry assured her, tweaking her nose. "Got your conk!"

"Watch it, or I'll get your dimple!" she teased.

"Can we get back to the poodle?" Hermione said. "If it's as big as a collie, I could keep up when you run."

"Yeah," Ron said, grinning. "That would be cool." He glanced over at Harry. "You know, I think Hermione could do with a boost from you."

"A boost?" Harry looked puzzled.

"Remember the boost you gave me when I was stuck?" Ron reminded him.

"Oh! A boost. Yeah, I can do that. Our neighbour had a poodle. I think I know enough about them to do the transformation."

"What are you talking about?" Hermione said suspiciously.

"I could turn you into a poodle for a while so you'd see how it feels," Harry explained.

Her eyes widened, her expression a mixture of fear and curiosity. "Really? But. . . ."

"I won't do it unless you want me to," Harry assured her. "Or Ron can do it if you'd rather."

"Oh no," Ron said, holding his hands up in surrender. "You get better marks in Transfiguration than I do. I'm afraid I'd mess it up somehow."

"Yeah, and you care too much about her to do something like that well anyway," Ginny agreed as she transformed her paw back into her hand.

"Are you saying Harry doesn't care about me? He was able to transform me," Ron said, acting aggrieved.

"You know I love you," Harry laughed, leaning toward Ron and patting him on the back fondly.

Ron looked mollified, then burst into laughter. "Oh, I'm SO relieved!" he said dramatically. "You love me! You really love me!" All four friends giggled at Ron's performance.

"So do you want me to try that?" Harry asked Hermione when the laughter died down. "Or you could ask Professor McGonagall to do it. I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

"I'd rather you did it if you don't mind," she said timidly. "When would you like to do it?"

"That's up to you. Just let me know when you're ready," he said amiably.

Hermione sat thinking while Harry and Ginny tickled each other and Ron played with her hair. Finally she burst out, "OK. Now. Let's get it over with."

"Huh?" Ron said. "What?"

"Let's turn me into a poodle," she said with determination. "It's now or never."

"Let's not do it here in the Great Hall," Harry said quietly. "If you really want to, let's go outside somewhere, maybe just into the edge of the woods, where we'll have some privacy."

"No," Hermione said nervously. "I'm afraid the dog will take over and I'll run off into the woods. Can't we do it somewhere more. . .confined?"

"How about the tunnel to Honeydukes?" Ron suggested.

"That will work. Or the Room of Requirement, if nobody's in it," Ginny said.

"That room has been quite busy since our exams ended. I think the tunnel will be our best bet," Harry replied. "OK, let's go."

Soon the four of them were seated on the floor of the tunnel. "Hermione, are you sure about this?" Harry asked her.

"Yes. Do it quickly, before I change my mind," she said, looking really frightened.

"OK," Harry said, lifting his wand.

"WAIT!" she cried, holding her hands out frantically. "Are you certain you can change me back?"

"I changed Ron back all right," Harry assured her. "I don't see any reason why it should be harder to change you either way."

Hermione took a deep breath. She was trembling visibly, her eyes frightened.

"'Mione, do you want me to be a collie when you're a dog, so you and I can talk dog talk or whatever? Will that make you more comfortable?" Ron offered.

"I can turn into a dog after I change you, if you want," Harry added.

"Oh, thanks, both of you. Ron, yes, I'd love for you to change. Harry, if you change and get stuck somehow, Ginny doesn't know how to change any of us back!" Hermione replied. "You stay Harry, OK?"

"No problem," he agreed. "Are you ready?"

"Just a sec," Ron said, then kissed Hermione quite thoroughly. While she was still catching her breath, he changed into a collie.

"Now," Hermione insisted. With three taps of his wand, Hermione changed into a large chocolate poodle, the long shaggy curls all over its body looking very much like Hermione's real hair. It stood there trembling, as if it were afraid to move. The collie whined and nudged it with its nose. The poodle started and turned its head, its ears flapping and startling it. It jumped in reaction, then sat down suddenly. The poodle looked at the collie intently for a few moments, then looked down at itself, studying its own appearance. It stood shakily to its feet and took a step, then another, then began walking, looking at its feet for a while, then moving with more confidence. It broke into a trot for a few steps, then suddenly began to run, racing down the tunnel, the collie pelting after it, both of them barking joyously.

"Oh, no," Harry groaned. "They'll hear them in Honeydukes."

"*Silencio*," Ginny said, pointing her wand at the dogs. Instantly, both dogs were silent, although their mouths were still moving. They stopped their run and turned, glaring back at Ginny and Harry, who were laughing merrily.

"Come here, you two. Nice doggies," Harry teased. When the dogs approached, he murmured, "You were going to be heard in Honeydukes with all that barking, you know."

The two dogs looked at each other guiltily, and then hung their heads just for a moment.

"Do you promise to behave and not be noisy dogs anymore?" Ginny chided them, a grin tickling her lips. They both nodded. "OK, then," she said and removed the Silencing Charm.

The dogs ran joyfully down the tunnel again, this time in silence. They stood up on their hind feet, nipping at each other's ears, dancing and playing, then rolling on the ground together.

"I think they're having a rather indecent amount of fun," Ginny said, amused by their antics. Harry chuckled and nodded in agreement. Finally, the two dogs rejoined them.

"Ready to change back now?" Harry asked the poodle. It shook its fur as if saying "no" but then sat and looked at him happily, its tongue lolling out as it panted. "You make a cute dog, Hermione," Harry said, then transformed her back into his best friend.

"OH! That was SO much fun! It was BRILLIANT!" she cried, leaping into Harry's arms and hugging him tightly. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"No problem," he replied through his laughter.

"Wasn't that the best? Wasn't it wonderful? I can't wait until I can do it myself!" she said to Ron, who sat grinning by her side. "I'm going to work hard over the holidays and by next term, I'll be an Animagus too!"

"I forgot to ask Remus something," Harry said late that evening. "I'm going to run down to his quarters. I won't be long," he said, kissing Ginny on top of the head and waving to Ron. Ginny and Ron were playing Wizard's Chess while Hermione read a book on poodles.

"See you later," Ginny called after moving her knight and taking Ron's castle. "Ha! I'll have you in two more moves!"

"That's what you think," her brother said wisely, moving his bishop and taking her knight.

"Where did that move come from?" Ginny fumed.

Harry left the Common Room as Ron began explaining his strategy to his sister while his bishop demolished her knight. Harry knew from experience that Ron could explain such things all day, but it didn't seem to help his or Ginny's or Hermione's chess games. Ron was just too brilliant a player for them to ever catch him off guard unless he became seriously distracted during a game, and that was rare.

After trekking down numerous staircases and several long corridors, he arrived at Remus's living quarters. He heard music inside. "Good, he's there," he thought as he knocked on the door. When Remus opened the door, he looked flushed and flustered.

"Hello, Harry. What can I do for you?" he said, running his fingers through his rumpled hair.

"I wanted to talk with you for a few minutes, if you don't mind," Harry replied.

Remus looked over his shoulder, hesitated a moment, then threw the door open. "Come on in," he invited, blushing madly as Harry saw Tonks smiling at him from Remus's sofa.

"Hi, Tonks!" Harry said with a grin. "I'm sorry, Remus. You should have told me you had company."

"That's all right," Remus said. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thanks. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Nice to see you, Tonks," Harry said, waving and starting for the door.

"Oh, no, you don't," Remus said, grabbing his godson's arm playfully and pushing him into a chair. "You came a long way to see me. What's up?"

"It's not a problem or anything," Harry began. He glanced at Tonks, who wrinkled her nose cutely at him, making him laugh. "I don't want to interrupt your evening."

"Tonks doesn't mind, do you?" Remus said, looking at her fondly.

Harry couldn't help it. His face split in a grin. "You two are on a date, aren't you?"

Remus blushed even more. "Well. . . ."

"Yep!" Tonks said gaily. "He's teaching me about the music he likes, and I'm trying to convince him the Weird Sisters make music, not noise," she said with a laugh.

"Sounds like quite a challenge," Harry said, chuckling. He looked at his godfather, who was sitting opposite him and leaning forward, giving him all his attention. "OK, I'll get to the point so I can leave and you two kids can have fun." Tonks giggled at this. "I was wondering, Remus. Are you going to stay at Grimmauld Place this holiday?"

"Yes, I will probably be there most of the time since the Order is so busy now. I have some research to do in London, and a few trips to make out of the country if I can manage them, but I will be there whenever I can. Why?"

"Do I have to stay with the Dursleys this summer? I mean, since you're my godfather and all, can't I stay with you?"

"I would love that, Harry, I truly would. But the protections that are in place . . ."

"Are based on my blood relationship with Aunt Petunia," Harry said with a heavy sigh. "I know."

"Exactly."

"I was just hoping there was some way around that problem, so I could stay at Grimmauld Place too."

"You have to stay with the Dursleys for at least a few weeks, Harry. As soon as it's safe for you to leave there, you can stay at Grimmauld Place, or The Burrow – I'm sure the Weasleys would be happy to have you, as long as you and Ginny behave yourselves," he said, his eyes twinkling.

"It would be brilliant to stay at The Burrow, but honestly? I would love to spend as much of the holiday as possible with my godfather. Of course, I also want to spend as much time as possible with my girlfriend. Somehow, there has to be a way to work these things out," Harry said hopefully.

Remus had a fond smile on his face. "I'm so touched that you want to spend your holiday with me, Harry. I promise you, as soon as possible, you will stay at Grimmauld Place and have loads of visits to The Burrow. How's that?"

Harry's face split in a grin. "Thanks, Remus. I wanted to talk to you about this before the trip back. I appreciate your letting me take up so much of your time." He stood to go. "Tonks, it's great to see you. Have fun, you two!" With a wave, he was gone.

When Harry settled into his favourite squashy armchair in the Common Room, Ginny squeezed in next to him and asked, "What did you need to ask Remus?"

"About where I'm living for the summer," he said as casually as he could.

Ron and Hermione turned to look at him. "What did he say?" Ginny asked.

"He said I have to stay with the Dursleys for a few weeks, but as soon as possible, I can stay at Grimmauld Place, and visit The Burrow as often as your parents can stand me. But he did say you and I have to behave ourselves." His eyes twinkled as he said this.

"Behave ourselves? Whatever could he mean?" she said as haughtily as possible, then dissolved into laughter with Harry and the rest.

"Guess what he was doing when I got there?" Harry teased.

"Remus?" Hermione said.

"Yeah."

"What?" Ginny asked. "Don't keep us in suspense!"

"He had someone with him. . .a young lady!"

"NO! No way!" Ron said. "Who?"

"Tonks! Remember after the battle in France? They seemed to be getting close then. I guess they've been developing the relationship. He blushed like mad when he invited me in and I saw her sitting on the couch. She said he's trying to teach her about the music he likes, and she's trying to convince him the Weird Sisters actually make music!" All of them laughed, delighted that two people they all cared about had found each other.

Hermione sighed and smiled as she said, "I hope they're happy together."

"They looked very happy. Remus's hair was rumpled when I got there," Harry said with a chuckle.

"You don't think they were snogging, do you?" Ron asked in surprise.

"Ron, you know adults snog too sometimes!" Ginny chided him. "Even Mum and Dad. . ."

"Don't go there, Gin!" Ron warned her. "That's too much information!"

The four friends laughed and talked and snuggled in their squashy armchairs until bedtime, then reluctantly parted and went their separate ways. As they trudged up the stairs, Ron said, "I can't believe the Leaving Feast is in just a few days. It feels as if we just got here a few weeks ago. Where has the time gone?"

"It's gone in classes and exams and Quidditch and snogging and various other pursuits," Harry said, clapping his friend on the back as they trudged their way up the spiral staircase. "It's been quite a busy term, hasn't it? It's amazing we managed to find time to go to classes at all," he teased, squeezing Ron's shoulder companionably.

"Yeah. We were such little kids last year, remember? We've grown up a lot this term."

"In more ways than one," Harry agreed with a chuckle, stretching and yawning as he pulled open his wardrobe and got out his pyjamas. "G'nite, guys," he called to the other boys as he took off his glasses and climbed into bed.

"Night," came from three other beds, the voices in various stages of sleepiness. Soon, the darkened room was silent except for the sounds of sleeping boys.

Chapter 39 – The Leaving Feast

The rest of the week passed all too quickly, and before he knew it, Harry was sitting down at the Gryffindor table for the Leaving Feast. The Great Hall was decorated in scarlet and gold Gryffindor banners. The Head Table included some strangers as well as Madam Bones, Minister of Magic, Arthur, Molly, Fred and George Weasley. Ron, Ginny, Harry and Hermione ran up to say hi to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then joined the many who had gone up to greet to the Weasley twins. The students hurried back to their tables as the rest of the staff entered. Each House table was full of students whispering excitedly, wondering why these extra people were here, and what interesting things might happen that evening.

After the, as usual, excellent feast, Dumbledore got up and raised his hands for silence. "And so we come to the end of another year at Hogwarts. It has been anything but boring, as I believe you will agree. We have had tremendous fun, wonderful learning opportunities and some very sad occurrences. We lost a number of dear friends recently. We toasted them not long after their deaths, but I would like to honour them one last time. Raise your glasses to the fallen."

Everyone stood and solemnly said, "The fallen," then drank from their goblets, then sat back down after a moment's silence.

"Now, on to more cheerful things. I'm sure you've noticed the decorations this evening. We have several awards to distribute. First, the Quidditch Cup, which we were unable to award at the final game due to circumstances beyond our control." A nervous titter of laughter floated across the hall – "circumstances beyond our control" was a very mild way of referring to Harry's abduction and the subsequent battles. "Harry Potter, as you all know, is captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry, would you please come forward?" Harry rose and strode down the aisle between tables, smiling at the headmaster, Remus, Hagrid, Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Firenze, Professor Sinistra and the others. "Once again, Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup! Three cheers for Gryffindor!" Dumbledore cried. As the students cheered, Dumbledore handed Harry the huge silver cup, which Harry lifted over his head in triumph as he turned and faced the crowd. The Gryffindor table went wild, the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs joining in the cheering. The Slytherins made a show of barely clapping their hands and looking sour. Harry turned to Professor McGonagall and presented the cup to her.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," she said fondly, a warm smile spreading over her face. Harry grinned at her in return.

As Harry returned to his seat, Dumbledore spoke again. "The House Points stand as follows: Gryffindor, 486; Ravenclaw, 415; Hufflepuff, 402; Slytherin, 324. I am pleased to present the House Cup to Professor McGonagall on behalf of Gryffindor." Professor McGonagall stood up, smiling broadly. "With my compliments," Dumbledore said, bowing a little as he handed her the Cup. He turned to face the students again and led the cheer, "Well done, Gryffindor!"

When the applause died down, Professor McGonagall sat down, but Professor Dumbledore wasn't finished. He raised his hands for quiet again and said, "I have the honour and privilege of presenting some special awards. I will be giving a plaque individually to several students, a copy of which will go on permanent display in Hogwarts' Trophy Room. When I call your name, please come forward and receive your award."

At this point, Hermione nudged Ron, who kicked Harry and tilted his head toward the far end of the Head Table. One of the strangers was obviously a reporter, a Quick Quotes Quill busily at work in front of him. Harry scowled, but then sighed. The man was here with Dumbledore's approval, or he wouldn't be at the Head Table.

Dumbledore smiled benignly at the waiting crowd, then lifted a large wooden plaque with the Hogwarts Crest in bronze mounted on the top, a smaller bronze medallion with the Gryffindor crest, and a large brass plate on the bottom. He read the inscription: "For extraordinary service to Hogwarts, this plaque is awarded to Ginevra Weasley, for training and leading the Healer Squad of Dumbledore's Army." Blushing madly, Ginny walked up and accepted her plaque, shaking hands with Dumbledore and then glancing at her parents. Her mother was wiping tears from her eyes and both parents were smiling hugely. The twins gave Ginny a big "thumbs up." She waved at them and went back to her seat, still blushing prettily.

Dumbledore picked up a second plaque and read from it: "For extraordinary service to Hogwarts, this plaque is awarded to Hermione Granger, for having the idea to start Dumbledore's Army and helping to organize it, as well as her excellent work as second-in-command to General Ronald Weasley." Hermione blushed nearly as much as Ginny as she accepted her award and the warm smiles of the Weasleys.

"I am especially honoured to award this plaque to Ron Weasley," Dumbledore said, holding up a plaque like the others, but which also had a large star with crossed wands beneath it as an extra decoration, "whose brilliant battle strategies minimized casualties while shortening the duration of the battle – I particularly liked the pincers movement, Mr. Weasley," he added, his eyes twinkling. "Very effective." Ron's pulled his ginger hair over his beet-red ears to hide them, but he couldn't hide the blush suffusing his face. Dumbledore handed Ron his plaque and told him to turn around and face the students. "I believe Mr. Weasley is due an extra cheer. His wisdom in leading the battle saved many of your lives. Hip Hip!"

"Hooray!" yelled the students. Harry, Hermione, Ginny and the twins cheered the loudest.

"Hip Hip!"

"Hooray!"

"Hip Hip!"

"Hooray!"

Ron ambled back to his place, his face split in an ear to ear grin, his cheeks as red as his hair. As he plopped down in his seat, Dumbledore held up another plaque and called Harry forward. This plaque had the Hogwarts crest, the Gryffindor crest and a brass plate with an inscription, but also included a bronze image of a phoenix. Dumbledore read the inscription: "For extraordinary service to Hogwarts, this plaque is awarded to Harry Potter, who trained Dumbledore's Army and led by example, inspiring them to go far above and beyond their personal expectations; who did his best to protect as many D.A. members as possible, while battling Voldemort and numerous Death Eaters; and who selflessly tended the most severely wounded despite being badly injured himself." He handed the plaque to Harry, and smiled down at the boy.

Harry was hanging his head. He didn't want a plaque. He didn't deserve awards. He'd rather Seamus and Katie were safe and well and sitting at the table with him enjoying the feast. He looked up at Dumbledore for a moment as he accepted his plaque.

"Well done, Harry!" Dumbledore said quietly. The hall rang with cheers again.

Harry turned around and looked around the room uncomfortably as the cheering went on and on. When the tumult settled down, he turned around and asked Dumbledore, "May I say something?"

"Of course, dear boy. The floor is yours," Dumbledore said kindly, then sat down.

Harry stood turning the plaque nervously in his hands, glancing around the Hall. Everyone sat quietly, waiting for him to speak. "Erm. . .I don't. . ." he stopped and cleared his throat. "Well. . .I wanted to say, um. . . ." He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders and looked at Ginny. Keeping his eyes on his girlfriend, he found his voice and carried on. "I wanted to say that I don't feel I deserve this award, or any award. If I'd been smarter, if I'd fought better, if I'd managed to kill Voldemort, we wouldn't have so many empty seats here. I'd much rather have Seamus and Katie sitting at the table with me than have any award. I do appreciate it," he said hurriedly, turning to look at the staff behind him, "but what I mean to say is," he said as he turned back to face his fellow students, "you lot were brilliant. I wanted to visit each of you after the battle, but I wasn't strong enough. And since then. . .well, I didn't want to remind you about sad things when you were studying for exams, or enjoying your free time. But now that I have the chance, I want to thank you, all of you who came to help me. You were brilliant, you really were." He stopped for a moment, looking around again, and his eyes fell on Alex McCullough, the Ravenclaw boy who'd asked Harry if he'd killed his dad. "Someone recently told me he wasn't as brave as I am," Harry said slowly. "I told him I'm not brave, and that's true. I get in these stupid situations and then have to find some way out of them. I get lucky a lot. I get a lot of help. Some things I do manage on my own, granted, but without the help of my friends, I probably wouldn't be standing here today. So thank you. That's all I wanted to say," he murmured, ducking his head and going back to his seat.

The Hall was quiet for a moment, then thunderous applause broke out, accompanied by whistles and cheers. Several people patted Harry on the back or shook his hand. It took a while for the Hall to settle down again. Professor Dumbledore joined in the applause and cheering and let it run its course before standing to speak again.

"Well said, Harry. I'm sure your words meant a lot to your classmates. Well done." He smiled at the young man fondly for a moment before going on.

"I'd like to introduce Madam Amelia Bones, Minister of Magic. She has some awards to present, as well." Dumbledore helped Madam Bones with her chair, and then sat down, smiling beatifically over his steepled fingers.

Madam Bones left her place at the Head Table, walking behind the table to the end, stepping down off the raised platform to stand on the students' level. She stood centred in front of Dumbledore, a table beside her covered in small boxes of various colours. She looked over the assembled students slowly, her eyes resting a moment longer here and there as she saw people she recognized, smiling in particular at her niece when she saw her, and at Harry, as well. She finally cleared her throat and began speaking.

"In the history of Hogwarts, students have gone to battle only once before, around four hundred years ago, when the Seventh Year students participated in a minor skirmish. Never before have students faced such a foe as they faced this year in Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Dumbledore's Army fought valiantly, brilliantly led by Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger and the various Squad Leaders. I've viewed the Omniocular records of the battle, and I must say, every one of you acquitted himself or herself admirably. You each stood your ground. You each listened to your leaders. Many adult wizards and witches could not have performed as well as you did under those circumstances. Well done!

"We will be awarding two brand new medals to you this evening. One of these awards was specially created to commemorate the Battle of Little Hangleton, the other to commemorate the Battle of Hogwarts. The Ministry of Magic is pleased to present these awards to those who fought to defend us from Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

"In your presentation boxes, you will find a medal and a ribbon. The medal is to be worn on all formal occasions, and may be kept either in the presentation box, or in a frame on the wall of your room, if you prefer. The ribbon is to be worn on your everyday robes. The proper placement for such ribbons and medals is the left front of your robes, over your heart. You have earned these awards. Wear them proudly! And when you see someone wearing such a ribbon, from these or other battles, treat him or her with the utmost respect and honour, for the Ministry does not give such awards lightly.

One of the strangers at the table got up and stood at a distance in front of the Minister. When he got his equipment set up, it was obvious he was a photographer.

She looked at the Gryffindor table and said, "Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, would you please come forward?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other nervously, then walked up to the front table, shoulder to shoulder.

"I am pleased to give the first two Battle of Little Hangleton medals to Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley," she said, opening a box covered in purple velvet and removing a small bronze medal hanging from a purple and gold ribbon, then pinning it to Harry's robes, shaking his hand as she handed him the box with the remaining ribbon in it. She repeated the action with Ron. The photographer moved around, taking pictures of each presentation, as he would continue to do during the rest of the ceremony.

"Thank you for your service, gentlemen," the Minister said. The boys thanked her and started to go back to their seats when she stopped them with a quiet word just for them. "I'd like you to do the presentations, gentlemen. These young people worked their hearts out for you. They risked their lives for you. They deserve to get their medals from you."

Ron blushed, dropping his eyes in embarrassment, then glanced up at his parents. They had heard the Minister's quiet comment and were bursting with pride. He gazed at them a moment, trying to get over his nerves, trying to work out how to deal with this situation. Even the twins were smiling at him proudly, no teasing in their eyes at all. Ron had always wanted to do something to stand out from the rest of his brothers. He suddenly realized he'd done so without even noticing it. He stood tall and proud and turned to face the student body, accepting the honour with good grace.

Harry blushed and looked uncomfortable. He honestly didn't want any medals. He'd led kids to their deaths. He glanced up at Remus and saw his godfather's understanding. Harry's heart was in his eyes. He didn't want to turn around and face the rest of the students with a medal on his robes. He just wanted to go somewhere quiet with his friends and not think about battles, but he couldn't do that, not right now.

Remus smiled at him warmly. "You'll be fine," he whispered.

Harry took a deep breath. These kids had earned these awards in the eyes of the Ministry. It was his job to hand them out. He took a deep breath and blew it out, straightened his shoulders and turned to face the student body. He would hand out the medals with sincere thanks to each one who received it. Once he sorted this out, he felt much better and finally smiled at the assembly.

Madam Bones seemed to understand that the boys needed a moment to themselves before going on. When they both seemed ready to move on, she said, "Now, those who fought in the Battle of Little Hangleton, please line up in front of Mr. Weasley. Those who fought in the Battle of Hogwarts, please line up in front of Mr. Potter." She handed a box to each boy, then stood quietly waiting until the noise of many feet moving on the stone floor stopped. "The Ministry of Magic is pleased to present battle medals to commemorate your participation in each battle. Thank you for your service to your country." Madam Bones stood between Harry and Ron and a little ahead of them, shaking the hand of each student who came forward. The students then filed up and received their awards and a handshake from Harry or Ron, then returned to their seats.

"Staff too," Madam Bones insisted. The staff lined up and Harry and Ron presented them with awards. Firenze looked amused as Harry tried to find someplace to pin the award, then finally gave up and handed it to him in its box.

Several unclaimed medals remained on the table. Madam Bones indicated them and spoke again. "The Ministry of Magic will be sending these medals to the families of those who perished in the fight, or as a result of their injuries.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley," she said, opening new boxes and pinning a new medal on each boy. "These medals are for those who were wounded in the battles. If you are among those, please line up in front of Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley." She handed both boys new boxes. "You know what to do." Again, Madam Bones made it a point to shake the hand of each student as he or she filed past, thanking them for their service.

When the last student left, Madam Bones said, "Staff too," and Remus came to get his award. He and Harry shared a blushing smile as Harry pinned the medal on his robes.

"Professor Hagrid?" Madam Bones called. "I understand someone named 'Grawp' also fought and was injured?"

"Minor injuries, yes, Madam Minister," Hagrid agreed. "He's me half-brother."

"Since he isn't here, would you please accept his award?"

Hagrid's face lit up. "Oh, yes, I'd be honoured. Grawpie will be that thrilled," he said as he hurried to accept the Minister's handshake and the award from Harry. He returned to his seat, the bristling of his black beard showing that he was beaming. He wiped tears from his beetle black eyes as he admired Grawp's medal.

"Wonder where Grawp's going to pin that?" Ginny said, nudging Hermione. They both giggled, then smiled and waved as Hagrid caught their eyes and held up the medal for them to see. Harry and Ron started to go back to their seats, but the Minister touched them on the sleeve, indicating they should stay where they were.

"There were several feats of particular bravery in each battle, for which the Ministry has created special awards. For risking his life under fire to retrieve the fallen and fighting to protect his patient, the Ministry of Magic is proud to present this Golden Star award to Neville Longbottom." As an astonished Neville made his way forward, Madam Bones went on. "The Omnioculars showed this particular instance which, in the opinion of the Awards Panel, merited a special award. The Healer Squad did a magnificent job overall, but at one point, Neville Longbottom was attending a fallen student and came under attack himself as he was lifting that student onto his broom. Longbottom fought back valiantly, saving his and the other student's lives and capturing the Death Eater who'd attacked him. Mr. Longbottom was wounded during this action, but when he delivered his patient to the treatment area, he jumped on his broom and went right back into battle. Well done, Mr. Longbottom," she said, pinning his medal on his robes. "How did things go with that patient?" she asked as she handed him the box and shook his hand.

"He. . . he died," Neville replied quietly. "It was Seamus Finnegan. He died from his wounds after he got back to Hogwarts."

"I'm so sorry. You certainly did your best to save him. Well done," Madam Bones said kindly. Neville posed for his photograph with the Minister, then went back to his seat.

"The Omnioculars also showed one student who led a charge into the midst of a large group of Death Eaters. This student was struck down, but not before he hexed several Death Eaters. His squad was inspired by his charge and cleaned up that area quickly. I understand the student was seriously injured, but is well now. The Ministry of Magic is pleased to present the Golden Star award for bravery to Mr. Colin Creevey."

Colin bounced to his feet and nearly ran to the front, his face wreathed in smiles as he got his award and his picture taken with the Minister.

"Could I have a copy of the photo, Madam Bones? Would you autograph it for me?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course," she said with a smile. She glanced at the photographer. "Make a note of that request, please." The man nodded and wrote something on a scrap of parchment. "And if any of the rest of you would like copies of the photos, please see the photographer after the Awards Ceremony and he'll take your names. There will be no charge for the photos. After what you've done for us, giving you photos of you receiving your awards is the least we can do for you." She smiled graciously at the applause that rang through the hall.

"One student was seriously injured, losing the bones in both legs, and yet kept fighting from his position on the ground. Then he managed to overcome his predicament with a Levitation Charm and relieved the tension of the Healer Squad by doing a marionette show with his boneless legs. Laughter often is the best medicine. I'm glad to hear he's fully restored to good health now. The Ministry of Magic is pleased to present the Golden Star award for bravery to Ernest McMillan."

The Hufflepuff table went wild. All the special awards had gone to Gryffindors so far. Ernie could barely make it to the front of the Hall for all the backslapping that was going on as he moved forward.

"Well done, Mr. McMillan," Madam Bones said as she pinned the award to his robes. "I was so upset while watching the battle through the Omnioculars. It was astonishing to see you sitting still yet battling for all you were worth. And then, for you to be so funny about your injury. I needed a laugh almost as much as those you made laugh at the time. Thank you for your service to your country."

"Thank you, Madam Minister," Ernie said formally, bowing a little as he shook her hand. He puffed his chest out for the photographer, strutting back to his place at the Hufflepuff table proudly, amidst renewed cheers and whistles.

"I've never seen such courage as I saw in the Omniocular account of this battle. The bravest, most selfless, most awe-inspiring fighter I've ever seen is Harry Potter. Mr. Potter, it is my extreme pleasure to present you the Golden Star Award with a Mystic Cluster for courage above and beyond the call of duty, strength of will, generosity of spirit and a command of magical powers rarely seen. This medal has only been awarded once in the last century, when Professor Dumbledore was awarded it for his battle with Grindelwald. It's an honour for me to be able to present this medal to you tonight." She pinned the medal on Harry, then stood with her arm around him to pose for the photographer. The medal was a Golden Star like the others, but the Mystic Cluster was a glittery haze surrounding the star, making it appear to be part of a galaxy.

Harry looked down at the medal, dazzled by its beauty, dazed by all that was going on this evening. He just wanted to go sit in the Common Room with Ginny in his arms, his friends by his side, laughing and playing a game of Exploding Snap. What did all of this ceremonial stuff mean? Love and friendship were what mattered, not medals. He wondered if he'd ever work out how to deal with such experiences.

"The Battle of Little Hangleton marked a change in battle tactics in many ways. Harry Potter came up with the idea of organizing Dumbledore's Army in a Muggle military fashion, with commanding officers, lower level officers, and specialty squads. The commander, or general, would plan strategies, train the troops in these strategies, and oversee the battle, changing strategies as needed. Mr. Potter chose Ronald Weasley, a brilliant chess player, as the general. Ron Weasley studied battle tactics in Muggle books to understand them, and then came up with plans that would work for him and Dumbledore's Army. For his brilliance in planning and executing these tactics, the Ministry is pleased to present Ron Weasley with the Golden Wand Award for Meritorious Achievement. This award is rarely given, and is a great honour." She handed the astonished Ron a plaque with a golden wand and an inscribed golden plate on it, and pinned another medal on his robes. "This award includes a monetary gift as well," she added, placing a heavy bag of gold in Ron's trembling hands.

Ron was speechless. He stood staring at the bag in his hands, then gazed wide-eyed at the Minister. "Th-th-thank you!" he stammered.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," she said warmly. She turned back to face the audience. "For his ingenious concept of using organized battle forces and training Dumbledore's Army, the Ministry is pleased to present Harry Potter with the Golden Wand Award for Meritorious Achievement." She handed Harry the plaque and pinned a medal on his robes, but he pushed the bag of gold away.

"No, please, I don't want it," he muttered uncomfortably.

The minister leaned in to speak to him privately. "You can do what you want with it. Share it with your friends. Give it away. Throw it in the lake. But you do need to accept it. A grateful government chose to give this to you, lad. You earned it."

With a heavy sigh, Harry took the bag and shook her hand, muttering "Thank you," and trying not to look to miserable. He looked at Ron, who was still gazing at his bag of gold in awe. Yes, Harry could give his bag of gold away. He'd send some to each family who'd lost a child in battle. That decision made, his heart lightened and he paid attention to the ceremony once more.

The Minister was speaking again. "One of the tactics Ron Weasley included in his plans was air strikes. His brothers, Fred and George Weasley, are the creative minds behind Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, a company that has cut a wide swath in the joke industry since it began nearly a year ago. Fred and George Weasley, would you please come down?" The twins elbowed each other playfully as they stood up. Molly looked as if she might scold them, but then thought better of it. The twins soon stood before the minister, huge grins on their faces. "For extraordinary service to our country, and the brilliant development of weaponry, the Ministry is proud to give you both this special award." She presented them with certificates and a large bag of gold, as well as Battle of Little Hangleton medals. "The monetary award is to not only repay you for the expenses you incurred in using up your stock in battle, but also to fund research and development of other aerial weaponry. Well done, gentlemen. I will be speaking to you about a contract for such research soon."

"Cool!" said Fred.

"Wicked!" said George, then both remembered their manners.

"Thank you, Madam Minister," they intoned solemnly together. The photographer snapped their picture as they shook her hand and accepted their awards.

Dumbledore spoke up. "I, too, have an award for the Weasley twins," he said as he made his way to the presentation area. "Never in all my years of teaching have I met a pair of mischief-makers like you. In some ways, Hogwarts has been a bit dull since you left. You always found a way to make everyone laugh, and in these times, we need as much laughter as we can find," he said, his eyes twinkling at the young men before him.

He turned suddenly to Madam Bones. "By the way, there's a swamp in one of our corridors these boys made as a prank. At first, it was so large, our caretaker had to ferry students across it!" He chuckled at the memory. "Professor Flitwick removed enough to make the hall

passable, but preserved part of it as a memorial to their ingenuity. You must see it before you leave." She smiled and nodded her agreement.

"Fred and George Weasley, it is my pleasure to present you each with an honorary diploma from Hogwarts," he said, handing a rolled-up parchment to each of them. They grinned and shook Dumbledore's hand.

Up at the Head Table, Molly Weasley burst into tears. "Oh, Arthur," she murmured. "They finally have their diplomas!"

"There, there, Molly," Arthur replied, putting his arm around her and patting her comfortingly.

As they walked back to their seats, the twins elbowed each other and whispered giddily together. "We couldn't pay for publicity like this!" Fred enthused.

"And a government contract! Have you felt this bag of gold?" George said gleefully. They plopped into their chairs, giving their parents cheeky grins, then waving merrily at the cheering students.

When things quieted down again, Madam Bones said, "Earlier this year, there was a battle in France, in which three students and one Hogwarts staff member participated. Also participating in that battle were Arthur Weasley, head of the Ministry of Magic's Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, Auror Nymphadora Tonks and retired Auror Alastor Moody. The Aurors will be presented their awards in a separate ceremony. Since Mr. Weasley has children here at Hogwarts and fought alongside them, the Ministry thought it appropriate for him to receive his award along with his children. These medals commemorate their participation in the Battle of Cascade Prele du Chevaux. Please come forward as I call your name." The Great Hall quieted.

"Professor Remus Lupin," she called. Remus came down to the presentation area and Madam Bones herself pinned the medal to his robes, handing him a purple and gold box as she shook his hand and thanked him.

"Arthur Weasley," she called, and went through the same process with him. Molly wiped her streaming eyes with a lace hanky. Her face was glowing, she was so proud.

Madam Bones took her time with each of the awards, spending a moment thanking each person as she handed out the awards. Ginny, Ron and Harry each received an award and stood in front of the Head Table along with Arthur and Remus. Arthur put an arm around each of his children and hugged them. Remus did the same with Harry, keeping his arm around Harry for the rest of the presentation.

"The Ministry would also like to present an award to Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who not only arranged for the rescue of these boys, but also helped overcome the diplomatic nightmare that followed." Dumbledore smiled and nodded as he accepted his award. Soon, everyone was allowed to return to their seats – all but Harry.

"Mr. Potter, please stay up here," Madam Bones said as he started to follow Ron and Ginny back to the Gryffindor table. Harry looked startled, glancing at his friends, then at Dumbledore, whose eyes twinkled as an enigmatic smile crossed his face.

Oh, no, Harry thought. *Now what?*

"After the Battle of Cascade Prele du Chevaux, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore put in a recommendation for Harry Potter to receive the Order of Merlin, Second Class. The Ministry of Magic does not hand out Order of Merlin awards lightly. The documentation on Headmaster Dumbledore's recommendation was gone over thoroughly, and the matter considered very carefully. The Ministry decided that, at the age of sixteen, Mr. Potter was simply too young to be awarded an Order of Merlin despite his many accomplishments. After the Battles of Little Hangleton and Hogwarts, I, personally, was quite angry that Mr. Potter had led children into battle. I came to Hogwarts' hospital wing to see Mr. Potter and try to decide on what punishment would be appropriate for what I saw as a serious misjudgement on his part. He was too ill for me to visit, and then I learned my own niece, Susan, was injured. I spoke with her," she smiled at Susan, "and she told me the way things really were during the battle. Harry Potter was under attack from Lord Voldemort as well as his Death Eaters, yet he managed to send a Blocking Spell that saved Susan's life. I visited other survivors of the battle. From their accounts, Mr. Potter did this type of thing several times. He was trying to protect the students while his own life was in mortal peril. Then I saw the Omniocular record of the Battle of Little Hangleton. I had copies made that could be projected on the wall, and showed them to the heads of all the departments in the Ministry of Magic, the Wizengamot and everyone else who had any say at all in how we deal with either awards or punishments in our world. I thought it was of the utmost importance that anyone in a decision-making position within the Ministry understand what we're facing. Too many of them were still in denial about the return of Lord Voldemort, and the need for the Ministry to act aggressively to stop him and his Death Eaters. Thanks to these visual records, which are being preserved in the Ministry's archives, the doubters and nay-sayers were finally convinced." She took a deep breath. "It is the unanimous decision of the Ministry of Magic that Harry Potter be awarded the Order of Merlin, but not Second Class, as Headmaster Dumbledore recommended after the first battle. It is my extreme pleasure and honour to name Harry Potter as the youngest Order of Merlin, First Class, recipient in our history." She reached behind her and pulled out a sizeable golden box. She opened it, revealing a large sunburst-shaped gold medallion hanging from a golden ribbon with purple stars woven into it. She had to ask Harry to bend down so she could put the ribbon around his neck. She shook his hand as the photographer took several pictures, the flashes of his camera making spots in front of Harry's eyes. The Minister turned Harry to face his classmates, standing with him and posing for the photographer. "Smile, Harry. This story will be on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow," she said, glancing up at him with a warm smile.

Harry just gazed back at her, fighting to quell the flip-flops of his stomach. *Oh, boy, more newspaper stories. Just what I wanted.* He sighed, wishing his life was different. But then he heard the sound of the applause, the cheers, the stamping of many feet in congratulations. He looked up, gazing around the Hall, his eyes resting on familiar faces here and there. And finally, he smiled.

Gryffindor Tower was the site of a huge party that evening. Arthur, Molly and the twins, as well as Remus and Professor McGonagall, joined the Gryffindors in celebrating all the honours heaped upon their House. Harry was getting sore from his back being pounded so often. As soon as the senior Weasleys arrived, Ginny took them into a quiet corner to talk with them. Harry glanced over toward them and saw her showing them her ring. Her mother's face was stunned. Harry's heart sank.

"A ring? Do you mean to tell me you two got engaged without so much as a by-your-leave to us?" Molly cried.

"No! No, Mum, it's not like that at all!" Ginny said, feeling she'd done the entire thing completely wrong. She hadn't wanted to write to them about the promise ring – it felt like something that should be told in person, but there hadn't been a chance to do so until now. As soon as she saw the chance to talk to them alone, she took it. Now she was regretting it. She was surprised at her mother's negative reaction. As many times as her parents had said they loved Harry, as often as they'd seen Harry and Ginny together, and as much as they'd seemed to approve of them going out together, Ginny had expected her mother to celebrate this happy news with her, not to be upset by it. Suddenly she felt a strong, gentle arm come around her shoulders and a tall, warm, comforting presence by her side. She leaned against Harry, glad he'd come to her rescue.

"Mrs. Weasley, I hope you don't mind," Harry said calmly, despite the fact his heart was in his throat. Her parents could force them to break up. They could forbid Harry to see her again. But he didn't think they'd actually do that. They might even be pleased with the idea once they got used to it. He glanced at Arthur and saw no real surprise in his eyes. *So he guessed, did he?* Harry thought, smiling at the man.

"What do you think you're doing, giving her a ring and . . ." Molly sputtered incoherently. Her emotions had been so abused all evening, and now this? She didn't know how to handle this situation at all!

"Mrs. Weasley, please, let me explain," Harry said with quiet intensity. "I love Ginny. She loves me. This is a promise ring. It means someday I'm going to come and ask you properly for her hand. That day won't come for a long time, though. We both have a lot of schooling to finish. But . . . ." He looked down at Ginny, his heart in his eyes, not knowing quite what to say next. "I, um, I just wanted her to know how much she means to me, that's all." He gazed earnestly into Molly's eyes. "Please don't be angry with her. The ring was my idea, so if you need to be angry at anyone, it should be me." He paused, glancing down at Ginny again before continuing. "We love each other. I hope you and Mr. Weasley understand."

Molly appeared to be fuming.

Harry tried again. "I didn't want to ask you formally because we're not ready for that yet – we're too young." He stopped and studied Molly's face hopefully for a moment, then realized he had one more detail to add. "I bought myself a ring at the same time, to show that I'm spoken for." He held his left hand out so they could see his gold Gryffindor ring.

Arthur put his arm around Molly and gave her a squeeze. "Molly, dear, I told you I had a talk with Harry in France. I suspected then that they were very serious. I didn't think this would come so soon, but I'm not surprised. Surely it's not that much of a shock to you? Ginny's letters have been full of nothing but Harry for months."

"I know," Molly said, trying hard to control her emotions, which were ranging between rage and heartbreak. "I just didn't think my little girl would grow up quite so soon."

Arthur drew her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. "Look what a wonderful young man she's chosen, love. We couldn't ask any better. You know that."

When Ginny and Harry heard Arthur's words, they looked at each other hopefully. Maybe everything would be all right. Harry tightened his arm around Ginny's shoulders, and she leaned her head against his chest, the contact comforting both of them.

Arthur broke the stalemate. He released Molly and held out his hand to Harry, a warm smile on his face. "Harry, we're happy for you both. I know you'll take good care of our girl."

Harry shook his hand and said, "I'll do my best, Mr. Weasley."

Molly opened her arms to her daughter and held her closely. "Will you at least let us know when the wedding is?" she said bravely through her tears.

"Mum! That won't be for ages!" Ginny protested. "We both have loads of studying to do first. We've already talked about that."

"You have? What else have you talked about?" Molly wanted to know.

Ginny whispered in her ear about her and Harry's discussion of where to live, how many children they wanted, and how long they'd have to wait before starting their life together.

Molly stepped back and looked her daughter in the eye. "You really are serious, aren't you?" Ginny nodded, her heart in her eyes for anyone to see. Molly smoothed Ginny's hair away from her face, lifting the heavy locks off her shoulder and putting them behind her back, straightening her collar, all the little things mothers do to tidy up their children, or just to show affection.

"Please be happy for us," Ginny murmured.

"I am, baby. I am." Her heart aching, Molly cupped her daughter's cheek in her hand and smiled sadly at her for a long moment. Then her eyes moved to Harry, who was watching her uncertainly. "Harry, dear, come here." She opened her arms and gave him a brief hug, kissing him on the cheek when he leaned down to hug her. "You've always been like part of the family. I could not be happier in Ginny's choice." She patted his cheek and let him straighten up, then reached blindly for Arthur's hand. "It seems we'll need to have a party when the children get home," she said, smiling bravely up at her husband.

"That's a wonderful idea," Arthur agreed, hoping Molly's heart would soon follow her words in acceptance of the situation.

Suddenly, the twins swooped down on them. "Did we hear something about a party?"

"What's the occasion?"

"We do fireworks for parties!"

"We have all kinds of party favours."

"Party is our middle name!"

"Where, when, and who do we send the bill to?" they said, talking over each other as usual.

Molly smiled at their enthusiasm. "At The Burrow, as soon as we can arrange it after Ron and Ginny get home from Hogwarts. I don't know that we'll need party favours, but I think fireworks would be a very nice touch."

"You're on!" said Fred.

"And we'll give you a family discount!" said George.

"What's the occasion?" they said together.

"Ginny and Harry are. . .well, betrothed isn't quite right," Molly said uneasily.

"We just say 'spoken for,'" Harry said with a grin at the twins.

"You're kidding," said Fred, not really believing what he was hearing.

"Harry and Ginny?" said George, his eyes widening as realization hit.

"Harry Potter's going to be a Weasley?" Fred said in astonishment.

"No, you dolt, Harry won't be a Weasley, Ginny will be a Potter!" George corrected him.

"Wicked!" they said together.

"We will definitely outdo ourselves on those fireworks, Mum," Fred promised.

"And anything else you want for the party, let us know. We've got contacts in all the entertainment fields now – caterers, bakers, decorations of all kinds, bands, whatever you want, we can find it – and get it at a discount!" George declared.

The twins descended on Ginny and Harry. "Welcome to the family, brother!"

"Good going, Ginny!"

"You picked a winner, Gin!"

"Harry Potter's going to be our brother!" They chortled and hooted with glee, lifting Ginny in their arms and doing a bizarre three-way dance with her, only stopping when all three were so dizzy that Harry had to catch a laughing Ginny or she would have fallen. The twins, as usual, managed to hold each other up while laughing merrily.

"What are you lot up to?" Ron said as he and Hermione joined the family gathering.

"You two don't have something you need to tell me, do you?" Molly said suspiciously, looking at Hermione's left hand, which only bore her charm bracelet on her wrist.

"No, Mum, we're not promised to each other," Ron said, glancing sideways at Hermione. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he just wasn't ready for such a commitment, despite his love for her.

"Honestly, Mrs. Weasley, I don't think Ron and I are ready to make that kind of commitment," Hermione said, as if reading his mind. Ron breathed a sigh of relief, smiling down at her.

Molly looked from Ron to Hermione and back uncertainly. She could smell a rat somewhere. They were very serious about each other, it was obvious. So why were they not in the same kind of rush as Harry and Ginny?

Meanwhile, the twins had filled Ron and Hermione in on the raucous plans they were making for what Molly had thought would be a nice quiet family gathering. She threw her hands up, surrendering to the twins' keenness. "I'll just let you lot plan it, then, shall I?"

"Brilliant!" Fred and George agreed.

Arthur saw the sadness behind Molly's smile. "Come with me," he whispered in her ear. "I have something to tell you." They excused themselves and went up to Ron's and Harry's room to have some privacy.

"What is it, Arthur?" Molly asked as she straightened Ron's bed and tutted about the state of Harry's clothes, which were strewn everywhere and could use a wash.

"I wanted to talk to you about Ginny and Harry."

"What about them?" she snapped, more harshly than she'd intended. Alone with Arthur, she could allow her emotions to show. Tears streamed down her angry, hurt face.

"I believe the reason they've become serious about each other so young is that Harry doesn't believe he has long to live," Arthur said gravely. "His life seems to be . . . I don't know, accelerated somehow because of You-Know-Who. He seems to be very determined to get everything he can out of life while he's able to. You can understand that, can't you?" He watched Molly's face as she considered what he'd said. "I think he's hungry for love, since he's had so little in his life growing up. Ginny's loved him her whole life, and the real Harry is so much better than the Harry she loved from the stories about him. She's just as much of a nurturing, loving person as you are, and that's good for him. Have you watched the two of them? If they're apart, even if they're busy talking to someone else, they look for each other. When they're together, she's always touching him, seeing if he needs anything, looking after him, letting him know he's cared for, and he treats her the same way. He is a very loving young man, you know that." She nodded. "Ginny's good for him. And he's good for her. I might have preferred they wait until they're older to get serious, but I can't see any reason to object to their relationship."

"Yes, but if he . . . if he. . . if he *dies*," Molly said, her voice breaking as her fears found their voice, "Ginny will be heartbroken."

"She will always have the memories to treasure, if that does happen," Arthur reminded her. "I wouldn't put it past Harry to win this war and come out of it all in one piece, ready to have a long and happy life with her. They've already been through a lot together. If she couldn't handle the kind of stress that's involved in being part of Harry Potter's life, the constant worrying about his safety, taking care of him when he's ill or hurt, all that – she would not have gotten involved with him at all. She's seen him fight You-Know-Who twice now. I can't

imagine how she managed to stay on her broom and do her job with the Healer Squad while he was risking everything right in front of her, but she did. She's extremely strong when she needs to be – just like you. Their relationship seems to be solid. I believe we need to be supportive of both of them, and be there for them when they need us. And if they wind up marrying young. . .well, Harry's parents, James and Lily, married right out of Hogwarts, and they were incredibly happy together from everything I've heard. We've known many others who did the same. And I would have married you right after Hogwarts if you had agreed," he reminded her.

"I had this silly notion that I wanted a career teaching school," she said, smiling at the memory. "I had no idea I'd wind up with a whole houseful of children of my own to teach."

"It wasn't a silly notion, and you can go back to teaching any time you want, now that all the children are nearly grown," he reminded her.

"I'm looking forward to having some grandchildren to teach," she said with a tender smile. "Just not from Ginny and Harry, not for a while!" She moved into his arms, looking up at him fondly. "I wouldn't change a thing in my life, Arthur Weasley," she said, pulling him down into a kiss.

"Me either," he agreed, holding her closely. "Now, are we all right on the Ginny and Harry issue?"

"Have they actually talked about the possibility of his. . .being killed?" she asked anxiously.

"I think it's more of an understanding between them. I don't think Harry talks about it much, if at all, but I see that knowledge in his eyes from time to time. He has the saddest eyes I've ever seen sometimes, haunted, even. He's tough, and an amazingly powerful wizard. As terrible as his duel with You-Know-Who was, it was a thrill to watch Harry fight. He's amazing. I know you were too far away from the centre of things to see much, but it was absolutely astonishing to watch him – terrifying, since I was so worried about him, but fantastic, as well. I believe he'll survive this war. I certainly hope he does, anyway."

"Ginny's being put right in the heart of danger, being so close to him. Ron, too," Molly worried.

"And there's nothing we can do about it," Arthur reminded her. "Being close to Harry Potter is a dangerous thing, I grant you, but it's also one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. He's such a dear boy. I couldn't be more proud of him if he were one of our own."

Molly sniffled a bit, trying to control her emotions yet again, scrubbing the tears off her face. She squared her shoulders, preparing herself for whatever was coming. "He will be one of our own someday," she reminded her husband bravely, "and that's a wonderful thing, isn't it? Let's go back down and enjoy the party, shall we?"

The rest of the Gryffindors, all of whom were aware of Ginny's and Harry's relationship, had noticed the scene in the corner between Ginny, her parents and Harry. When the Weasley parents disappeared up the stairs, there were some worried glances among Harry's friends, and between Ginny and Harry themselves.

When Arthur and Molly came down a few minutes later, they went to find Ginny and Harry, hugging them with joy on their faces.

"What happened?" Ginny asked cautiously.

"It took me a little while to get used to the idea, that's all. I'm sorry I reacted badly before. It was just a bit of a shock, and coming so soon after hearing about your battles again and all. . .well, I apologize for my behaviour. I am so happy for you, sweetheart, so proud of you. You know how much we love Harry. How wonderful that he's going to be 'officially' part of the family!" Molly said with obvious sincerity. "Now let me see this ring," she said, taking her daughter's hand in hers and admiring it quite satisfactorily.

"Welcome to the family, son," Arthur said, shaking Harry's hand and then pulling him into a hug.

"Thanks for understanding," Harry replied. "I'll take good care of her."

"I know you will," said Arthur.

Once the Gryffindors saw the Weasleys were accepting the situation with good grace, the party just grew noisier and even more fun. Finally, near midnight, Professor McGonagall, Remus and the Weasley parents and twins all left. Professor McGonagall reminded her House that they needed to pack, since they'd be leaving on the Hogwarts Express the next morning. Eventually, everyone went up to bed except for Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione. They sat in the comfortable old armchairs that were their favourite seats, the girls in their boyfriends' laps, all of them tired but not wanting the evening to end yet.

"I can't believe it. We go home tomorrow," Hermione said wistfully. "Where has the year gone?"

"I can't believe I have to go back to the Dursleys," Harry grumbled.

"Is that why you haven't packed yet?" Ron asked curiously.

"Yeah. I can't stand the thought of going back to Privet Drive."

"Can't blame you, mate," Ron agreed. "But didn't Remus say you wouldn't have to be there long?"

"Yeah, but even one second is too long," Harry said, getting more depressed by the minute.

"I know what you need, Harry Potter," Ginny said suddenly. "You need to do something FUN!"

"We've been partying for how many hours, and you think I need some fun?" Harry said, grinning at her. One of her talents was getting him to smile when he was down. It was one of the many reasons he cherished her.

"Yes, you do. You are in need of significant fun. Now let's think. What can we do that's loads of fun?" Ginny said, being very theatrical about putting her chin in her hand and thinking very

seriously about his problem. "Oh, I know," she said, giggling, then leaned over to whisper in his ear.

Harry blushed madly and laughed. "Yeah, that would be fun!" he agreed, still chuckling.

"So?" Ron said. "Are you going to keep this fun idea to yourselves? We could use some fun too!"

Ginny looked at Harry gravely. "Should we share?" she asked.

"It would be the polite thing to do, I suppose," he agreed.

Ginny hopped off of his lap and, looking around to be sure they were alone, sat on the arm of her brother's chair and whispered to Ron and Hermione, "Shrieking Shack," then burst into giggles.

"But. . ." Hermione began.

"It's just an idea," Ginny said, shrugging and climbing back into Harry's arms.

"It's brilliant! You take the Shack, we'll take the tunnel to Honeydukes," Ron agreed.

"Why don't you use the tunnel to the Shack, so we can travel together under the Cloak? That way, you're in no danger of getting caught coming out of the tunnel," Harry reasoned.

"Yeah, that's even better! OK," Ron agreed.

Hermione had watched this entire exchange in disbelief. "But we haven't packed!" she cried. "How are we going to get everything done?"

"Haven't you learned the Pack Spell yet?" Harry teased her.

"The Pack Spell?" she repeated.

"Yeah, Tonks showed it to me last year, and I looked it up and learned how to do it. I'll teach you in the morning," Harry said. "It's easy, and very fast. In the meantime, it's late. We'd better set the alarms on our watches so we get back in plenty of time." He started to follow his own suggestion, then grumbled angrily.

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, surprised at his sudden change in mood.

"My stupid watch. Damn Voldemort anyway." Harry looked at his faithful watch, the one he'd bought to replace the one ruined in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Its crystal was starred, its face nearly melted, but it had kept running, if not exactly keeping time, until this evening. It was now a completely useless decoration he'd kept on his left wrist for no understandable reason.

"What?" Ginny said, studying his face seriously.

"It was damaged by spell fire in the battle. When my arm healed, I put it back on anyway." He shook his wrist and looked at the watch again hopefully, then sighed with disgust. "It's dead. I'm surprised it kept running this long. I just couldn't throw it away while it still worked." He unbuckled it and tossed it in the bin.

"I can set the alarm on my watch," Ginny offered, hoping he'd get his playful mood back. "Four AM sound about right?"

"Perfect," Harry replied, a bit of a sheepish smile on his face. "Sorry."

"No problem," she said serenely.

"Yeah, four o'clock," Ron agreed, setting his watch as well.

"I'll go get my Cloak," Harry said, gently lifting Ginny off his lap and setting her back in the chair before racing up the stairs. Before long the four of them were huddled together under the Cloak, hurrying across the darkened grounds toward the Whomping Willow. Harry transformed into the cat and pushed on the knot that stopped the tree's motion, and the other three hurried into the tunnel, Ginny picking up the cat as they went underground. Once in the tunnel, Ron pulled the Cloak off of him and the girls, Harry changed back into himself, and the four of them ran laughing down the tunnel. About halfway to the Shrieking Shack, the tunnel widened. Ron and Hermione stayed there and Harry and Ginny ran on toward the Shack. Ron did a Cushioning Charm on the floor and he and Hermione leaned their lit wands against the wall, giving the room a soft glow.

"This may be it for a while," Ron said seriously. "If your parents take you to Italy for the whole holiday. . . ."

"Yeah," she replied. "We'll have to make this last." Her breathing was already quickened, her heart beating faster as he leaned toward her. After all this time together, her nerves still tingled with joy when their lips met. She hoped it would always be like this, with them finding such fulfilment together, so much delight in each other's company, such ecstasy when they made love. He trailed a line of kisses down the side of her neck, making her gasp with pleasure. His hands found her bottom, pulling her close to him, gently squeezing the lovely round softness there. He slid his hands up, pulling her shirt out of the waistband of her skirt, his hands gliding up inside the shirt as his lips made their way down her body. He expertly undid the catch of her bra, gently sliding his hands under the bra and lifting it away from her breasts, his hands softly kneading her breasts as he nibbled her earlobe and the side of her neck. She gasped, arching her back, pressing herself to him, and then tugging his shirt out of his waistband roughly. "You have too many clothes on!" she said huskily.

"Bossy little witch, aren't you?" he chuckled, his lips against her throat. He straightened and undid a few buttons, then pulled the shirt off over his head as she fumbled with her own buttons. Soon they were completely entwined, hands and mouths exploring hungrily.

Meanwhile, Harry and Ginny had finally reached the Shack. As they ran up the stairs, gasping for breath, Harry laughed and said, "It didn't occur to me they'd save time and energy by using the tunnel. Next time, they get the bed and we get the tunnel!"

"Works for me!" Ginny agreed, trying to catch her breath at the top of the stairs. She didn't have much time to do so, because his lips were glued to hers as soon as they stopped moving. He kissed her eagerly, lifting her into his arms without breaking the kiss, and carrying her into the bedroom. They managed to undress while still kissing and soon were revelling in the glorious sensation of skin against skin. His hands glided over her breasts as hers slid down his back, both savouring the delicious feelings their hands and bodies were experiencing. Moonlight spilled between the boards over the windows, casting a golden glow over their bodies.

"You are so beautiful," Harry said when the moonlight outlining her curves caught his attention. "Too beautiful for words." He gazed at her, drinking in the sight of her eyes half-closed as she lost herself in passion while his hands explored the lovely warm mounds of her breasts, the delicate arch of her hip, the long lean lines of her legs. He moved over her, gently caressing her, kissing her everywhere, treasuring every moment with her. He trailed kisses down her body, giving her beautiful breasts extra attention, then sliding down to blow a wet raspberry in her tummybutton, making her laugh. He rolled her over and playfully tickled the backs of her knees with his tongue, then kissed the tops of her feet, her ankles, her calves, rocking her back and forth to find new places to tantalize as he worked his way back up her body. She giggled and gasped as he teased some parts of her, tormented others, kissing and nibbling every inch of her lovely skin, bringing her to the absolute heights of pleasure.

She pushed him off and rolled him onto his back, her eyes full of heat. She ran her hands and lips over the soft hairs on his chest, teasing his nipples, giving him a tummybutton raspberry in retaliation, her long hair trailing deliciously over his body, driving him mad as she wandered further down.

If she touches me there one more time. . ., Harry thought, torn between ecstasy and worry. He pulled her on top of his body, engulfing her lips with his own, and rolled her onto her back.

"I love you so much," she moaned, her breath coming in gasps as they rocked together, locked in passion. "I never want to let you go."

"I love you, Ginny, I love you, I love you," he murmured, enfolding her in his arms and kissing her deeply. Her sighs of pleasure were the most wonderful music he'd ever heard. They loved on and on through the night, not wanting to waste time on sleep this last night together for who knew how long.

Four AM came all too soon, with very little rest for the four friends. Ginny's watch went off and they dutifully got up, helping each other dress amid much laughter. They entered the tunnel, being deliberately noisy in case Ron and Hermione had overslept. They were relieved to find the couple standing there with silly grins on their faces, waiting for them.

"Did you have fun, then?" Ron asked cheekily.

"*Oh*, yeah!" Harry replied. "You?"

"Yeah!" Ron agreed with a cheeky grin. "Ladies?"

"Mmmm," Hermione murmured.

"Mmmmm," Ginny agreed with a warm sultry chuckle, snuggling against Harry as they walked with their arms around each other.

"How in the world are we supposed to survive the holidays?" Ron mused. "I don't think I'll make it."

"You'll manage," Hermione assured him. "Great idea, you two," she complimented Harry and Ginny.

"Yeah. We're geniuses, you know," Harry joked.

"I think so," Hermione agreed, making the others laugh.

They made it to the Common Room without incident and kissed goodnight, then headed up to their respective rooms.

"I wish. . ." Harry said as he climbed into bed alone.

"Yeah, me too," Ron agreed.

Chapter 40 – The Way Home

In the morning, Harry, as promised, quickly taught his friends the "pack" spell, and all of them were ready in plenty of time for the carriages to take them to the train station. Remus would be travelling back to London on the train, as well, since he couldn't Apparate with his trunks. Tonks had Apparated to Hogsmeade so she could ride back with him, causing much comment among the students.

"Oooo, Professor Lupin has a girlfriend!" some of the girls crowed.

"She's a babe!" some of the boys declared.

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione all smiled, happy to see the glow on Remus's and Tonks's faces when they looked at each other.

Once everyone was on the train, Ginny, Ron and Hermione went to the front of the train for their last Prefect meeting and to start their duties for the trip home. Harry found a compartment and settled in, putting Hedwig's and Pig's cages on the overhead rack, and Crookshank's basket on the seat opposite him. Merlin perched on the back of Harry's seat. Merlin had taught Harry how to do a Glamour Charm so he would look like a scarlet macaw. Harry would perform this spell when they got to King's Cross Station. Muggles would be surprised enough to see someone walking down the street with a macaw on his shoulder, but if he had a swan-sized phoenix on his shoulder, traffic would just stop completely, so Merlin needed to be camouflaged. He would be disguised whenever he was outside of Harry's room in the Muggle world.

Harry sat by the window, leaning his head against the glass, watching the countryside go by, stroking Merlin once in a while. He was getting sleepy when Neville poked his head in.

"Hi, Harry. You alone?"

"For a while. Ginny, Ron and Hermione will be coming along soon. Come on in." Harry stretched, enjoying the extra room for his long legs for the moment. The compartment would soon be so full that he wouldn't be able to stretch as luxuriously again for hours.

"Thanks," Neville said, sitting down across from him. Harry relaxed against the seat again, still sleepy. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Erm. . .where do you and Ron go when you come in so late?"

Harry's senses were instantly alert. He and Ron had always known it was dangerous to come in late, but that had never kept them from doing so. The other boys had always seemed to be asleep when they sneaked in long after curfew. "Why?"

"I just wondered. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be nosy," Neville said apologetically.

"That's OK. You're one of my best mates. If anyone else asked, that would be nosy. It isn't nosy coming from you. The truth is, when we came in late last night, we'd been out snogging

our girls." Harry said, hoping he wouldn't have to elaborate much on his lie. *Well, it's not really a lie. We did snog*, he thought, smiling to himself at the memory.

"That's what I thought. Where do you go for that?"

"Um, if I tell you, then it's no longer a private place," Harry replied cautiously. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason," the other boy said hastily.

"You have a girlfriend, don't you?" Harry said with a grin, "and you want to find a good snogging spot! That's it, isn't it?"

Neville blushed madly. "Well. . .kind of."

"Kind of?"

"I don't know if she considers herself my girlfriend or not," Neville said, shrugging his shoulders and hanging his head.

"Who is it?"

"Luna Lovegood."

"Oh yeah, you two went to the Yule Ball together, didn't you? Have you gone out much?"

"What do you mean by 'going out'?"

"Going to Hogsmeade together, going for walks, that kind of thing."

"Oh." Neville blushed again. "A bit."

"Then why do you wonder if she considers herself your girlfriend?"

"I don't know. It feels more like we're just friends. I don't know how to . . . how to. . ."

"Move it to the next level?" Harry said wisely.

"Yeah. So she knows she's my girlfriend, you know?"

Harry thought a moment. "Are you sure she doesn't already know she's your girlfriend?"

Neville shrugged, looking miserable.

"Have you let her know you'd like her to be your girlfriend?"

"I don't know how!" Neville looked miserable.

"You could show her how you feel," Harry suggested. "Have you tried?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you opened doors for her, held her hand, kissed her. . .?"

"Yeah, when she'll let me." Neville was blushing again. "Sometimes she just goes charging through doors and I don't have a chance to hold them for her. And no, I've never kissed her. I . . .erm. . .I don't know how."

Harry smiled, remembering the feelings of uncertainty and fear in his first encounters with girls. "So what do you want from me, mate?"

"Um. . .you seem to know a lot about girls," Neville began.

Harry hooted with laughter. "No, I don't! I just know a lot about Ginny. And Hermione too, I suppose. We were all friends long before Ron and Hermione or Ginny and I got together. Most girls I simply don't have a clue about, and that includes Luna."

"Oh," Neville said in a small voice. "I just thought. . ."

"What?"

"That maybe you could tell me how to. . .what to do to. . .what I mean is. . . ."

"Spit it out, Neville," Harry encouraged him with a grin, his eyes twinkling merrily.

"How to get her to like me. How to find out if she does like me. How to have a relationship like you have with Ginny." The words tumbled out of Neville in a torrent once he got started.

Harry sat back and scratched his head. Where to start? "Um. . .have you ever held her hand?"

"Yeah. Mine got all sweaty. It was gross."

Harry grinned in spite of himself. "Yeah, that sounds like a first-time hand-holding," he chuckled. "It gets better, believe me. Have you ever told her you fancy her?"

"No! I could never do that!" Neville blanched at the very idea.

"Why not? Do you fancy her or not?"

"Yes, I fancy her, but I could never *tell* her!"

"If you don't tell her, how will she be sure?" Harry said reasonably. "I mean, you can be nice to her, give her little gifts, hold her hand, hold doors for her, help her with her chair, all that kind of thing, and she might think you fancy her. But she'll be hurt if you never actually tell her."

"You and Ginny are in love, aren't you?" he asked shyly.

"Yeah," Harry said, blushing and dropping his eyes. His whole face softened at the thought of Ginny. Neville could see the effect just her name had on his friend.

"What's it like?"

"What's what like?" Harry said, being cautious again.

"To be in love."

"Oh. Well. . . .it's wonderful. She makes me feel warm all over. Just thinking about her makes me smile. I feel safe and comfortable with her. She's a great friend – I think that's important in a relationship, actually. If you aren't friends first, then you don't have anything to build a relationship on. At least, that's how it seems to me. I mean, look at Dean. He goes from girl to girl, just having fun, not taking the time to become friends with them, and he hurts a lot of feelings that way. He always moves on just as the girl starts to get to know him, and begins really caring for him. Of course, maybe he doesn't want to get serious about anyone yet. I mean, we are pretty young still."

"But you and Ginny are serious."

"Yeah. I think some people find the right person early, that's all. My parents fell in love when they were sixteen. Remus told me that."

Neville chuckled. "So you're following in your dad's footsteps, then?"

"Yeah. My mum even had long red hair like Ginny's. My mum's hair looks darker than Gin's in pictures, but still, another redhead," he said with a smile.

"That means you're very likely to have redheaded kids," Neville said wisely.

"Huh?" He'd startled Harry. "What do you mean?"

"It's genetics. You have a gene for red hair in your family and so does she. So you may have redheaded children. It's like cross-pollinating plants. If you have a plant with certain characteristics and cross it with another that has those characteristics in its background. . ."

"Oh, yeah. I remember that lesson," Harry said, smiling at the thought of a houseful of redheaded children who looked like Ginny. "So what are you going to do about you and Luna?"

"I don't know. I'd like to write to her over the holidays, maybe get together now and again. I'll have my Apparition license by the end of July, so it would be easy enough to go to visit her."

"That sounds like a good idea. Where is she now?"

"I saw her sitting in a compartment alone. I was too embarrassed to walk in."

"Why?"

"Dunno."

"If I were you, I'd go to her compartment and sit with her," Harry said.

"Wouldn't that be a bit forward?"

"What's wrong with that?" he joked. Seeing the discomfort in his friend's face, Harry came up with a different idea. "If it will make you more comfortable, invite her to join us here. The four of us will probably nap a lot on the trip since we didn't get a lot of sleep last night, so you'll be able to be with her uninterrupted, but you won't be alone with her."

"That would be brilliant! Are you sure you don't mind? I mean, this is your last trip with Ginny for a while," Neville said, suddenly acting shy again.

"Don't remind me," Harry said, immediately depressed. He fought down the dark feelings and looked up at his friend. "Go on and get her. I don't mind, and I'm sure the others won't either. But you'll probably have to put up with us snogging a bit. Will that bother you?"

"Uh. . .I don't think so."

"Maybe you'll learn something," Harry teased.

"Maybe I will," Neville said, brightening. "OK, I'll go see if Luna will come down here. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. See you in a bit," Harry said. "If I'm sleeping, just wake me – or not, your call." He thought a moment, then added, "and on the kissing thing? Just tilt your head to the side so your noses don't bump and the rest will come naturally." He tilted his head to demonstrate. "And start out slowly, gently. She'll like that better than if you rush her."

Neville beamed. "Thanks, Harry!" he said brightly, then left to find Luna.

After a few minutes, Luna came into Harry's compartment while Neville gallantly held the door for her.

"Hi, Harry," Neville said nervously. "Luna was alone, so I asked her to join us."

"Great!" Harry said with a smile. "Hi, Luna."

"Hello," she said, her enormous eyes locking on him intently. "You know, your scar looks different these days."

"Yeah."

"Why is that?"

"I took another Killing Curse," he replied casually, not really wanting to talk about it.

"And survived it?"

"No, I'm a ghost," he said, teasing her. "Yes, I survived it. I guess he didn't aim it very well or something."

"Does it hurt?"

"What, the Killing Curse or my scar?"

"Either. Both."

"Yes," Harry replied shortly, hoping she'd get off this topic soon. Seeing Neville's distressed face as he looked between Luna and him, Harry relented. "The Killing Curse does hurt, a lot. And my scar gives me pain sometimes as well. Most of the time when I say I have a headache, it's actually my scar hurting."

"I'm sorry," she said simply but sincerely.

"'S'OK," he muttered.

"Are you looking forward to the holidays?" she asked.

"No," Harry said with a sigh. "I hate living with my relatives. I can't wait to get out of there."

"Well, this is the last time, though, isn't it?" Neville said comfortingly.

Harry smiled. "Yes, it is. I'm holding onto that thought as my one bright hope for the first part of the summer."

"Why the first part?" Neville said.

"Remus said I can stay with him in a few weeks," Harry said, hoping to avoid going into details.

"Remus?" Luna asked.

"Professor Lupin. He's my godfather. I thought everyone knew that by now," Harry said patiently.

"Oh. I forgot," she replied.

"Where does he live? I didn't know he had a house," Neville asked.

"He doesn't. I inherited Sirius Black's house. Remus will be staying there," Harry explained.

"Stubby Boardman has a house? Where? The last time I read anything about him, he lived in a tent in Shropshire," Luna said, her eyes confused.

"Sirius's family had a house in London. That's what I inherited," Harry replied, avoiding the Stubby Boardman subject completely.

"Are you going to try to get a job again this summer?" Neville asked. All of Harry's friends knew about his working for the tile shop. Some of his mosaics had hung in his room in Gryffindor Tower this year.

"Dunno. I'll just have to see what happens. And if I get a job in Surrey, it might be hard to get to work once I move to London."

"You have your Apparition license already, don't you?"

"Yeah, Dumbledore arranged it so I could get it early, along with the dispensation to do magic out of school while I'm still underage," Harry agreed. "It's been a huge help."

"I can't wait for my birthday, so I can do magic outside of school and get my Apparition license," Neville said excitedly. "I couldn't believe I was actually good at Apparating! As clumsy as I've always been, I was really afraid I'd splinch myself!"

"You've done loads better since you got your own wand," Harry reminded him.

"I would never have believed breaking my dad's wand would be one of the best things that could happen to me," Neville said with a grin. His pocket started moving on its own. Neville reached into it and pulled out his toad, Trevor, handing it to Luna. "He wanted to come and visit you," he told her tenderly.

She smiled at the toad, petting it gently on the head as she sat it in her lap. "Oh, cute widdle Trevor, such a dear widdle thing," she murmured.

Harry had to stifle a laugh at her speaking baby-talk to a toad. Then he looked at Neville, who was watching Luna fondly. While she was bent forward concentrating on Trevor, Neville's arm was sneaking around her back. When she sat up again, he would have his arm around her shoulders. *Nice move, Neville!* Harry thought, doing his best not to laugh and break the sweet moment between them. There was no mistaking the expression on Neville's face. If he could work out how to manage it, he'd kiss her right there in front of Harry and Trevor. Trouble was, Neville didn't seem to be able to work out how to manage it.

Just then, Ron, Hermione and Ginny arrived. Ron and Hermione sat on the same side as Neville and Luna. Harry noticed that Neville bravely kept his arm on the back of the seat behind Luna even when Ron raised his eyebrows at him for it. Ginny and Hermione noticed, but carefully stayed quiet so they wouldn't disturb the fragile moment. The seats weren't really made for four people to sit on one side, so Hermione snuggled tightly against Ron, which neither of them minded at all. Harry leaned into his corner by the window, so he was supported by both the window and the wall behind him. Once he'd got comfortably slouched there, he pulled Ginny into his arms. She rested her head on his chest, snuggling in, her arms wrapped around his waist. Harry leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

"Mmmm, you smell good," he murmured, stroking the silky richness of her hair.

"You, too," she mumbled against his chest. She turned her head around and smiled at Neville and Luna.

"Great party last night, wasn't it?" she said to Neville.

"Yeah, it was," he agreed.

"You should have invited Luna. She would've been welcome!" Ginny said. She moved so that her back was against Harry's chest and she was facing the others, her arms resting comfortably on Harry's, which were around her waist. She interlaced her fingers with his and smiled at Luna and Neville.

"Thanks. We spent the evening tidying up our House," Luna said calmly. "No parties."

"Sorry. We should have thought to invite the other Houses," Hermione said, distressed that she hadn't thought of it in time.

"Then we would have needed to use the Great Hall for the party," Ron reminded her. "Our Common Room was full to bursting as it was." He made a small "Oof" sound as Hermione elbowed him. "But it would have been nice to have the other Houses at the party, you're right," he amended, realizing his gaffe.

"Ronald, what are you going to do with the money the Ministry gave you?" Luna asked suddenly. "How much was it?"

Ron blushed brightly. When he hadn't been with Hermione, he'd thought of little else since he'd been handed the bag of gold along with one of his medals the night before. "I don't know how much it is, honestly. It seems to be all galleons, but I haven't counted it. I don't know what I'm going to do with it yet, either. I may buy a Firebolt, then save the rest. I'll probably use it to pay my Auror School costs so my parents won't have to pay them. Maybe I can help Ginny with her Healer School costs, too. I think I'd like to buy something nice for my parents." He grinned, then squeezed Hermione gently. "And I may buy something for my girl."

"Ron, you don't have to—" Ginny protested.

"I don't even know if I can. I don't know how much money is in there. But those are the things that I've thought of that I'd like to do with it," he said with a smile. "I'll just have to see how things work out."

"Thanks," Ginny said sincerely.

Hermione looked up at him, touched beyond words. He'd struggled his whole life with being poor, and now that he finally had a bit of money, he was planning to spend it on other people! Eyes sparkling with affection, she said, "You don't have to buy me anything, Ron! You should save your money to help with your expenses during Auror School."

"I'll sort it all out over the summer, I imagine," he said, smiling tenderly down at her.

Ginny watched this interaction between his brother and his girlfriend with interest. Were they ready to be more serious? She couldn't be certain from watching them. When Ron quieted and just kept staring at Hermione, Ginny decided to give them a moment of privacy. She turned to Luna and asked, "Do you two plan to see each other over the holiday?"

"I don't know," Luna said, looking shyly at Neville.

"I'd really like that," Neville said humbly. "Would you?"

"Yes. Yes, I would like that," she said, a smile spreading over her face. They stared at each other intently. Any other couple would have kissed at that point, but Neville and Luna weren't any other couple. They were both terribly shy and were still trying to work out how to be a couple at all.

Their conversation had caught Hermione's attention. She could see they were nervous with each other, and it seemed they wanted to kiss, but that stupid toad was in the way. She simply couldn't stand it. "Neville, why don't you put Trevor up in the overhead with Hedwig and Pig? They won't bother him, they're both in cages."

"What about Crookshanks?" he said, eyeing the cat in her arms warily.

"He isn't interested in toads, are you, Crookshanks?" she said, hugging the ugly yellow cat. "And you know Merlin won't bother him."

At the sound of his name, Merlin pulled his head out from under his wing and surveyed them all regally, then tucked his head away again.

"I don't mind holding him," Luna said quietly.

"But then you can't hold hands or snog," Ron said reasonably, "and if we all snog, you lot may as well too."

Neville and Luna blushed madly. "Snog?" Neville said, his voice cracking.

"Snogging is *loads* of fun! I highly recommend it," Harry said, chuckling as he leaned down to kiss Ginny's suddenly upturned, grinning face. Their kiss went from a peck to something more serious and she turned around again, snuggling against him happily as he folded his arms around her and pulled her closer to him.

"Oy, get a room!" Ron teased, and Hermione put Crookshanks gently on the seat beside her, then turned and grabbed Ron by the ears, planting a big sloppy kiss on him.

"See?" Harry said, chuckling softly into Ginny's hair as he nuzzled her neck. "Loads of fun!" He glanced up and saw how red Neville's and Luna's faces were. "Oh, I'm sorry," he apologized immediately. "We didn't mean to embarrass you or anything. We just get a bit carried away sometimes."

"That's OK," Neville said, sitting stiffly, still waiting for Luna to lean back in her seat so his arm would be around her. Suddenly she did sit back and felt the warmth of his arm behind her back.

"Oh, excuse me," she said, blushing furiously.

"No problem," Neville said nervously. He glanced at Harry, who winked and nodded. With that encouragement, Neville tightened his arm around Luna, letting her know it was no accident that his arm was around her shoulders.

"Neville?" she said, gazing seriously into his eyes.

"Erm. . .yeah?" Neville looked at her uncertainly, but something in her eyes made his expression soften. He leaned forward, carefully tilted his head to the right so their noses wouldn't bump, and kissed her lightly on the lips. Both of them now had bright pink cheeks, but they both looked happier, too. Neville glanced at Harry again, his eyes alight with joy.

Harry decided to give him an example to follow, so he cupped Ginny's cheek in his hand and kissed her softly several times before letting the kiss deepen. When he and Ginny came up for air, they glanced over at Neville and Luna. They were holding tightly to each other, their lips locked together, oblivious to anyone else around. Harry smiled at Ginny and kissed her nose, then her forehead. Both of them were very tired. She snuggled against his chest again, and soon they were sound asleep. Ron's soft snores and Hermione's deep breathing soon joined Harry's and Ginny's sleepy sounds. Neville and Luna kissed a while longer, then just held each other, happy their shyness barrier had been broken at last.

The quiet of their rest was broken some time later when Harry awoke, shivering and wondering why the train had stopped. He looked around, wondering what was going on, and realized he could see his breath. "Dementors!" he cried, sliding out from under Ginny and pulling his wand. The other five pulled their wands and followed Harry out of the compartment door. Dementors were in the corridor and several compartments, with still more gliding in through the train's windows, which were all open on this unusually sultry day. *"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"* Harry cried, and his stag raced down the passageway, tossing Dementors out of the windows as it went. Patronus charms were being cast all over the train as D.A. members became aware of the danger. Harry ran down the passageway, looking into each compartment he passed. He sent his Patronus into several compartments to chase out Dementors, then felt a cold wave on his back. Turning around, over his five friends' heads, he saw a mass of Dementors coming their way. "GET DOWN!" he cried, pushing Ginny to the floor and aiming over Ron's head to send a Patronus that direction. Ron turned and sent his bear Patronus to stop the Dementors that were coming in the window beside them. When the Dementors in the passageway left, Harry turned forward again, running as fast as he could, directing his stag wherever it needed to go.

Remus came into the car, saw Harry pelting toward him and cried, "I've got the carriage ahead. Is everyone all right here?"

"We just came forward. I cleared some that were in the passageway behind us, but we haven't checked the compartments back there," Harry replied in a rush.

"Tonks is working on the carriage ahead of this one – I'll go forward and help her. We need to check on the driver, as well. You clear this carriage and work your way backward. The D.A. members are casting Patronus charms everywhere, but not all of them are effective."

"Yeah, I noticed," Harry said grimly. "They need more practice."

"They're getting it today!" Ron cried, sending his bear into a compartment which a Dementor had entered from outside.

"We're surrounded!" Hermione cried, looking out of the windows next to her and the ones visible in the compartment beside Neville. "They're *everywhere!*"

Cries of "EXPECTO PATRONUM" floated through the train, with various shaped silvery mists, and some unshaped mist, coming out of wands all over the place. Most of these Patronus charms weren't strong enough to chase Dementors away but they at least held them at bay until a stronger one came along, usually Harry's or Ron's, since they were the fastest at casting the spell. Hermione's otter gambolled and played on its way to chasing the Dementors, then flipped the monster in the mask with its back feet, flitting off to take on another one.

Ginny's horse galloped around, either rearing and pawing the enemy to the ground, or turning and kicking with its back feet, sending the Dementors flying out of the windows. Neville shocked himself by finally making a corporeal Patronus when a Dementor got too close to Luna. His Patronus was a dolphin that flapped its tail in the monster's face, knocking it down, after which it skulked away.

Harry raced back down the corridor, followed closely by his friends, checking every compartment, then running into the next carriage and doing the same. In one compartment, a Dementor was kissing a young Slytherin boy. Harry's stag threw the attacker out of the window, but the boy was already lost. A second monster was about to kiss another boy in that compartment, but Harry's stag got to him in time. As the Dementor left, Harry knelt by the boy, who was gasping for breath.

"Are you OK?" Harry asked urgently, shaking the boy's shoulder roughly. "Wake up! Are you OK?"

The boy finally managed to focus his eyes a bit and nodded. "I. . .I think so."

"Good. Eat some chocolate, you'll feel better," Harry said, turning to race out the door again.

Ginny broke off a piece of chocolate from the bar in her pocket and handed it to the boy, pulling Ron and Neville away from the boy who'd been Kissed. "You can't help him now," she said. "Come on." The boys, Hermione and Luna followed Ginny out of the door. She looked both ways, looking for Harry. He'd disappeared. She ran in the direction they'd been going, looking from compartment to compartment. She saw him come out of a compartment several doors down, run a few feet, and direct his stag down the aisle toward a Dementor entering the train through a window. While Harry was concentrating on his Patronus, a ham-sized fist came out of a compartment door and hit him hard just above his ear. His head crashed against a bell mounted on the opposite wall and he fell to the floor, not moving.

"HARRY!" Ginny screamed as she ran to his side. She glanced into the compartment. There was a Third Year Slytherin who had followed Draco Malfoy slavishly ever since he'd started at Hogwarts, standing with his fists still held ready as if Harry might get up any moment and fight him. This boy was already nearly as big as Crabbe and Goyle. Ginny raised her wand and did the first hex she could think of. Soon the boy was screaming, covered in running sores. Ron and Hermione cursed him at the same time, Neville and Luna moments later, all with different spells. Where there had once been a large and angry boy was now a quivering slimy mass like a pudding that had melted. It had open running sores all over it, oozing blood and green pus.

"Serves him right," Ron snarled, turning back to Harry. "How is he, Gin?"

"It's bad," she said, trying not to fall apart. "I can feel a deep depression in his head from that boy's fist. He hit that bell on the wall, and he has a huge bump on the other side of his head from that. I can't help him. I'm afraid to move him. He needs a real healer." She conjured a neck brace for him and then dissolved into tears, not knowing what else to do for him. Hermione knelt beside Ginny, putting her arms around her friend and holding her as she sobbed. Ginny held Harry's hand, her other hand smoothing his hair or touching his cheek, over and over. He was bleeding from the ear on the side where the boy had punched him.

Ron looked around. The Dementors seemed to be gone now. He sent an Adfero to Remus, who came pounding down the passageway and fell to his knees beside Harry, Tonks close behind him.

"What happened?" Remus asked, his heart in his voice.

Ron filled him in, indicating the slimy pile in the compartment as the villain.

"Well done!" Tonks said admiringly. "Whatever jinx that was, I want to learn it."

"It was probably four or five jinxes and hexes all at the same time," Hermione murmured, "except the boils were Ginny's – those were first."

"Good work," Tonks assured all of them. "Now, Remus, make him comfortable, and I'll go and get a healer."

"Could you try to get Healer Pomfrey from St. Mungo's? Harry trusts him. His password is 'scar on his sister's elbow,'" Ginny said, tears streaming unheeded down her face.

"I'm onto it. I'll be back soon. Remus, get them to stop the train at the next station, all right? Otherwise, we might Apparate right in front of it, and that could hurt," Tonks said with a cheeky grin, trying to lighten things up a wee bit.

"Yes, I'll do that as soon as I get him settled," Remus said, kneeling next to his godson. Tonks blew him a kiss and Disapparated with a soft "pop."

"This looks bad," Remus said, worry creasing his prematurely aged face as he pushed Harry's thick hair aside as gently as he could to try to inspect the wounds. "We need some ice and some sterile cloths. Neville, run to the galley and ask the food trolley lady if she has any ice. We'll need two ice packs, one for each side of his head."

"Do you know how to treat this kind of injury?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"I used to be the mediwizard for a local Quidditch team. I've treated this kind of injury before. Ice and sterile coverings are the best things to do until a real healer comes along," Remus assured her. "You did well to conjure the neck brace for him, Ginny. I'm guessing you're the one who did that?" She nodded, tears streaming down her face. "I think that, once we have ice on both sides of his head and something over the wound to protect it, we can move him to someplace more comfortable. Luna, would you go look for the nearest empty compartment?"

She nodded and took off running, looking in each doorway she passed. Four doors down, she found an empty compartment. "Here!" she called, waving back to the group huddled anxiously around Harry.

"Thanks," Remus called. Neville came back with a bucket of ice and an armload of clean dishtowels, all the "clean cloths" he could find. Remus and Ginny carefully made ice packs that wouldn't press on Harry's wounds, but would cool them and possibly stop the swelling. "OK, Ron, I'm going to need your help. Ginny, you're the smallest. Come get in front of me, between my arms. Your job is to keep his head stable, his ice packs in place and his head and neck in line with each other. I'll carry his shoulders. Ron, you carry his legs. I'll conjure a

stretcher to put under him, but I don't want to trust that with the train rocking along the tracks the way it is. Between the stretcher and us, we should get him there safely." Following Remus's instructions, Harry was soon lifted onto a conjured stretcher, Ginny gently steadying his head, Remus controlling the stretcher and Harry's shoulders, Ron holding Harry's legs at the far end of the stretcher, moving cautiously along the passageway. Shocked faces were sticking out of every compartment in the carriage.

"What happened?" "Is he dead?" "Did a Dementor get him?" The questions flew the length of the train as word spread that Harry Potter was seriously injured.

Ron yelled at them to get back as the sad procession slowly made its way past them. Carrying a young man who is six foot three through a train's narrow passageway is a difficult task. Turning such a long burden in that tight passage to go through the narrow door of a compartment proved to be impossible. Hermione Vanished the entire wall of the compartment in a fury, anxious to do something to help. They finally got their awkward load into the compartment, where Remus magically enlarged the seat so it would be long enough for Harry to be comfortable. He, Ginny and Ron put the stretcher on the enlarged seat.

Harry's breathing was quick and shallow, his colour very pale, blood still running from his ear and the wound on his head. Ginny started to press cloths against the wound to stop the bleeding, but Remus stopped her. "You can't press on a wound like that. You might push bone into his brain. Just keep it covered. The healer will be here soon."

Ginny's face, already pale, lost all colour as the reality of Harry's injuries sank in. She looked at him, her heart breaking. What could she do for him? "Oh. He needs blankets," she said, her training breaking through her numbed brain.

"I'll get some cloaks out of these trunks," Ron said, pulling two trunks down and digging out winter cloaks. "Here," he said, handing them to his sister.

"Thanks," she replied, sniffling hard as she gently spread the cloaks over her boyfriend's still form. She sat on the floor by his side, holding his hand, stroking his cheek, praying he'd wake up soon. The others stood around waiting, as helpless as she was, hoping he'd be all right, but the dent in his head above his ear had been painfully obvious to the naked eye before the ice pack was applied. His hair was matted with blood. Luna excused herself and reappeared with a basin of water and a flannel, handing it wordlessly to Ginny.

"Oh, thank you!" Ginny said, wringing the flannel out and dabbing at the blood on Harry's cheek and neck, trying to clean his ear and hair. She knew enough not to try to clean the wound itself. That was a real healer's job, not hers. When she cleaned around his earring, she sobbed. It hadn't protected him at all. She couldn't wait until she was making enough money to buy him good jewellery that would help keep him safe! Ron stood behind her, rubbing her and Hermione's backs, comforting them the best way he knew how.

Neville stood aside, not knowing what to do. Luna put her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder. Neville wrapped his arms around her gratefully. That simple contact was more comforting than Neville could have imagined. He looked at Harry, his heart breaking. Why couldn't he find some way to help? Everyone else had. He felt like such a loser. Harry had always been such a good friend to him, and here he was, not doing anything to help. He felt a slender hand rubbing the tears off of his cheeks.

"He'll be all right," Luna said quietly.

"He has to be," Neville said fiercely. "He just has to be." He held Luna closely for a moment more, then said, "I know what we can do. Harry hates rumours. Let's go tell people the truth about what happened." Luna nodded.

"That's a good idea, Neville," Remus commented. "Thanks."

"Yeah, thanks, mate. That will be a big help," Ron said solemnly. "I think Harry would appreciate that."

"Oh, while you're gone, please tell the driver to stop at the next station to pick up Tonks and the healer, all right?" Remus added. Neville nodded, and left with Luna to tell people what had happened, and that a healer was on the way.

In a little while, they felt the train slowing and finally stop. Within moments, Healer Pomfrey and Tonks were at the compartment door.

"How is he?" the healer asked Ginny. She just stared at him, her eyes inconsolable, unable to speak.

"This looks bad," Marcus mused. "Has he come round at all?" Everyone shook their heads. "Harry! Harry, wake up! I need you to wake up now. You're scaring poor Ginny to death. Wake up, Harry!" he called.

"What's your password?" Ginny asked suddenly.

"Scar on my sister's arm, just above the elbow," he replied immediately, giving her a quick smile. "Someone did this with a fist?"

"Yes, and then his head hit a bell on the wall on the other side – he has a bump as big as a tennis ball there," Ginny said, pointing to the injury.

"Remus, lift his head and shoulders without bending his neck. That neck brace looks good, but I want you to be very careful with him until we know what's going on in there. I need to get some potion down him," Marcus said. When Remus had him lifted sufficiently, Marcus put a few drops of potion in the young man's mouth. Harry didn't move, didn't react. His breathing was quite shallow, his skin so pale, his eyelids were nearly translucent. Marcus put a few more drops in his mouth. Still no reaction. More drops, and finally Harry drew a deep breath. "OK, put him down," Marcus said. "Ginny, call him. Tell him to wake up," the healer instructed.

"Harry? Harry, wake up! Come on, wake up! Harry, please! Wake up! I need you, sweetheart," she said, her voice breaking as she forced herself not to cry anymore. "Please, please, Harry, wake up!" She straightened up and leaned over him, kissing him gently on the lips. "Wake up, baby. Come on, wake up. Harry! *Wake up*!" She ran her hand over his forehead, tracing his scar with a fingertip, something she never did when he was awake. She ran her fingers through his hair, traced his eyebrows, removed his glasses and kissed his eyes, then his nose, then his lips again. "Wake up, baby, please, wake up!" As he finally began to stir, she sat down on the floor next to the seat where he lay, and took his hand in hers. She put

her face in his palm, breathing in the scent of him. "That's it, you can do it. Please, please, wake up," she murmured, kissing his palm. His fingers curled and touched her cheek softly. She looked up and saw his eyes just barely open.

"Gin. . .?"

"Right here, baby."

"Wha. . .?"

"You're hurt, but you're going to be fine," she said heartily. The faces of those around her began to relax a bit as Harry regained some colour. His eyes were wandering around oddly.

"How do you feel, Harry?" Marcus said.

"Who. . .?" Harry murmured.

"Healer Pomfrey. My password is 'scar on my sister's elbow.' Remember me?" Marcus said as he looked into Harry's eyes and ran his fingers lightly over his injuries.

"Three."

"What?"

"Three," Harry insisted.

"Three what?" Marcus asked.

"Of you." Harry frowned and squinted, trying to get his eyes to work together properly. "Of all of. . ."

"You're seeing three of me?" Marcus replied, still examining his patient.

Harry tried to nod, gave it up and said, "Yeah."

"Here are your glasses," Ginny said, putting them back on his face.

"Thanks."

"Better?" Marcus said.

"Little."

"Harry, I want you to follow my finger. Don't try to move your head, just follow my finger with your eyes." Marcus held his finger over Harry's face, then moved it up and down, then side to side. "Very good, Harry. Now, can you wiggle your fingers for me?" Harry wiggled his fingers. "And your toes?" Harry moved his feet. "Excellent. Can you feel this?" Marcus said, touching Harry's knee.

"Yes."

"Great. Can you feel this?" Marcus said, touching the calf on Harry's other leg.

"Yeah."

"And this?" Marcus prompted, acting as if he were touching Harry's leg somewhere, but actually not touching him at all.

Harry frowned. "Erm. . .no?"

"Excellent, Harry. Well done."

"Why couldn't I feel . . .?" he said, much more awake now than he had been just moments before.

"Because I wasn't touching you. That was just a test, to make sure you were telling me what you were really feeling. You're going to be fine."

"Tell . . . my head . . . that," he said, wincing in pain as Marcus pushed his hair aside to see the damage caused by that huge fist. "Ow!"

"I'm sorry. It's going to hurt a little bit until I get things cleaned up and can see what I'm doing here. It won't take long. Are you still seeing three of me?"

"Two now."

"Good! That's an improvement," Marcus said encouragingly.

"Why can't I move my head?"

"You're in a neck brace. We need to see how your neck is, make sure there's no damage there, before we can remove it. Just be patient with me, I'll get to it in a little while," Marcus assured him. Eventually, Harry's wounds were cleaned, potions put on them, and other potions inside him to speed the healing process.

"Better?" Ginny asked, seeing him looking around more alertly.

"Yeah, I guess," he replied. "There's only one of you now," he added, smiling at her.

"Good! I can't stand competition, you know," she said tartly, making him chuckle.

"Harry? If you feel strong enough, you might be able to speed the healing process yourself. Can you do your healing spell, or are you not feeling well enough?" Marcus asked.

"Maybe." Harry raised his hands awkwardly, trying to find the injuries. Ginny and Marcus placed his hands near the wounds and told him to be careful there. His face became concentrated, intense, and his fingers gingerly explored the sides of his head, finally coming to rest with the fingers of each hand surrounding the wound on that side. After several minutes of complete silence, he said, "My brain's bruised. And I have a huge dent in my head." He looked around the compartment. "Where's Merlin?"

"Oh! We forgot about him! He's in our compartment. We just stopped in the nearest empty one after you were hurt," Ginny said, appalled that they'd forgotten that Harry now had a bird with healing powers in its tears.

"Do you want me to get him, mate?" Ron offered. "I doubt he can fly in the passageway. It's probably too narrow for his wingspan."

"Yeah. Thanks, mate," Harry whispered. "Hurts."

"The dent in your head is not nearly as bad as it was when I got here. You're much better already," Marcus told him. "Can you heal the bruise on your brain? I can do it, but your way is much faster."

"I think so. . ." Several minutes later, he dropped his hands. "That's all I can do for now," he said, looking tired. "I need Merlin."

"Here he is," Ron said, coming in with the phoenix on his shoulder. Once in the compartment, Merlin glided down and sat on Harry's chest, looking him in the eyes for a few moments. The phoenix stretched his beautiful neck out so his head was over one of Harry's wounds. Thick, silvery tears fell from the bird's eyes onto the injury, healing it quickly. The bird moved to the other side of Harry's head and healed the lump there.

"Thanks, Merlin," Harry whispered, raising one hand wearily to pet him. The bird settled down on Harry's chest and began crooning to him sweetly, filling the room with phoenix song.

"I never get tired of hearing that," Hermione murmured.

"Me either," Ron agreed. "Makes me feel good all over."

"Are you feeling better, Harry?" the healer said. He nodded. "Let's see what kind of progress you've made." He examined Harry first with his wand, then using a crystal point as Healer Bradford had done. "I'm surprised that boy used his fist instead of a spell, but it makes the injuries easier to heal," he commented. He reached into his bag and pulled out another flagon of potion. "Your phoenix healed most of the injuries that you and I hadn't managed before. Drink this. It should take care of the rest of the damage. Then you'll just need to rest for a few days and you'll be fine."

"Rest? At Privet Drive?" Harry said sarcastically.

"What's he talking about?" Marcus asked the young man's friends.

"He lives with his aunt and uncle at Privet Drive. They're Muggles and have mistreated him all his life," Remus replied. "Harry, I'll stay with you until you're better. And I would love it if those Muggles give either of us a hard time."

"You'll stay with me?" Harry asked, suddenly hopeful. "Thanks!"

"My pleasure," Remus replied.

"I can come and visit you, if you want," Tonks said brightly.

"I'd like that, but I bet Remus would like it even more," Harry said, a twinkle in his eye. "Can we get this thing off my neck?" he asked Marcus.

"I need to make sure everything's all right back there. Hang on," he said, using the wand and the crystal to check for broken bones or any other damage. "Wonderful. All right, Harry, the collar can come off, but I have to do some adjusting to your neck and spine because of your being hit from the side," he said as he removed the collar. "It will sound awful, but it won't hurt you, I promise. If I didn't do this, you'd have pain in your neck and back from the bones being out of alignment. I'm going to do a Cushioning Charm on this bench and leave a gap where your face will fit so you'll be comfortable, then I'll help you roll over onto your stomach," the healer explained. "You just relax." With the young man positioned on his stomach, Marcus ran his hands over Harry's neck and spine, then said, "Breathe out. Relax," just before pressing his hands hard into Harry's back, making his spine crackle, Harry grunt, and everyone in the compartment cringe. He ran his hands over the boy's back again. "Good, that worked. Now, I need you to relax," he said as he lifted the boy's head from the magically cushioned seat. "Trust me, Harry. Just relax," he repeated calmly. Harry blew out a breath and did his best to relax his muscles. With a quick twist, his neck crackled and Marcus smiled in satisfaction. "Fantastic," he said as he used both wand and crystal to check his patient again. "Good as new. Well, almost. Here, see if you can sit up," he said, offering his hand to help Harry up. "You may be a little unsteady at first."

The boy sat up, weaving a little when he first became upright, then shaking his head as if to clear it. He squinted, then rubbed his eyes, sliding his hands back carefully over the sides of his head to see how he was. The dent and the lump were gone, just a sore spot on each side of his head to remind him of his injury. "Wow. Thanks, Healer Pomfrey!" he said, smiling at the man.

"You're welcome. And thanks for what you did to heal yourself. If you and your phoenix hadn't managed it, you'd be in St. Mungo's for a week at least."

Harry shuddered involuntarily.

"You feeling all right?" Marcus asked, concerned.

"Yeah. Just the idea of a week in St. Mungo's. . .sorry," he replied, grinning ruefully up at the healer.

Marcus grinned. "I understand completely." He reached into his bag and pulled out two flagons of potion. "These are pain potions. This one will help you sleep, and this one is the non-drowsy formula. The directions are on the flagons." He studied Harry's face for a long moment as the boy took the proffered flagons, then seemed satisfied with what he saw. He stood up and closed his bag. "If that's all, I'll go back to work. Did you have any casualties from the Dementor attack? Someone else I should see?"

"One boy was Kissed, but everyone else seems to be fine, and we got chocolate into everybody," Tonks replied"Show me that boy. I'll take him back to St. Mungo's with me," Healer Pomfrey said. He and Tonks left to find the Slytherin boy.

"Harry! You're all right!" Neville cried as he and Luna came back to the compartment.

"Yeah. Still a bit sore and all, but the healer said I'd be fine," Harry said with a weary smile.

"Come on, let's go tell everyone," Neville said, taking Luna by the hand and trotting down the passageway again.

Harry chuckled. "Looks like they got over being shy with each other," he mused. He looked at his friends and asked, "What happened to me?" They told him the story, and what they'd done to the boy who'd attacked him. "Wish I could've seen that!" he said with a grin.

"It's probably still there, quivering like a great melting pudding," Ron replied.

"I should go check on him, actually," Remus said. "Will you be all right, Harry?"

"Yes, thanks. I'll be fine."

"I'll look in on you on my way back to my compartment, then. Call me if you need me," Remus replied.

"Thank Tonks for me, will you?" Harry asked suddenly.

"It will be my pleasure," Remus replied, his eyes twinkling.

"I knew that," Harry said with a cheeky grin. Remus laughed, then waved and left.

"Wonder why that boy hit me?" Harry wondered.

"He was a Malfoy fan," Hermione said. "He used to follow Malfoy everywhere."

"Not that fat little boy who had a funny walk?" Harry asked. "Bowlegged or duck-footed or something?"

"The very one," Ron assured him. "He's huge now, like Crabbe and Goyle. I guess we didn't notice him because he's a Third Year and we never had classes with him."

"I wish he'd never noticed me!" Harry said ruefully, rubbing at the few bits of his hair still matted with blood.

"You're a little hard not to notice," Ginny purred, leaning down to kiss him. "Don't scare me like that again, OK?"

"I'll do my best," he promised.

"That's good enough for me," she assured him.

"Do you want to go back to our compartment, or stay here?" Ron asked. "I'll help you if you want to go back."

"Thanks, mate. Yeah, let's go back. Hedwig and Pig are alone in there with Crookshanks," Harry said smiling in anticipation of Hermione's outburst.

"Crookshanks wouldn't hurt either of them!" she cried defensively.

"I know, but you're so beautiful when you're angry," Harry teased. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

"Are you calling my girlfriend beautiful?" Ron asked mildly as he helped Harry to his feet. Harry was still a bit wobbly. Ron pulled his friend's arm over his shoulder to help him balance.

"Yeah. She is. So's mine," he said with a cheeky grin, tightening his arm around his best friend's neck playfully.

"Yeah, she is," Ron agreed amiably as the girls giggled behind them. "They both are, actually. Just checking."

Once they got back to their own compartment, Harry sat in his corner, pulling Ginny into his arms again. Soon their compartment looked just as it had before the Dementor attack. Ron and Hermione, Ginny and Harry were all napping, Neville and Luna snogging, Merlin sitting on the back of Harry's seat, his head under his wing.

When the food trolley lady stopped at their compartment, they all woke up. Harry reached for his pocket, ready to treat everyone to snacks as usual, but Ron put his hand out and said, "Nope. Not this time."

"Huh?"

"Harry, you have treated us on every train ride we've ever taken together," Ron said seriously. "It's my turn."

Harry smiled and sat back in his seat, watching with a smile as Ron took a few galleons out of his pocket and took a deep breath. "We'll buy the lot," he said firmly, echoing Harry's words from their first train ride.

Hermione bit her lip, wanting to tell him to save his money, but not wanting to spoil this moment for him. Ginny looked at her, understanding her look, and smiled, then said, "Thanks, Ron!"

"Yeah, thanks, mate," Harry said sincerely as he reached out for a chocolate frog from the huge stack now on the seat beside him. Neville and Luna thanked Ron profusely and Hermione gave him a kiss.

Ron blushed madly, his ears fiery red, but he had a delighted smile on his face. This having money thing was fun!

They ate until they thought they'd burst, then Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione drifted off to sleep again. Neville and Luna snogged a bit and then cuddled happily for the rest of the trip.

A few hours later, they pulled into King's Cross Station. Neville and Luna left the compartment quickly, Ron and Hermione more slowly.

"Are you coming, mate?" Ron asked, noticing that Harry hadn't moved.

"Yeah, eventually. I'm just not in any hurry."

"Do you need some help getting up?" Ron asked, reaching out to help him.

"No, thanks. I'm not dizzy anymore. You guys go ahead. It's easier to get stuff down if the compartment's not so full."

"OK," Ron agreed, "but I'll get these trunks down for you." He got Ginny's and Harry's trunks and Hedwig's cage down and sat them on the seat opposite Harry and Ginny. "If you find you need help, or you want me to carry your trunk and Ginny's. . ."

"I'll let you know. Thanks, mate." Ron and Hermione finally left. Ginny sat watching Harry, who apparently didn't want to leave the train.

"Do you think they'd take me back to Hogwarts if I refused to get off?" he mused sadly.

"No. Come on, love, it won't be so bad," she said encouragingly.

"A lot you know," he grumbled. "Sorry, didn't mean to be ugly." She shrugged, not at all worried about his temper showing. It was understandable, given that he had Dursleys waiting for him. Finally, he got groaning to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Ginny asked in alarm.

"I'm fine," he said shortly.

"You always say you're fine!" she protested.

"I have a bleeding great headache. There, are you happy now?" he snapped. He saw the hurt look on her face and grabbed her shoulders. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be so rude. I do have a bad headache, but I'll be fine. I love you, sweetheart. I didn't mean to hurt you." He folded her into his arms and covered her face with kisses, finally making her giggle.

"Do you want your pain potion? Remus has it," she said when he let her up for air.

"No, it's better already. I probably slept at a funny angle or something," he replied. "Then again, you're kissing it and making it better, aren't you?"

"Yes," she replied, pulling him closer and kissing him tenderly. He went from kissing her lips to nibbling her neck. "That tickles!" she laughed, pushing away from him a bit. She looked at his face in surprise. While he was kissing her, he'd grown his beard to make up for his show of bad temper a few minutes before. He knew it would make her happy. The white stripes looked very distinguished. "Oh, love. Look at you. You're magnificent."

"And love is blind, so I've heard. I think you just proved it," he said, kissing her neck again and laughing at the same time. He rubbed his beard over the soft skin under her ear, making her giggle.

"If you go outside like that, there will be girls all over you," she warned, pulling away from him and smiling up at him.

"That could be fun!" he joked, but then looked at her seriously. "But the only girl I want all over me is you." He kissed her quite thoroughly, earning groans, whistles and a wide variety of comments from the students passing by who could see into their compartment.

"Did you hear that?" Ginny said suddenly.

"What?"

"Some girls were saying, 'Who's that man Ginny Weasley's snogging? Wait until Harry hears about this! Maybe he's free again!'"

"Oh boy. Just what I need, more fan girls. So should I keep the beard or get rid of it?"

"Keep it. I like it, and I know it's you under there," she teased, smoothing his moustache away from his lips, then running her fingers down the white stripes that outlined his chin.

"As you wish, m'lady," he replied, kissing her lightly on the nose, then lifted their trunks off the seat. Ginny carried Hedwig in her cage. They stepped off the train with him carrying both trunks and Merlin riding on his shoulder, still looking like a phoenix.

"Look, that's Harry's owl! That man in the beard. . .it can't be Harry, can it? Is that a phoenix?" The fan girls were staring, pointing and discussing him as if he couldn't hear them.

"Did you know I can hear everything you're saying?" he said, turning to them suddenly, his eyes blazing in a flash of temper. "Yes, I'm Harry, and Ginny and I are still together and always will be. You girls need to find boyfriends of your own. What you need is a good snog with someone you care about – and that someone is NOT me! Have a good holiday." With that, he put his and Ginny's trunks on a trolley, stowed Hedwig on top, and put the scarlet macaw glamour on Merlin as he forcibly tamped down his anger.

"With Merlin as a macaw and sitting on your shoulder, you look even more like a pirate," Ginny teased as she looked up at him.

Only Ginny could tease him out of a temper so quickly. "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of butterbeer," he growled in his best impression of a pirate's voice, squinting one eye shut and trying to look tough. Her laughter pealed through the station, his deep chuckles not far behind. "I guess we have to go now, huh?" She nodded. He pushed his way through the divider between platforms 9 and 10, with Ginny close behind him, emerging in the sunlight at King's Cross Station.

The Weasleys were hugging Hermione and Ron and talking with them animatedly. The Grangers stood nearby, having already hugged their daughter and Ron. At the edge of the platform stood the Dursleys. Harry's stomach clenched at the sight of them. How was he going to survive there even a few weeks? Remus caught his panicked eyes, and nodded reassuringly. Harry relaxed a bit. With a werewolf in the house, they wouldn't give him a hard time for long.

He parked the trolley near the Weasleys and took Ginny in his arms again, holding her close, his head bent down next to hers as he drank in the scent of her. "I'll call you on my ring every evening, maybe even more often. And I'll write to you lots. Take good care of yourself."

"Stay safe. Stay well. I'll write every day," she promised.

"If you do, you'll wear out poor Errol!" Harry said with a laugh. He turned and looked at his owl. "Hedwig, would you like to spend the summer with Ginny? You know she lives in the country," he said, doing his best to coax her so she wouldn't be angry at either of them. "There's loads of fresh air. Tons of mice and frogs to hunt. And I'll bet she won't ever lock you up." He glanced at Ginny and saw a grin spreading over her face.

"You'll never be locked up at my house, Hedwig," she promised.

"See? You can fly whenever you want," he added. The owl hooted dolefully at him, then blinked and turned her head to consider Ginny. She looked back at Harry and hooted a bit more cheerfully. "Thanks, girl," he told his owl. He turned to Ginny and said, "Hedwig can carry your letters, and I'll use Merlin instead."

"I can't believe you'd let me borrow Hedwig," she breathed. Hedwig was the first pet Harry had ever owned, his only friend on Privet Drive during the long, horrible holidays at the Dursleys ever since he'd started Hogwarts. He'd always been generous about sharing, but lending his owl for the summer was a huge gift.

"I'd feel awful if Errol died from carrying our letters," he said with a smile. "Hedwig will enjoy the exercise, and living in the country will be good for her. I'll visit her as often as I can – and you, too, of course."

"Where is that infernal boy?" Vernon snarled, studying faces in the crowd. "Maybe they finally put him in jail or something. I'm leaving if he doesn't show up soon," he told Petunia and Dudley. Harry wasn't that far from him, but none of the Dursleys recognized him. They hadn't seen him since he'd become so tall, developed huge pectoral muscles from flying in his Animagus forms, and grown his beard with its white stripes. His face still bore scars from the battle, as well. He looked like a complete stranger to them.

"There you are, Ginny," Arthur said fondly. "Harry, it's good to see you. I heard about the trouble on the train. Are you feeling quite well now?"

"Much better, thanks."

Arthur started to take Ginny's things, setting Hedwig's cage on Harry's trunk. "Harry's letting her come with me, Dad," Ginny told him.

"Hedwig? Why?"

"So I can write to Harry often without wearing out Errol."

"Oh, that's very generous of you, lad. What will you do to send your mail?" he asked as he moved Hedwig's cage to sit on Ginny's trunk.

"I'll use Merlin," Harry replied, nodding at the parrot perched on his shoulder.

"That's your phoenix? Nice glamour! Well done. I wouldn't have known it was him at all."

"Thanks!" Harry said, smiling broadly. Learning to do that particular Glamour Charm had taking some doing, especially creating one that would last a long time. He was rather proud of how well he'd managed it.

Ron and Hermione joined them. "See you soon, mate," Ron said, gently punching Harry in the arm.

"Yeah, I can't wait," Harry replied. "When do you leave for Italy?" he asked Hermione.

"In two weeks. I'll be able to come to your party!" she said, her eyes sparkling as she smiled up at Harry. "My parents may come as well!"

"My party?"

"The one the Weasleys are throwing for you and Ginny. It's next Saturday. Didn't you know?" Hermione said.

"We haven't got that far in our conversation yet," Arthur explained. "Will Saturday work for you, Harry?"

"Yeah!" he said, putting his arm around Ginny and squeezing her shoulders. "Saturday will be great! Thanks."

Dudley Dursley poked his parents. "Mum – that must be him over there. The tall one with the beard and the big red bird on his shoulder."

Vernon gazed at his massive son indulgently. "That can't be him, Dudders. That's a grown man. Look at the grey in his beard."

"Those are Harry's friends all around him. That redheaded boy, that girl with the curly hair? The boy is a lot taller, but the girl isn't that different. That white owl looks like Harry's. That redheaded man is the one who blew up our living room that time. And the guy with the beard has messy black hair and glasses like Harry."

"Oh my goodness," breathed Petunia as Harry moved and she could see more of his face. She noted the maturity, the eyes that had seen far more than a boy his age should have, the grown man's physique and appearance of her nephew. Despite the beard, he looked familiar, yet vastly different. "He looks so much like James," she murmured in disbelief, but no one heard her.

Harry sighed as he took Ginny in his arms. "Last kiss for a while," he said sadly.

"Make it a good one," she urged him, and he complied. He held her close a moment longer. As he held her, he looked up and saw Remus kissing Tonks. He winked at his godfather when

Remus came up for air, then kissed Ginny once more and followed Remus and Tonks as they walked toward the Dursleys.

Dudley's face was ashen. He'd seen Harry holding that beautiful red-haired girl, trying to suck her tonsils out, and it appeared she'd been doing the same to him. How did he rate such a gorgeous girlfriend? And how the hell had he grown so bloody *big*? Tall and muscular both? Where was his skinny shrimp of a cousin?

Tonks's hair was bright pink today, spiked all over her head, and she had a small glittery stone in the side of her nose, as well as a long dangly decoration hanging from her exposed bellybutton that sparkled as she walked. The Dursleys looked from Tonks, to Remus with his scarred face and prematurely greying hair, to a giant Harry Potter with a beard, earring and new scars on his face, and their faces fell, horror-struck. Harry snorted with grim laughter at their expressions.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley, Mrs. Dursley, Dudley," Remus said politely. "Do you remember me? I'm Remus Lupin, Harry's godfather."

"His godfather's dead. He told us so last summer," Vernon snapped.

"That was Sirius Black, his original godfather," Remus corrected gently. "He was one of my dearest friends, as was Harry's father. I offered to be Harry's guardian last summer and he asked me to be his godfather as well. All the legal documents have been filed. I am his legal guardian and godfather."

"Then he can go and live with you!" Vernon cried triumphantly.

"No, he can't. This is the last summer he will have to live with you, but for the protections to remain in place, he must live with you for part of the holidays. It may not have occurred to you, but those protections also safeguard your family. As long as Harry's there, you're much safer than you would be if he weren't," Remus said reasonably. "I'm sorry to impose, but I will be staying with Harry for at least a week."

"What? Who the hell do you think you are?" Vernon sputtered. Petunia was wringing her hands anxiously.

"If I were you, I wouldn't make a scene here," Remus warned. "And I need to stay with Harry because he was injured on the train. He needs to be watched for several days to make certain he's all right and healing properly."

"He doesn't look ill to me," snapped Vernon.

"He had a fractured skull and bruising on his brain among other things," Remus said quietly. "They were very serious injuries and he needs to be looked after. I will feel better looking after him myself than hoping he's getting proper care from you."

Vernon's face got a sly look. "You say this boy had a fractured skull that happened on this train ride today?"

"Yes. That's part of the reason the train is late."

"He looks fine! I see no injury. He looks perfectly healthy. We'll just be going and you can go wherever you normally stay," he said dismissively. "Come on, boy."

Remus was making a very obvious effort to stay calm. "I told you he had a fractured skull. I don't tell lies. Wizard medicine works much more quickly than Muggle medicine."

Harry looked at Remus and saw the feral light in his eyes that almost never showed except at the full moon. "Um, Uncle Vernon? Don't push Remus any more. You don't want to see him angry."

"He can damned well see *me* angry!" Vernon blustered, his face a magnificent shade of plum, his moustache blowing about fiercely as he blustered.

"Uncle Vernon," Harry murmured, leaning down to speak very softly to his relatives so passers-by couldn't hear, "Remus is a werewolf. He has the strength of a dozen men. He is a very gentle man, usually, but you're making him angry. If he wants to, he can chuck you and Dudley both over the roof of the station, at the same time, without breaking a sweat. Do not make him any angrier." He straightened up and stepped away, enjoying the sight of Uncle Vernon's face as he digested the information Harry had just given him. His face went from purple to mottled purple and white, like a plum pudding in clotted cream.

"There's no such thing. . ." Vernon sneered, but Remus interrupted him.

"Shall I come visit you on the full moon?" he said softly, leaning close to Vernon, glaring into his eyes, willing the thick-headed man to believe him. "Everything Harry said was true. Don't force me to prove it. And don't you ever doubt that young man's word again." His voice had become quietly dangerous.

A railway policeman strolling by sensed the anger in the group and moved to confront them. "Any trouble here, folks?"

Vernon was the first to answer. "No, no trouble, officer," he simpered. "My nephew and his godfather were just telling us some, um, family news, that's all. No problem. Thank you for checking."

When the security guard moved away, Harry, Remus and Tonks took their hands out of their pockets, where all three had been gripping their wands, prepared to do whatever was necessary.

"You know, guv, you're the worst wanker I've seen in a long time. You have an international hero for a nephew. Get him to show you his medals when you get home," Tonks suggested, her face uncharacteristically grim. "He has saved a lot of lives the last several months, including Remus's and mine. You will treat him with proper respect, and the same goes for Remus. If you were worried about that policeman, you should be doubly worried about me. I'm what you might call a Scotland Yard kind of person in my world. I'd just love to haul you in. Please, *please* give me an excuse!"

Vernon giggled as his eyes roved from the top of her colourful head to the heavy workman's-type boots on her feet, taking in the bellybutton decoration and the shiny stone on the side of her nose, as well. "You expect me to take you seriously?"

"I would if I were you," Harry warned.

Just then, Arthur Weasley joined them. "Problem, Harry?"

"The usual," he replied with a sigh.

"I could see the tension between you lot from way over there," Arthur said quietly. "Whatever you're talking about, it shouldn't be discussed in public, not in front of all these Muggles."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Harry apologized. "Come on, Uncle Vernon, let's go."

"You'll leave that ruddy great bird with those. . .those *friends* of yours. Did you replace that blasted owl?" Vernon said snidely.

"This 'ruddy great bird' is coming with me. My owl is staying with my girlfriend, but she'll be bringing me mail, so she'll be around frequently," Harry replied calmly.

"I. Will. Not. Tolerate. Any. Sodding. Owls!" Vernon growled as quietly as he could, his face going plum again.

"You will tolerate however many owls come to the house," Harry replied, exuding power merely by straightening his posture and looking gravely at his uncle as he spoke. "It's legal for me to turn you into a kumquat now, you know." He smiled a bit in satisfaction as his uncle blanched.

"Mr. Dursley," Arthur began, trying to find a way to defuse the situation, "I'm sure you remember me. Arthur Weasley?" He held his hand out hopefully.

"How could I forget, after you blasted a sodding great hole in our living room," Vernon snarled, purpling up again and pointedly ignoring Arthur's extended hand.

"You need to accept the fact that we're close to Harry. We're going to be relatives someday," Arthur said, pride in his voice as he clapped Harry on the shoulders. "Your nephew and our daughter are – what did you call it, Harry?"

"Spoken for," he replied shortly. He hadn't really wanted the Dursleys to know so many details about his life.

"Well, 'engaged to be engaged,' you might say, or 'promised.' At any rate, we're having a party in their honour on Saturday. Just family and a few friends. Would you like to come?" Arthur said as nicely as possible.

Vernon sputtered and puffed up in even more rage, but Petunia put her hand on his arm. "He's engaged?" she said sceptically.

"Not really engaged. Just promised," Harry corrected.

"Is she . . .?" Petunia asked nervously.

"She's a witch, yes, from a long line of purebloods," Harry said quietly. The look on his aunt's face told him that wasn't what she'd wanted to know. His temper flared dangerously, making the glass in the station windows rattle as if five trains were all pulling in to the station at once. "No, she's *not* what you're thinking," he snarled. "We love each other. That's all you need to know."

"What was she thinking?" Arthur asked Harry innocently.

"That I'd got her in trouble," Harry growled, fighting to control his temper. Petunia's expression confirmed his interpretation.

Arthur's temper was in danger of flaring too. He stifled it with visible effort. When he'd managed to calm himself, he said, "So will you be joining us or not? We need to know how many to plan for."

"No, we will not!" Vernon snarled.

"Good!" Harry retorted.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I thought I should make the gesture," Arthur told the young man placatingly.

"I know. You just don't understand them very well."

"I'd hoped we could build some bridges since we're going to be related," Arthur said simply.

Harry's heart softened. Arthur was a generous, kind-hearted man and had done his best to do the right thing. "Thanks for trying. Don't worry about it, OK?"

"All right. See you Saturday. Tonks, you're coming with Remus, right?"

"Yes!" she said brightly. "I wouldn't miss it!"

"Great, I'll add you to the list. Four o'clock, then? We'll have a picnic in the garden, maybe play some Quidditch, that kind of thing. The twins are going to do a fireworks display after dark. That should be fun," he said with a smile.

Harry grinned. "It sounds brilliant. I can't wait."

"Have a good week, then, Harry. See you soon. Bye, Remus, Tonks. See you Saturday!" Arthur said as he walked away. "Goodbye, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, Dudley. You don't know what you're missing by treating Harry the way you do. He's a wonderful young man. Try treating him well. Try getting to know him. This may be your last chance to do so. I hope you have a nice holiday."

The Dursleys remained stubbornly silent as Arthur left. Dudley took advantage of his parents' attention being riveted on Arthur's retreating back, and sidled over next to Harry, looking him up and down in disbelief.

"What happened to you?" Dudley asked, looking up at Harry's great height and broad shoulders.

"I grew. Don't bother me or I'll give you pig's feet to go with that tail you had before," Harry warned offhandedly.

Vernon turned back to look Harry over as well. "What is wrong with that pathetic excuse for a school, letting you grow a beard. . .?"

"Oh, I grew it for my girlfriend. That beautiful redhead you saw me snogging? That's her. I can get rid of the beard if it will please you, Uncle Vernon," Harry said cheekily.

"Yes, you will!" Vernon snapped.

"OK," Harry said amiably, and an instant later, the beard was gone. Passers-by looked at him askance. Surely they hadn't seen what they thought they'd just seen? They shook their heads and went on about their business. Meanwhile, the Dursleys were gasping as if there was no air to be had anywhere. Harry laughed again, winking at Remus and Tonks. "This summer might not be so bad after all," he said with a roguish grin.

The End