

The Time of Destiny

Abraxan

The Time of Destiny

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Chapter 1 – The Heart of the Problem

"I don't see how we're going to manage both of you, that bloody great bird and your luggage in our car," Vernon Dursley whinged to Remus as they left King's Cross Station, with Remus pushing his and Harry's trunks on a trolley.

Harry Potter, his godfather Remus Lupin, and Harry's phoenix, Merlin (who looked like a scarlet macaw now, thanks to a Glamour Charm) were about to go home with the Dursleys. Hedwig, Harry's owl, was staying with Ginny for the summer in order to carry her letters to Harry so they wouldn't wear out poor Errol, the Weasleys' elderly owl. Harry had suffered a serious head injury on the train ride home when a Slytherin boy attacked him. The injury was already much improved, but he needed to be watched for several days to make certain he was all right. When Remus had told Harry he'd be staying with him until he was well, Harry was ecstatic. At one point, he'd whispered to his godfather that it was almost worth a fractured skull to have his company at Number 4, Privet Drive, for at least part of the summer holiday.

Now Remus looked at Vernon's resentful face and smiled pleasantly as they proceeded to the car. "Just leave the luggage to me," Remus said amiably. "It won't be a problem."

Harry grinned at his godfather, and tried not to laugh at the horrified look on his uncle's face.

"You won't be, um, you know. . .?" Vernon asked in a tremulous voice.

"I'm good at fitting things into tight places," Remus said mildly, then winked at Harry over the other man's head. He saw Harry bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

When they reached the car, Vernon opened the boot and stood back, apparently waiting to see how Remus was going to manage to get both Harry's huge trunk and his own in that small space. Remus had partially shrunk both trunks to fit them onto one trolley, but they were still too big for the car's boot. Remus grinned at his godson again as he hefted the boy's trunk into the boot. As he lifted his own, he quirked an eyebrow at Harry, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Harry got the message and instantly, the boot area expanded to fit both trunks comfortably. He tucked his hand into his pocket, pleased with his very unobtrusive bit of wandless magic. He did the same enlarging charm to the car's interior, so when he, Merlin, Remus and Dudley sat in the back seat, there was room to spare, when normally, Dudley took up two-thirds of the seat by himself. Harry sat in the middle, his long legs bent at an uncomfortable angle to fit in the small amount of legroom in Vernon's mid-sized car.

Uncle Vernon's face was purple. He had no idea how the three of them, *and* that huge red bird, had managed to fit in the back comfortably, but he was certain there was magic involved. But how did they do it without showing those infernal stick-things of theirs? He glanced in the mirror and saw his nephew's face filling it. With a growl, he snapped, "Get your head out of the mirror!"

Harry looked from his uncle's livid face to the mirror. Harry was six foot three now, thanks to the Refiner's Fire and a natural growth spurt, and his head nearly brushed the car's headliner.

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He tried to scrunch down out of the line of the mirror, but there simply wasn't room for his long body in that amount of space.

Remus sighed, seeing Vernon still glaring at Harry in the mirror when he should be looking at the road. As unobtrusively as possible, Remus put his hand in his pocket and used his wand to push the back seat farther away from the front one.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and slumped down a bit more comfortably. "Thanks," he murmured.

"What the devil did you do back there?" Vernon demanded.

"I got out of the line of sight of your mirror, Uncle Vernon," Harry said as mildly as he could.

Since Harry had done exactly what he'd asked him to, Vernon lapsed into tense silence, taking his rage out on other drivers with shouted oaths and squealing tires as he fought the London traffic.

On the ride to Surrey, Aunt Petunia rode silently, her back stiff as a board, having given her most disapproving sniff every time she glanced at Remus before he climbed into the car. He no longer dressed shabbily and he didn't have that gaunt, haggard look he'd had the previous summer, but still, there was something about him that simply unnerved her. Possibly, it was simply the fact that they had a fully grown wizard who was a friend of her peculiar nephew now riding in their back seat. She felt as if a target was painted on the back of her head, with Remus sitting directly behind her. How was she going to survive with that man in the house? And if he expected her to cook for him. . . .

Dudley did his best to cringe away from his cousin, but the huge red bird sitting in Harry's lap caught his interest and he began watching it. "What is that thing?" he finally said.

Harry pondered whether to answer his cousin's question or not, then decided he may as well at least *try* to start the summer off on the right foot. "He's a phoenix, but I've put a macaw glamour on him so he'll look like a normal bird to Muggles," Harry explained.

"What's a phoenix," Dudley asked, staring at the bird, "and a 'macaw glamour'?"

"He doesn't normally look like this. He's a magical creature the size of a swan, and he's red with a gold tail. His tears have healing powers, he can disappear and then reappear somewhere else whenever he wants to, and he can carry very heavy loads. Phoenixes are quite rare – you can't buy them. If they decide to bond to a wizard, they'll come to him when he's a teenager and be with him for life. He came to me recently." Harry stroked the back of the macaw, smiling at the cheeky expression in the bird's eye. "His name is Merlin. And the macaw glamour – a 'glamour' is a spell you put on something to make it look different." He glanced at his cousin, who was still shrinking away from him but seemed intrigued by the bird. "You can pet him if you want, Dudley. He's very gentle."

Merlin raised his head and looked at Dudley quite seriously, studying him. He stood up in Harry's lap and moved closer to the other boy, bobbing his head as macaws do when they're excited, doing his best to appear charming and friendly.

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"Why's he doing that?" Dudley asked nervously.

"He thinks he's being cute," Harry said, smiling at the bird. "Sit still, Merlin, so Dudley can pet you." The bird stilled instantly. "Go on, he won't hurt you."

As Dudley reached out a timid hand and started to pet the bird, his mother snapped, "Birds carry all kinds of germs! Don't touch that thing, Dudley!"

Dudley jerked his hand back and looked at it as if there was a pox on it.

Harry shook his head in disgust. "Merlin does not have germs, Aunt Petunia. He's a very clean bird."

"Parrots can bite your fingers off!" she cried, turning around and glaring at him.

"He's a phoenix, not a parrot," Harry said, losing what little patience he had with the Dursleys. He glanced at his cousin, who had gone back to looking at Merlin uncertainly. "He won't hurt you, and he's not dirty, nor does he carry germs, Dudley. If you want to pet him, go ahead. You can always wash your hands when you get home." He gave Dudley a challenging look, daring him to defy his mother.

Exactly as Harry had expected, Dudley couldn't resist such a challenge. He lifted his hand and touched Merlin on the head very gently, then began to stroke him. "He's soft."

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile.

"Dudley Dursley, you will obey me!" Petunia snapped.

"Mum, I'm seventeen years old!" Dudley countered. "I'm old enough to make decisions for myself. And I can wash my hands when we get home."

"Don't talk back to your mum!" Vernon snapped.

Dudley sighed, stroked Merlin's gleaming feathers once more just to defy his mother, then settled back in his corner and looked out the window, acting as if nothing at all had happened.

Harry stifled a grin. Dudley was disobeying his mother to her face? Maybe there was some hope for him yet. He glanced at Remus and saw his godfather's mouth quirk as he forced himself not to smile. Harry ducked his head and went back to petting Merlin, hoping there would be no further blow-ups with his relatives on the way home.

When they arrived, Petunia and Dudley made a beeline for the house, leaving Harry and Remus to deal with their trunks on their own. Vernon opened the boot, then stood back with his hands on his hips, looking disapproving and grumpy until he noticed nosy Mrs. Next-Door peeping out of her window. He wiggled his fingers at her in a simpering wave, and then took Remus's trunk from him, trying to act the gracious host since he realized he had a witness. Remus let go of the trunk with a smile and a hearty "Thanks!" as soon as Vernon took hold of it, which meant that it fell directly to the ground, being far heavier than the older man had expected. With a huge grunt and much puffing and redness of face, he manhandled the trunk

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into the house, and then stood inside the doorway glaring at Remus and Harry as the older wizard carried the boy's trunk, with no apparent effort, up to the door.

Harry smiled and nodded at Mrs. Next-Door, who sniffed huffily and turned away when she noticed him. He closed the boot of the car, ignoring the neighbour's snub, watching the scene before him between his uncle and his godfather, which he found quite humorous. He was inordinately glad that Remus was spending the week with him. The Dursleys looked to be well beyond exploding, even to the point of trying to lock him in the cupboard – if it still had a door. He wondered if they'd replaced the door in his absence.

Remembering the door being gone reminded him of Casey and Doug Asher. One day the previous summer, Casey, a Muggle who was Harry's first real girlfriend, had arrived at the Dursleys with her parents to pick Harry up for an outing, and heard Harry yelling from inside the locked cupboard under the stairs. Vernon had grabbed Casey roughly by the arm, making her scream, which was the breaking point for Harry's temper. The cupboard door exploded outward, releasing Harry to protect his girlfriend from his uncle. In the aftermath, Casey's father, Doug, told the Dursleys not to replace it, or they'd have more trouble than they wanted to face. Harry smiled sadly at the fleeting memory.

For a good bit of the past year, Harry's Pensieve had held his memories of Casey and her family, all of whom Voldemort had killed last summer. Harry had visited those memories from time to time in the months after her death. Finally, he came to terms with the loss of his girlfriend and her family and put those memories back in his mind, then did what he could to cherish them and put the pain behind him. The memories had become mists in his mind, mere echoes of reality unless he allowed them to intrude on his consciousness. As the memories now surfaced in his mind, he pushed them back and pulled up the remembrance of his latest kiss with Ginny. The thought of her always cheered him. Yes, there was a Casey-sized hole in his heart, but the rest of his heart was overflowing with Ginny's warmth and vitality. He'd loved Casey, but that love paled in comparison to how he felt about Ginny. Holding fast to her image in his mind, and the feel of her lips on his, he walked into Number 4, Privet Drive, to face whatever his summer holiday held in store for him.

Dinner that night was a solemn affair. Petunia had not called Harry and Remus to join the family for the evening meal, but the smell of cooking food brought them downstairs anyway. Harry noticed with disgust that the door of the cupboard under the stairs had, indeed, been replaced. He sighed and did his best to suppress the flash of anger brought on by the sight of that door.

"What's wrong?" Remus asked before they reached the kitchen.

"They replaced the door," Harry said, sounding disgusted. "Doug told them not to. I guess since he's dead, they thought nobody would care." He glanced at his godfather. "It's so tempting to just Vanish it, but I suppose that would cause trouble."

Remus grinned. "Keep that in mind in case you need to put a good scare in them later."

Harry chuckled. "I'm so glad you're here," he said, clapping his godfather on the shoulder.

"Me, too," Remus replied.

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When they entered the kitchen, they saw Petunia was setting the table. "What can we do to help?" Remus offered pleasantly.

"Nothing," Petunia snapped, carrying dishes to the dining room from the kitchen.

Harry grimly strode into the kitchen and picked up the glasses and silverware needed for the meal. He silently counted the plates in Aunt Petunia's hands – three. Opening the cupboard, he added two plates to his load and carried them to the dining room.

Petunia glanced up at him, a mixture of fear and disgust on her face, piled the dishes on the table and then hurried back into the kitchen.

Harry and Remus set the table for five, then pulled up the two extra chairs needed. The air was thick with tension. Harry knew it wouldn't be long before his aunt or uncle, or both of them, started spewing ugly, derisive comments. He glanced up at Remus uneasily. "Sorry about this," he murmured.

"About what?" Remus replied good-naturedly. "So far, so good."

"This is the quiet before the storm," Harry whispered. "Trust me." The two of them stood politely behind their chairs waiting for Petunia to sit down.

The Dursleys looked at them in astonishment, but said nothing as they came to the table and seated themselves. After everyone was settled, Petunia served, giving Harry and Remus miserly portions, taking little for herself, and loading Dudley's and Vernon's plates to overflowing.

Remus looked at Harry, his eyebrows raised in question. The boy just shrugged in reply. Remus smiled and thanked Petunia for his food, then ate quietly for a while, soon cleaning his plate. He sat waiting for the polite thing to be done, but when an offer of second helpings wasn't forthcoming, he said, "Everything is delicious, Mrs. Dursley. May I have more?" He held his plate out expectantly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harry watching warily for his aunt's reaction.

Petunia didn't want to be nice to these . . . these . . . **BLOODY WIZARDS!** Her inner turmoil was marked outwardly by the twitching of her mouth, the flashing of her narrowed eyes. She jerked the plate out of Remus's hand and gave him another, even smaller portion.

"More, please, if you have it?" Remus prompted amiably. "Don't you want another helping, too, Harry? It's a lovely casserole, Mrs. Dursley. What's your secret?"

Harry held his plate out mutely, watching his godfather work his charms on his aunt. He was shocked when Petunia not only added to Remus's plate, but added a decent amount to his own. "Thank you, Aunt Petunia. It is good," he said, trying to stay on the right side of things.

"Do I taste a touch of lemon?" Remus asked graciously. "There's some subtle seasoning that's just wonderful. I simply can't place it. Since I'm a bachelor, I cook for myself quite a lot. I'm always looking for ways to improve my cooking."

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Petunia, as Remus had surmised, was a sucker for flattery. "Oh, well, yes, there is a bit of lemon in the sauce," she allowed. "Just a touch. And a bit of tarragon."

"Ah, tarragon. That must be the other flavour I noticed. It does go well with chicken, doesn't it? I'll have to remember that. Thank you!" Remus smiled with genuine appreciation. She wasn't as hard to deal with as he thought she might be. He racked his brain for some other conversational gambit, but it was a losing battle, and neither the Dursleys nor Harry were helping.

Vernon cleared his throat importantly. "I'd like to know exactly how long you intend to be here," he demanded.

"As I said," Remus replied mildly, "I have to stay at least a week, possibly more. It depends on how quickly Harry heals. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I'll stay in his room with him. We get along quite well, it won't be a problem."

"I won't have anything unnatural going on under this roof!" Vernon snapped unexpectedly.

"What do you mean, 'unnatural'?" Harry demanded. "I'm allowed to do magic at home now, but we won't do any more magic than we need to."

"It's not. . .that's not. . ." Vernon sputtered.

"Then what is it?" the boy asked, confused. He was distracted a moment by Dudley's sniggering. Apparently his cousin had an idea what Vernon was talking about, but Harry was lost.

"He can stay with you, but you two need to . . . you mustn't. . . ." Vernon's great melon of a head was turning an interestingly splotchy plum colour.

"Mustn't what?" Harry queried, totally mystified.

"You know what! I won't have it!" Vernon exploded, spittle flying from his mouth as he clamped his lips shut to avoid saying what he was thinking.

Harry blanched, horrified as realization finally struck. "Remus is my *godfather*! And my *professor*! And my FRIEND! There's nothing unnatural in any of those things," he snarled. "And I don't like your implications. You saw us at the station with our *girlfriends*, for Merlin's sake! You didn't offer him the spare room, so we thought you'd prefer it if he stayed with me." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dudley watching this exchange avidly, his head going back and forth between speakers as if he were watching a tennis match.

"I have to stay in the room with you, Harry, so I can make sure you're all right," his godfather said quietly.

"Merlin's sake?" Dudley said suddenly. "Why are you bringing that bird into this?"

"Oh, shut up," Harry grumbled. "Read some history, why don't you. Learn about him for yourself."

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"About your bird?" The boy was completely at a loss.

"About Merlin, Dudley," Harry said, disgusted with his cousin's ignorance. "King Arthur's wizard? Don't you read at all?" He shoved back from the table, thoroughly annoyed with his relatives.

"Where are you going?" Remus asked.

"Outside," the boy snapped. He turned and looked at his godfather and his face softened. "I'm sorry they were so rude, Remus. Would you like to go for a walk with me?"

"Yes, that would be nice," the older wizard replied, standing and picking up his dishes to carry them to the kitchen. Harry followed his godfather's example, leaving the stone-faced Dursleys alone in their dining room.

"I can't believe them, I simply can't believe them," Harry muttered as they walked down Privet Drive. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched as if expecting a blow, his head bowed.

Remus put a companionable arm around the boy's shoulders and gave him a brief hug. "Don't worry about it. I did have some idea what to expect. I didn't realize it was quite so bad, though. You've kept it to yourself rather well."

"I didn't see any reason to tell you what it's like here. Ron and Hermione know. And Ginny. But I haven't really told anyone else before. It's not worth thinking about, y'know?" The boy barely turned his bowed head, glancing at his godfather through the fringe of hair hanging over the top edge of his glasses.

"I understand." They walked quietly for a while. The farther they got from the Dursleys, the more Harry relaxed, until finally he straightened up and looked around, appreciating the beautiful summer evening. "Fresh air. It's a wonderful thing."

"Highly underrated, I'm sure," Remus mused, a smile tickling his lips. When Harry seemed to be his old self, Remus commented, "We shouldn't go too far. You're supposed to be resting."

The boy growled in frustration. "I'm so tired of having to rest, having to stay in bed, having to take care of myself. I'm not fragile!"

"No, you're not. That blow would have killed most people, you know," his godfather said seriously. "You're lucky to be alive. And you do need to rest."

"I know. It just makes me so angry. . . ." He reached up and rubbed his temples with his thumbs.

"Do you have a headache right now?"

"Yes. It started before dinner. Their behaviour didn't help a bit. I can't believe them. Uncle Vernon, saying what he did. What a sodding idiot!" The boy's face was twisted in disgust.

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"Getting angry will just make your head hurt worse," his godfather reasoned. "Let's turn back, all right? Healer Pomfrey gave me some potion that will help your headache. We could get started on our homework, too."

"Our homework?" Harry said, the beginnings of a smile tugging at his lips. "What's this 'our homework' stuff? I thought I was the only one with homework."

"I have things to do, too. And if you don't tell anyone, I'll help you with your homework while we're together," Remus confided with a cheerful smile.

"You're on!" his godson replied with a grin.

Two evenings later, Harry, who had gone to bed early due to another headache, was asleep when he heard Ginny's voice near his ear. "Harry? Harry, are you there?"

"Huh? Ginny?" he muttered, struggling to wake up. He pulled his hand out from under his pillow, sat up, put on his glasses and gazed blearily around the room.

"Harry? Oh rats, I don't know how to tell if he's taken his ring off," she muttered.

He finally twigged that his ring was talking to him – or rather, Ginny was talking to him via the Communication Charm in their promise rings. He smiled as he pressed the ruby and said, "Ginny Weasley."

"Harry! There you are!" she said, her face glowing with delight. Her face floated, disembodied and translucent, above Harry's ring. His face would appear the same way above hers now that he'd answered her.

"Hi! Sorry I didn't answer right away. I was asleep. When I heard your voice, I thought you were here," he said, smiling tenderly at her image.

"I wish we were together. I miss you terribly already."

"Me too. If it's like this after only a couple of days, how are we going to survive the summer?" he replied.

"We'll just have to arrange to get together as often as possible. Do you suppose Mrs. Figg would allow Ron and me to use her fireplace to floo over there?"

"Yeah! That's brilliant!" Harry replied. "I'd love to see you both!"

"I'll have to see when we can arrange it. Ron knows how to get to your house, right?"

"He should. If you get lost, you can call me on your ring. No, wait, you can't do that here, the area is crawling with Muggles." He heard a low voice rumbling in the background behind Ginny.

"Ron says he knows how to get there. He says 'Hi,' by the way. We'll try to come over soon! Is there any day that's better for you?"

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"I don't have a summer job yet – I have to rest because of my stupid head injury. If I have to rest much longer, there won't be any summer jobs left," he said with a disgruntled shrug. "So I'm free all the time – come on over!"

"We can't this evening, but soon!" She smiled happily at him, and then lowered her voice. "I wrote to you today."

"Yeah, Hedwig got here a little while ago. I really enjoyed your letter. Thanks! I wrote a reply, but I thought I'd send her back with it in the morning so she can rest for a while." He smiled at her. "What did you do today? It is so good to see you. I just can't tell you how happy it makes me."

"Me too. Oh, today wasn't anything special. We helped around the house, getting ready for the party on Saturday, that kind of thing. Ron and I were de-gnoming the garden until dark. I don't know why we bother – they always come back straight away." She smiled at him, studying the dark circles under his eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"I had a headache a while ago, but I'm feeling better," he replied.

"So how was your day?"

"Dursleyish," he said with a sigh.

"Dursleyish? What did they do this time?"

He filled her in on all that had happened since he and Remus had left the station with the Dursleys, trying to make each situation sound funny rather than as nasty as it had felt at the time. He soon had her laughing at the antics of the wildly bizarre Dursley family – at least, he was painting them as wildly bizarre rather than cruel and small-minded, as they were in reality.

Remus came into the room and raised an eyebrow in question at Harry. Harry blushed and raised his hand, showing his ring with Ginny's translucent face hovering over it. Remus grinned and left again.

"I'd better go. Remus just came in and left again straight away. I'm keeping him from going to bed," Harry said regretfully. "Thanks for calling, sweetheart. I miss you."

"I miss you too, baby. Are you taking good care of yourself?"

"Yes, Remus is watching me as closely as you do. You'd be proud of him," he said with a wry grin.

"Tell him I said 'thanks!'" she said.

"When you called, you said something about not knowing how to tell if I took my ring off. I don't take it off except to dry my hands when I wash them, and then I just move it enough to dry under it. It isn't going anywhere, don't worry."

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"OK. That's good to know. So if you don't answer, you're probably snoring too loudly to hear me calling then, right?" she teased.

"Yeah, that would be it," he agreed, chuckling. "I love you, baby," he murmured.

"I love you too. Good night!"

"Good night." They pressed their rubies and the connection was broken. Harry snuggled back into his bed, putting his hand under his pillow as it had been before. That was why he'd thought Ginny was there with him – the ring was just inches from his ear when he slept this way. He smiled as he took off his glasses and put them on the bedside table. He'd sleep much better now that he had a fresh image of Ginny to think of as he drifted off.

"Why are you in such a dither?" Remus asked with amusement as he watched Harry dig through his wardrobe, chucking shirts all over the floor.

"Ginny and Ron will be here soon," the young man explained, digging through the discarded shirts and finally finding the one he'd been looking for. He pulled it on over his head, then grabbed up the rest, shoving them unceremoniously into the wardrobe. He opened a drawer and pulled out his comb, looking at his reflection in the mirror. He'd already tried on four other shirts before deciding on the one he now wore, and his hair reflected the many times his head had been shoved through a shirt's neck opening. He sighed and went to work, trying to make his hair lie in some semblance of a hairstyle, or at least look a little neater. "I haven't seen her in days. I want to look nice for her."

"Have you ever tried any hair potions?" Remus asked, watching the boy's face screw up in frustration as he tried to get his hair to lie down.

"They just make it sticky and it's still a mess. I haven't found anything that helps," Harry grumbled, still fighting with that big cowlick at the back.

"Then why don't you make it stand up all over like Tonks does?" Remus asked reasonably.

Harry looked in the mirror, staring at his godfather in amazement. "Like Tonks? D'you think that would look good on me?"

"It wouldn't hurt to try it," his godfather said with a shrug. "Lots of young people wear their hair sort of pulled up in all directions these days. Your hair seems to want to do that anyway. Why not go with it instead of fighting it?"

Harry dropped his hand to his side, staring at his reflection in the mirror again, his face thoughtful. He set the comb down and ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it up away from his head in various directions. "It's too long, it looks silly sticking up like that."

"You could shorten it," his godfather offered, "but I like it long like that. Why not just make it stick up a little bit – let it do what it wants to but exaggerate it? Sometimes Tonks does her hair that way and I actually prefer that to when she has it sticking straight up all over. It feels nicer, too. I think she does that with magic – when she does it that way, there aren't any sticky potions in her hair. It might work for you."

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"Really? Huh," the boy said thoughtfully. He smoothed his hair down the best he could and then started pulling it up a little, lifting it from the roots with his fingers, then pulling the ends out a bit, concentrating as he worked. Soon his hair looked fluffier but somehow more organized, with his fringe thinned out a bit on the right side, thicker on the left, the hair lying over from a hint of a part on the right side. "How's this?"

Remus stood up and walked around Harry, surveying what he'd done. "I like it! What do you think?"

"I like it too! Thanks, Remus! I've been fighting with my hair for years. What a great idea!"

"Thank Tonks, not me. You know how she likes to experiment with hairstyles. She wears it like this on our dates now, since I said I liked it."

"She's *brilliant*!" Harry was back to bouncing on his toes in excitement, a huge grin on his face as he sped around the room straightening his covers, piling his books neatly, quickly cleaning the tray below Merlin's perch, giving the phoenix a friendly pat when he finished. "There. That's as good as it will get, I think."

"It looks great," Remus commented. "What are you three going to do this afternoon?"

"Dunno. Since it's raining so hard, I suppose we'll just hang around in here, play some Exploding Snap or gobstones or something. Maybe go to a film. I forgot to look at the listings. Shame Hermione can't come today, we could have a double date. If Tonks could come, we could try a triple date!" he laughed. "You're welcome to come with us."

"That would be fun, but I have some work to do. We'll have to plan that triple date sometime."

Harry froze as he heard the doorbell ring. His face then split in a delighted grin. "They're here!" He raced out of the door and started downstairs.

"Slow down, Harry! Be careful!" Remus called, realizing as he did it that nothing he said was going to deter the boy from bounding down the stairs as fast as he could.

Harry got to the door too late. Vernon had already opened it and was staring aghast at the two redheads standing on his doormat.

"What do *you* want?" he demanded, a sneer of disgust on his florid face.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley. I'm Ron Weasley, and this is my sister, Ginny," Ron said politely. "We've come to visit Harry."

"I have too many of your kind under my roof as it is! You are not welcome here!" he snarled, and started to slam the door in their faces.

Harry reached out with one long arm and stopped the progress of the door, swinging it wide open again. "I live here too, whether you like it or not, and my friends are here to visit me," he told his uncle. "Hi, guys! Come on in!" he told his friends. Ron and Ginny came in nervously, and Harry closed the door quietly behind them. "Let me take your wet things. Do you want

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something to drink?" he offered graciously, taking their jackets and umbrellas and hanging them on the hooks behind the door.

"I am not feeding any more of you! They are not welcome here!" Vernon snapped.

"Maybe we should go somewhere else, Harry," Ginny suggested carefully.

"It's pouring rain outside," Harry said, "or we could go to the park. Let's go upstairs. Come on." He turned and started up the stairs, holding Ginny's hand. He turned around, startled, when he felt her hand jerked out of his and heard her gasp.

"Let me go, Mr. Dursley!" Ginny cried. Vernon was holding her arm in both of his hands and pulling her toward the door.

"YOU. ARE. NOT. WELCOME. HERE!" he cried, trying to drag her across the hall.

"*Let her go!*" Ron and Harry shouted together, advancing on the man with their wands out. A vision of the bruises on Casey's arms after Vernon had similarly manhandled her the previous summer flashed through Harry's mind, enraging him further.

"Everyone calm down," Remus advised. "There's no need to argue." The boys glared at Vernon, not backing down.

Vernon let go of Ginny's arm, but glowered from one wizard to the next, ending up with Harry, who had put his wand away when Ginny was released. His uncle advanced on him boldly, his finger poking the boy viciously in the shoulder with every word. "I've told you and told you. There will be none of your shenanigans in this house! You will not use those things in here! *You will behave like a normal person!* We put a roof over your head and food in your belly and *this* is the thanks we get?"

Dudley and Petunia watched the scene with morbid fascination, Petunia with her hands covering the lower part of her face, Dudley with some kind of manic gleam in his eye. He sidled up beside Harry, avidly watching his father dressing down his cousin.

Harry was leaning back away from his uncle's diatribe, trying to avoid the spittle flying from the furious man's mouth. Vernon's pokes in his shoulder were getting harder and harder, and Harry's temper was near the flash point. He fought with all his will to force his mind to go over the twelve uses of dragon's blood to help him stay calm. He did not want to blow up the house, especially with Ron and Ginny in it. But the humiliation he was bearing with his friends and godfather as witness . . . the fourth use of dragon's blood was even cleaner, yeah, that was it. Or was that the twelfth use?

A small redheaded ball of fire inserted herself insistently between Vernon and Harry. "Mr. Dursley! You need to calm down! Harry's had a serious head injury and all this stress is bad for him! We'll go somewhere else with him if that will keep you happy, but you must not treat him this way!" Ginny glared up at the rotund man, whose many chins were vibrating as his rage escalated.

"You. . .you *bitch!* How dare you tell me how to behave in my own house!" Vernon snarled.

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Both Harry and Ron bristled, but it was Ginny who beat them to the reply. "A bitch is a female dog. I, Mr. Dursley, am a *witch* and proud of it!" she snapped.

Vernon bristled, and opened his mouth to speak again, but Harry had endured enough. "Shut up! Just *shut up*!" he snarled at his uncle, pushing Ginny protectively behind him. "You have no right to speak to her that way!"

Vernon's face was violently red, his tiny eyes nearly hidden by the engorged rolls of fat around his eye sockets, his many chins quivering violently, spittle flying as he mouthed incoherently. He swung at Harry. The boy caught his uncle's fist in his hand and stopped it cold, then threw it down as if it were a disgusting piece of rotting meat. Vernon growled and bent over, readying a heavy swing at Harry's stomach. Remus raced down the stairs to put a stop to the confrontation, but before he got to them, Vernon grabbed his chest and collapsed, his face suddenly ashen, his body thudding resoundingly to the floor. Petunia screamed, then was silent.

Everyone stood frozen for a moment, and then Harry fell to his knees beside his uncle. He rolled him over, put his hands on the man's chest, and leaned down to listen for a heartbeat. He ripped Vernon's shirt open and tore his vest in two, placing one hand on the man's massive chest and the other on his left side. He felt for a heartbeat, then sensed inside his uncle to see what he could learn.

"Get away from him!" Petunia cried tremulously. "Leave him alone!"

"I'm trying to help him, Aunt Petunia," Harry snapped as his magic probed inside the man's chest.

Dudley made a lunge for his cousin. "Get off him! Get off!" he cried, just before Ginny turned him into a large, shivering gelatinous confection not unlike a fruit salad in jelly.

Ron chuckled nervously as he lowered his wand. He'd been about to hex Dudley too, but Ginny beat him to it. "Nice one, Gin." She gave him a tiny smile in reply.

"How is he, Harry?" she asked, kneeling next to him.

"He's had a heart attack. I'm trying to get it to start beating again. I've seen on TV where they do an electrical shock to make the heart restart. I'm trying to do that with magic." He went back to concentrating, then looked around again. His aunt was wringing her hands nervously. Where Dudley had been, a giant mound of multicoloured gelatine trembled and shimmered on the floor. Remus and Ron were watching seriously, but neither seemed to know what to do. "Do any of you know how to use a phone?" he asked his friends.

"I called you that time," Ron offered, "but I don't think I was very good at it."

"Could you go to the kitchen and bring the phone to me? It's on the wall by the door," Harry directed, still working his magic on his uncle. "Ginny, get back. I'm going to try some surges instead of steady power." When she moved away from him, he poured magic in a sudden jolt through his uncle, causing the man's body to lift from the floor then slam back down. "Damn," he muttered, then tried it again. . .and again. . .and again, every jolt accompanied by a scream

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from Petunia. Finally, he cried, "It worked!" his face alight with amazement. "He's got a heartbeat again!"

"Well done, Harry!" Remus cried, patting him on the back.

"I need a rhythm," Harry said distractedly, still holding his hands on Vernon's chest.

"A rhythm?" Ginny questioned.

"Yes. I have to listen to him too closely to match his heart beat to mine. I need an audible rhythm to follow. Listen to your heartbeat. It goes 'da-dump, da-dump, da-dump,' right? I need you to say the rhythm out loud so I can match it in his heart. His is just fluttering around. There's no steady rhythm."

Ginny put her fingers on the pulse in her throat and began solemnly reciting, "Da-dump, da-dump, da-dump, da-dump," in time with her own heartbeat, hoping her heart wasn't racing too fast from nerves to be a good tempo for Vernon's injured heart.

Tonks Apparated into the room and removed the Disillusionment charm that made her blend into her surroundings. "What's going on? We registered some underage magic here, and then a surge of serious magic that's continued."

"I turned Harry's cousin into a jelly," Ginny said, nodding toward the massive mound nearby. "He was trying to attack Harry while Harry was trying to help his uncle."

Harry glanced up at the young Auror. "Nobody's going to break her wand, Tonks. They'll have to get past me first," he warned.

"Yeah, I knew that. That's why I insisted on coming. Don't worry about it. We were afraid you were under attack. The house is surrounded by Aurors right now," Tonks replied. "What happened?"

While the others explained the situation to Tonks, Harry continued to work frantically, trying to get Vernon's heart to cooperate and work with a steady beat. His aunt had started keening, her voice rising and falling like a siren, grating on his nerves. "*Silencio!*" he cried, taking a hand off of Vernon just long enough to shut her up. "I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia, but I can't concentrate with all that noise!"

"Do you need help, Harry?" Tonks asked as she watched him work.

"Do you know anything about heart attacks?" he asked hopefully.

"Not really. I know more about wounds and spell damage," she replied apologetically.

"That's OK. I think I've got it going fairly well. There's a fluttering in there, though, something that opens but doesn't close properly. The blood is gushing through that spot, not pumping properly, and I don't know how to fix it." He shook his head in frustration, moving his hands a bit and trying something else. "Nope, that didn't work either. All I can do is keep it pumping, and I'm barely managing that. The veins have narrowed spots that are constricting the blood flow, as well. It feels like there are chunks of stuff in there somehow, where it

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doesn't belong. I'm trying to clear some of that out so the blood will flow better, but I'm afraid to try a repair on that flutter because there's too much wrong with him and I don't know what to work on first."

"Here's the phone, mate," Ron said, holding out the cordless receiver to Harry. "It wasn't hanging on the wall. I had to look everywhere for it. Sorry it took so long."

"Thanks. Dial 999 for me, then put the phone on my shoulder, OK?" Harry directed. "Emergency?" he said into the phone after a few moments. "Yes, my uncle has had a heart attack. Yes. Number four, Privet Drive, Surrey. Vernon Dursley. He's 50. Yes, that's right. This is Harry Potter. My aunt is here, but she's too upset to come to the phone." He glanced up at Petunia and saw he'd spoken the truth. Her eyes were huge, glassy, and she was shivering. She seemed unaware of her surroundings now.

Ginny saw Petunia's distress and went to her, led her to a chair and helped her sit down. Then she pulled a throw off the back of the settee and draped it around the woman's shoulders. Remus went to the kitchen and found a bottle of brandy, coming back with a good sized splash of it in a glass and handing it to Petunia. The woman downed it in one gulp, then handed the glass back, her eyes pleading for more. Remus went to refill her glass and she downed that one quickly as well, then seemed to sink into herself, her eyes still huge but not quite as glassy as they had been.

"Aunt Petunia, has he ever had heart trouble before?" Harry asked. He waited for an answer, and then saw a tiny shake of her head. "I think this is his first heart trouble," he said into the phone. "No, I'm away at school most of the year, and I just got back, so I don't know what's been going on with his health. My aunt seems to be in shock."

"I'll just pop out and tell the others they don't have to stay," Tonks said quietly. "I'm near the end of my shift. I'll stay with you in case you need help here, all right?"

Remus smiled at her. "That would be wonderful. Thanks." She Disillusioned herself, then Disapparated with a loud POP.

"I've been doing CPR on him and got his heartbeat back," Harry said, continuing his conversation with the emergency operator. "No, no first aid classes. I saw it on TV and just did what I remembered from it. Yes, pumping on his chest, that's it. Oh, I hear a siren in the distance now. Is that them? Great! We'll go open the door for them. Thank you. Goodbye." He glanced up at Ron, who took the phone and held it gingerly in both hands. "Press that button that says 'Off,' OK?"

"Oh. Yeah. Got it," Ron replied as he turned off the phone, and then put it down on a nearby table.

"Ginny, we can't let the Muggles see Dudley like that. Could you either change him back or move him out of sight?" Harry said, continuing his work on his uncle.

"Erm. . . I don't know how to reverse it. I've only just started reading up on that jinx, that's why it came to mind."

As Ginny spoke, Tonks returned with a loud POP and removed her Disillusionment charm.

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"I'll reverse the spell," Remus told Ginny calmly. "We just have to worry about what he's going to say when he's himself again."

"I can take care of that. Go ahead and change him," Tonks said with a cheeky grin.

Remus transfigured Dudley back into himself. The massive boy stood trembling, much as he'd done as a jelly.

"Dudley, my dear," Tonks said sweetly, "what's it like to be a jelly?" The boy's mouth moved but no coherent sounds came out. "Remember that feeling, would you, precious? Because that's mild compared to what's going to happen if you ever breathe a word, or write a word, or even THINK about writing, saying or in any other way telling anyone about Harry and his abilities, about what happened here, about any of us, or about the wizarding world in general. It will be perfectly fine for you to be incoherent when the paramedics arrive. You've suffered a great shock today, after all, with your father being so ill. But sweet boy, listen to me closely." She leaned in, her spiky blue hair nearly mingling with his thick curls. "If you so much as think about revealing Harry's secrets, or any of ours, for that matter, to *ANYONE*, *EVER*, not only will you lose your voice forever, but your tongue will cleave to the roof of your mouth so you can't eat easily. You could stand losing a few pounds, you know," she said, smacking him in his huge belly. "Oh, and your little willy will fall off so you'll pee like a girl for however long you live." She smiled sweetly as he grabbed his crotch protectively. "Yes, that's right. That willy. I see we understand each other. I'm putting an irreversible enchantment on you that will last the rest of your life." She waved her wand and muttered a long incantation. "This is what we Aurors – that's the wizard equivalent of Scotland Yard, the police and MI-6 all rolled into one, so you understand who you're dealing with here – that's how we deal with potential traitors. You now have the control over your voice and the way you pee. Take good care of them, won't you, luv?" She patted him lightly on the shoulder and moved away from him, glancing around at her friends with a twinkle in her eye. Harry was still concentrating on Vernon, but was chuckling quietly. Ron's face was completely astonished. Remus was laughing out loud. Ginny's eyes were huge.

"You know a spell that does all that?" Ginny said in awe.

"Oh, we Aurors know all kinds of interesting things," she assured the girl. "He's fixed for life, he is."

"Wicked!" Ron breathed. "That's absolutely brilliant! Can you teach me that jinx?"

"Sorry, mate, Aurors only," Tonks said with a cheeky grin. "Keep up the good school work and you'll be in Auror School learning that and loads more before you know it." She glanced over at Dudley. "Oh dear." A wet stain was spreading across the front of his pants. "He peed himself. What a baby." She waved her wand at him, making him scream in terror. "Oh, give over, you great oaf. I just dried your pants for you. The polite thing to do would be to say 'thank you, Miss Tonks.'" She stood with her arms crossed, holding her wand loosely, tapping her foot impatiently, waiting for him.

"Th-th-th-thank y-y-y-you, M-m-m-miss T-t-t-tonks," he stammered. He was weaving as he stood there. Remus Banished a chair to slide underneath him as Dudley's legs gave out. He fell into the chair with a resounding thump.

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"Now say 'thank you' to Professor Lupin as well," Tonks prompted.

"Th-th-thanks," he muttered, glancing from her to Remus and back.

"Good boy! You'll learn some decent manners by the time I've finished with you! I think I'll take you on as a project. It should be interesting, teaching you to treat people kindly." She stood there with her hands on her hips, a roguish grin on her face, her eyes dancing with mirth. Harry was snorting with laughter by now, as were the others.

A knock on the door quieted the room. Remus crossed to the door and opened it, just as Tonks changed her hair and clothes from her punk look to a sedate, professional woman's casual attire with long, wavy dark red hair and a businesswoman's restrained makeup rather than her normal wild colours. Dudley's eyes popped at the transformation. Tonks leaned over to him and whispered, "Get used to it. And remember what I said before." He nodded mutely.

The paramedics poured into the house and over Vernon's still form like a swarm of locusts. Remus, Ron, Ginny and Tonks backed against the walls, getting out of the way as well as they could. Petunia still sat silently in her chair. Dudley trembled in his. Harry worked like a machine pumping on Vernon's chest, having switched to the Muggle CPR method as soon as Remus opened the door.

"All right, lad, we've got him," one of the paramedics said kindly, sliding his hands under Harry's and taking over the cardiac compressions as his co-workers readied their diagnostic and treatment equipment.

Harry stood up, gazing down at his uncle and weaving on his feet in exhaustion. Remus quickly wrapped an arm around him and pulled him to a chair. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly. The boy nodded, then leaned forward and put his face in his hands. Remus stood rubbing his back comfortingly. Ginny moved in front of him and embraced him, bending down and kissing his bowed head. He wrapped his arms around her slim waist and held on tightly.

"Headache back?" she whispered. He nodded miserably.

"I'll get your po. . .medicine as soon as they leave," Remus said quietly, glad he'd caught himself before saying "potion" in front of the paramedics.

"Good job, lad," one of the paramedics called over his shoulder. "The ECG shows he had a massive coronary, and he's still got a lot of problems, but you kept him going until we got here. Well done." The man turned and looked at Harry, who had sat up when the man spoke to him. "You all right there?"

"Yeah. Just tired. That's hard work," he replied, pushing his glasses up to rub his eyes.

"He's going to be just fine," the man said, misunderstanding Harry's emotion. "Your family should be proud of you." He glanced over at Petunia. "Mrs. Dursley? Are you all right?"

Her eyes flashed momentarily from Vernon's still form to the man. She barely nodded before moving her eyes back to her husband.

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"A bit of a shock, I'm sure. Can you drive yourself to the hospital? Maybe one of your friends here can drive you. Or shall we call you a taxi?"

Petunia grew even paler, fear apparent on her face, but she was still silent.

"We'll be taking him to Queen Mary's Hospital in Guildford. You can catch up with him in the Emergency Room." The paramedics had hooked Vernon up to all kinds of monitors and IVs and were wheeling the trolley bearing him out of the door as the man spoke.

"Thank you," Remus said as he closed the door behind them. He turned back to the others. "She's had a good bit of brandy," he commented, nodding toward Petunia. "Can any of you drive a car?" Ron raised his hand hesitantly.

Petunia snapped out of her reverie and tried to speak. Harry waved his hand absently and reversed the Silencing Charm. As soon as she was able to speak again, she spat out, "I will not allow that boy to drive my car!"

"No problem," Ron said with a shrug and a snort of unexpected laughter. "The only car I've ever driven flew. I don't know how to drive in traffic anyway." Ginny chortled and even Harry grinned at Ron's casual reply and its effect on the Dursleys.

"That was you?" Dudley cried. He was still pale and trembling from his encounter with Tonks.

"Me and my brothers," Ron said with a cheeky grin.

"I can drive," Tonks said. "Unless you want to, Harry. I don't think Dudley's in any fit state to drive either."

"You think they bothered to teach me to drive?" Harry replied, a suddenly disgusted look on his face. "Not bloody likely."

"You should know how," Tonks said seriously. "It's an important skill for an Auror." She was silent a few moments. "Tell you what, I'll teach you!" she said happily. "In the meantime, let's get this lot to the hospital. Then you can get back to having your day with your friends."

He smiled at her gratefully. "That's brilliant. Thanks."

"All right, Dursleys, let's go. Harry, where do they keep the car keys?" Tonks said, all business.

"On the hook by the door."

"Got 'em!" she said triumphantly as she snagged them off the hook. "Dursleys. By the left, Quick March!" When they didn't respond, she added, "Or I'll make you!" Petunia and Dudley hesitantly got to their feet and trudged out to the car.

"I'll come with you," Remus offered. "Hang on a sec." He turned back to the three friends left in the room. "Ginny, Harry needs a dose of his headache potion – the one that doesn't make him sleepy. That's the one in the blue flagon up in his room. The purple flagon is the sleepy one. Don't get them mixed up unless you want him to sleep the day away! He knows how

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much to take, but you need to make sure he takes it – you know how stubborn he is!" He smiled at Harry, who made a face at him. "We'll be back as soon as we can." He waved and jogged out of the door, joining Tonks in the front seat of the car. Petunia and Dudley clung to each other in the back.

Tonks waved cheerily to Harry, Ron and Ginny, who were now watching from the doorway as she backed out quickly, burned rubber as she shifted gears and took off after the ambulance.

"At least the rain has stopped," Ron commented.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Otherwise, Uncle Vernon might have drowned on the way to the ambulance." His wry comment made all of them laugh nervously.

"I'll get your potion," Ginny said, running up the stairs as Harry closed the front door.

"Thanks," he called after her. He led Ron to the kitchen. "Want something to drink? Or eat?"

"Food would be good," Ron agreed, plunking himself down into a chair and watching Harry move around the kitchen, getting down plates and rummaging around in the fridge and cupboards. "D'you need any help?"

"Nah. Thanks." Harry sat out bread, various cheeses, some fruit and three cans of Coca-Cola. "How's this?"

"Brilliant!" Ron said, grabbing the can happily. "Is this like the stuff in the cinema?"

"Same thing. I thought you'd like that. I hope Ginny will."

"She'll love it. She's wanted to try some ever since I told her about having it at the cinema last summer," Ron said with a grin, trying his best to twist, pry or pull the top off of the can.

Harry quelled the memory of that good time with Casey that tried to sadden him. He sighed, then looked up at Ron and smirked, then laughed out loud as he watched his friend trying to open the can of Coke. "No, no, no. Like this," he said, holding his own can and lifting the pull tab to open the top.

"Oh! What a great idea!" Ron enthused, popping the top open with glee. He lifted the can and looked inside. "Where's the straw?"

"You don't need one. Oh, would you rather have a glass? I'm sorry; I should have given you one. Cans are rude." He shook his head and started to get up to get some glasses from the cupboard.

"Rude, huh? That sounds like your aunt talking."

Harry snorted. "You're right. That's simply horrible! Enjoy the can, mate."

"No problem." Ron watched as Harry lifted the can and drank from it, then followed his example. "It still tickles my nose! Great stuff!" he said with a laugh.

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"Yeah." Harry sat his drink down and put his elbows on the table, his face in his hands, and rubbed his temples.

"Is it bad?" Ron said kind-heartedly.

"Not so bad. Just annoying, I guess." Harry stopped rubbing his temples then looked at his hands, leaning forward to smell them. "Eauw."

"What?"

"Eau de Dursley," Harry grimaced and went to the sink, soaping his hands liberally and scrubbing them hard. "Yuck."

Ron watched his friend for a while, wondering what was going through his mind. Harry silently washed his hands far longer than necessary. "What's up, mate?" Harry just shrugged in response.

Ginny bounded into the room, the flagon of potion in her hand. "Here you go, sweetie! This will fix you up."

Harry turned to face her, his eyes tragic.

"I'm sorry I took so long. Go on and take it. You'll feel better soon," she said sympathetically.

"Thanks," he muttered dispiritedly as he took the flagon from her and swallowed his dose. "Want something to eat?"

The two of them joined Ron at the table. Ron showed Ginny how to open her can of Coke and laughed with her when the fizz tickled her nose. Harry was uncharacteristically quiet.

"Harry?" Ron said after a few moments of silence. "What is it, mate? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Not nothing," Ginny said, reaching over to rub his forearm. "Something's bothering you. A lot. Talk to us."

He sighed. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to think. He just wanted to be alone, yet he wanted his girlfriend and his best mate to stay and visit. It had started out to be such a good day. Trust Uncle Vernon to make it miserable for him.

Ginny and Ron looked at each other uncertainly. They let the silence stretch longer, just watching Harry's face as he dealt with some inward struggle. His shoulders were tense, he was chewing his lower lip, his eyes were distant. Ginny got up and started massaging his shoulders. After a while, he began to relax a little, and then leaned his cheek on her hand.

"Thanks. That feels good," he murmured. "I'm sorry. You two came all this way to have fun visiting and it's been bloody awful so far." He glanced up, finally looking directly at Ron. "It's been a hell of a day already, hasn't it?" he said with a hint of his crooked smile.

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"Too right it has," Ron agreed. "So what do you want to do today? We've just arrived a few minutes ago, and we've enjoyed our snack and a quiet visit so far. You've been cooped up in bed for a while, right? D'you want to go somewhere? Or just mess around here? We're open to suggestions."

"You've just arrived? I like the way you think," said Harry, a sad smile spreading slowly over his face. "I thought we might see what's at the cinema, or just stay here and play Exploding Snap or something. If it's not raining, we can go for a walk. Whatever you want."

"I've never been to the cinema," Ginny offered, still working the knots out of Harry's shoulders. "Could we do that?"

"Yeah," he replied, taking her hands off of his shoulders and kissing each palm before getting to his feet. "Let me go and see what's showing." He went into the living room and picked up the paper from Uncle Vernon's chair. He stood immobile, the paper in his hand, staring at the chair.

Ron and Ginny had followed him from the kitchen. They looked at each other nervously. Whatever was going on in Harry was coming to a head. They could feel the change in the atmosphere, as if a storm was coming over the horizon.

"Harry? Mate? Talk to us before you explode," Ron said quietly. "What's bothering you?"

Harry's back stiffened as he realized his torment was being witnessed. He took a deep breath and blew it out, trying to control his emotions. Finally, he spoke, his voice disgusted and angry. "I held his life in my hands. He's given me nothing but hell my entire life. He's lied to me, beaten me, locked me up, called me names, and humiliated me in every imaginable way. I *hate* him, I really do. He was *dead* when I first touched him." Harry turned and looked at his friends, his eyes anguished. "He was *dead*! And I brought him *back*." His face twisted in fury. "I don't know why I should've worked so hard to save the life of a monster like him, but I brought him back. Why? Why did I do that? I actually thought about letting him die several times. It was so hard to get a decent rhythm and keep his heart going. It would've been so easy to let him go, but I couldn't. *I hate him*! Why did I save him? *What's wrong with me*? Am I so into saving people that I'll try to save *Voldemort* when I kill him?" He dropped into the chair, his face in his hands, pulling at his hair in torment. "He won't thank me for this. He'll find a way to blame me. So will she. If my life was hell before, I can't imagine what it's going to be like after this."

"I think I know what's really bothering you, sweetheart," Ginny said softly, sitting on the arm of the chair and wrapping her arms around him, laying her head against the back of his.

"You're shocked that you even considered letting him die."

Harry grew very still when she said this. She bent her head and nuzzled under the hair on the back of his neck, kissing the tender skin there softly over and over. Her hair fell from behind her shoulder and spilled over his shoulder and arm. As she continued to kiss his neck and rub her cheek against his thick black hair, he sighed and took the silky red tresses in his hand, running his fingers through them, watching the sparkles of red-gold as the strands caught the light.

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"How did you get so wise?" he asked finally, turning around so he could pull her into his lap. He held her close, his face buried in her shoulder, drinking in the scent of her. She smelled like wild roses and strawberries and fresh air.

"I just know you too well, that's all," she replied, lacing her fingers in his hair and gently pushing his head up so she could look him in the eye. "That's it, isn't it? You're torturing yourself for having a bad thought?"

"I suppose," he said quietly.

"I think there's something else, too," she added.

"What, Miss Knows-Harry-Too-Well?" he said with a slight smile.

"I think it hurt you that he might die. I think you've always wanted him to love you, and it hurts you that he hasn't. And I think you were sad that there would never be a chance for you two to love each other."

He sat up and stared at her, shocked. "That's. . . ." He wanted to say "That's ridiculous," but something stopped him.

"He was the only father figure you had growing up," she reasoned, ignoring his interruption. "Even if he was horrible to you, there has to be some feeling there. You probably always wanted his attention, his approval, his kindness. At least fair treatment. Right? Be honest with yourself, even if you don't answer me."

Harry couldn't meet her eyes.

"Ah-ha. That's what I thought. You love him in some fashion, and don't want to love him because he doesn't deserve it. So now you're upset because you had the power of life and death over him and chose to give him a second chance at life." She ducked her head so she was in his line of sight again. When he'd finally locked eyes with her, she added, "That's it, isn't it?" He was silent, but he didn't glance away this time. "What you did was heroic. You gave him a second chance. What he does with it is up to him, but you did give him a second chance. I hope he's bright enough to make good use of it and realize what a treasure he has in you, Harry."

He snorted with unexpected laughter. "It will be a very hot day in Antarctica before he considers me any kind of a treasure."

"You are a treasure and someday that block-headed man will realize it. I just hope he does before it's too late."

He gazed into her serious brown eyes. "You do know that I love you, right?"

"I had a clue, but it's always good to tell me these things," she teased. The tip of her tongue darted out and barely touched the end of his nose. "Got your nose."

"Changing tactics, are we?" he replied, charmed at last out of his bad mood. "I thought it was the dimple in my chin you wanted."

The Time of Destiny

"That too," she agreed, and promptly began chewing on his chin.

"Oy, get a room!" Ron said with a laugh. "And do it soon, because Tonks and Remus just got back."

"A room. Why didn't I think of that?" Harry said with a grin at his girlfriend, smacking himself on the forehead with his open palm. Ginny kissed the spot he'd smacked, then proceeded to playfully kiss every inch of his face, pushing his glasses and hair aside as necessary. She had him laughing in a very short time.

Ron opened the front door for Tonks and Remus. "Everything OK?" he asked them as they walked back into the lounge where Harry and Ginny were still playing kissy-face.

"He's doing as well as can be expected," Remus replied. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stood in front of his godson. Harry's and Ginny's smiles faded as soon as they saw Remus's face. "It doesn't look good. He needs a valve replacement – that valve not working right was the fluttering you felt, I suspect. They expect he'll need bypass surgery as well, but they were still doing tests when we left. Muggle medicine works much more slowly than wizard medicine, as well, so he'll be sick longer than a wizard would with the same ailment."

Harry gazed up at his godfather silently

"Your aunt is taking this all quite hard," Remus added. "Dudley isn't being much help, either."

"I'd be shocked if he was being any help at all," Harry muttered darkly.

"The paramedics were very impressed with what you did, keeping him alive so long. The tests they did here showed he had considerable damage to his heart, as well as long-term blockages in his blood vessels. They said chronic obesity and no exercise were underlying causes of the attack. They were surprised you didn't come along to sit with the family. They wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About becoming a paramedic. They think you'd be good at it. They were quite enthusiastic about how well you did, especially with no training."

"I don't want that kind of responsibility," Harry replied grimly, glancing at Ginny, then Ron. They understood what he meant and gazed back at him sympathetically. Desperate for a change of subject, he noticed the newspaper still clutched in his hand. "We were thinking about going to the cinema. Want to come with us?"

Remus's eyes lit up. "The cinema? Moving pictures, right?"

"Yes, moving pictures, like wizard photos, but with a story," Harry replied. He repositioned Ginny in his lap so he could open the paper in front of her and check the schedule. "There's a comedy, an action picture and a romance film to choose from at our local cinema. I don't know anything about any of them. What are you lot up for?"

The Time of Destiny

"Comedy!" Ron cried with no hesitation. Everyone agreed with him and soon they were walking down the sidewalk on their way to the cinema.

Nosy Mrs. Next-Door was ostentatiously sweeping her porch. "Boy! Oy, you there, boy!" Despite having lived next door to them all of Harry's life, she still refused to call him by his name.

"Yes?" he said in as polite a voice as he could manage.

"What happened at your house? I saw an ambulance earlier."

There seemed no point in lying. "Uncle Vernon had a heart attack. He's in the hospital now."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that!" she said insincerely. "How is he? Is he going to live? How's your dear aunt?"

Harry could see she was licking her lips in anticipation of starting the neighbourhood gossip chain. "He's as well as can be expected. Aunt Petunia's upset but doing OK. Dudley's with them."

"And where are you off to, with your dear uncle in the hospital?" she demanded.

"My friends came to visit today," Harry replied, wishing he didn't have to deal with her.

Remus stepped into the situation. "Hello. I'm Remus Lupin, Harry's godfather. These are our friends, Ron and Ginny Weasley, and Miss Tonks. We've done what we could for the Dursleys. Harry is understandably upset. We're trying to find a way to keep his spirits up."

The woman cast a suspicious eye over the group. "Well, make sure you lock the house when you leave it. Some crooks follow ambulances around to loot the houses of sick people, you know."

"It's locked, no problem," Harry assured her.

"Do give your dear auntie my best when you talk with her. I'll bring over a casserole or something when I see she's home."

"Thanks. I'm sure she'll appreciate that," Harry replied, starting to walk away. "Bye." His friends were silent for a while, giving him time to deal with his emotions again. "What an old busybody she is," he grumbled finally. "You'd think, if she wanted to bring over a casserole, she'd offer to bring it whenever she got it done, right? But no, she'll wait until Aunt Petunia is home because she wants to make sure I won't get any. As if I'd eat anything she cooked." Ginny already had her arm around his waist. Ron clapped him on the shoulder and made an unrepeatable remark about old biddies that made all of them laugh.

At the entrance to the cinema, Harry said, "Five adults for the two PM show, please."

"You're not paying for all of us!" Ron protested.

"You can buy the drinks then, all right?" Harry said reasonably.

The Time of Destiny

With hands full of drinks, popcorn and sweets, the five friends found seats in the nearly empty theatre.

"Is this not a popular film or something?" Ginny asked. "Where is everybody?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "I suppose there aren't a lot of people here because it's a weekday afternoon and most of them are at work or something." He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "This is the best part about films, as far as I'm concerned."

"What?" she asked, glancing around to see what could have caught his attention.

"This," he said, leaning down and kissing her tenderly. "Snogging through the credits is an accepted practice."

"What are credits?" Remus asked, overhearing Harry's conversation.

"The list of who did what in the film," Tonks replied. "And Harry's right about the accepted practice, you know," she added cheekily, leaning close to Remus and tickling the end of his nose with her eyelashes.

"Crikey, and me with no date," Ron grumbled. His face brightened as Harry wordlessly passed him two huge boxes of sweets. "What's this?"

"For you," Harry replied with a warm chuckle as he gazed into Ginny's sparkling eyes. "I have enough sweets right here."

"Works for me," Ron said with a grin, settling in to devour three full boxes of sweets as well as his super-sized popcorn.

As they walked back toward Mrs. Figg's after the film, Remus had a bemused look on his face. He and Tonks had followed Harry's and Ginny's examples in the best method of enjoying the credits. "If I'd known films were that much fun, I would've tried them years ago," he commented wryly, giving Tonks a squeeze around her waist.

"You didn't know me years ago," she pointed out, "so you wouldn't have had nearly as much fun as you did today." She grinned cheekily.

"You are a wonder, I must say," he said, smiling down at her.

Ahead of them, Harry, Ron and Ginny were having a spirited discussion about all the illogical things in the film, laughing at the silly situations presented and the foolish ways the characters had reacted to them.

"Then again," Harry reasoned, "if they were sensible people dealing with problems in a mature manner, there wouldn't be any film." His friends agreed.

"But for a grown man to jump into the mud like that – how stupid!" Ron chuckled.

"But funny – and I suspect that's the only reason it was there," Ginny commented.

The Time of Destiny

"Damn," Harry said suddenly.

"What?" Ginny replied, surprised at his vehemence.

"We're here. Mrs. Figg's." His shoulders slumped, knowing Ginny and Ron would have to leave soon.

"Oh," Ginny said in a small voice.

Ron looked at his watch. "We're due home now anyway," he said with a shrug. "We promised Mum we'd be home before tea. There's still a lot to do to get ready for the party."

Harry held Ginny close for a long moment, then kissed her tenderly. "I love you," he whispered in her ear as he nuzzled her neck one last time.

"I love you too. See you in a few days!" She stood back from him, her hands stroking his cheeks. "Where's my beard?"

"I'll bring it for the party if you'd like," he promised.

"No, they need to see how handsome you are. No point in covering up that dimpled chin. But after the party's over, then you can grow it for me."

"As you wish, m'lady," he promised, then kissed her forehead and hugged her again, holding her close and rocking her in his arms. He was reluctant to let her go.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you how nice your hair looked today!" Ginny added, leaning back in his arms to look him over carefully. "You did something different."

"Thanks," he said with a blushing smile. "I never had a chance to tell you how pretty you look today."

She smiled, her eyes sparkling. "Thanks."

Harry looked up at Ron. "Mate, thanks for coming with her. I know it's been a bummer without Hermione."

"After what you told me about Dudley's gang, I wasn't about to let Ginny come alone. We'll be seeing a lot of you while you're here. And Saturday's only a few days away! Take care, mate!" Ron replied, waving as he and Ginny walked up to Mrs. Figg's front door and knocked. She opened it promptly, waved at Harry, Remus and Tonks as she let Ron and Ginny inside. They turned and waved again before the door closed behind them.

When Harry, Remus and Tonks arrived back at the Dursleys, Harry stopped at the door, then turned and sat on the front stoop, his arms crossed over his upraised knees. He looked miserable again.

"What is it?" Remus asked, sitting beside the boy.

The Time of Destiny

"I don't want to go in. I hate this place." Harry rested his head on his arms, the very picture of misery.

"I know. It won't be much longer. But you've been up a long time today and should go in and rest. That's what Healer Pomfrey would say," Remus commented quietly.

He sighed. "I know." After a few more moments, he got up and put his hand on the doorknob, and was shocked to find it unlocked. He cast a warning glance behind him and pulled out his wand. Tonks pushed him aside and was the first inside the door, her wand at the ready, Harry and Remus close behind her. Keeping their backs to the walls, they peeped through the archway into the living room. Nobody there. Tonks signalled that they should head for the kitchen. The door was closed. With Tonks on one side of the door and Remus and Harry on the other, Tonks silently Vanished the door and burst into the room, the two men hard on her heels. They drew up short at the sight of a terrified Petunia and Dudley Dursley sitting at the breakfast table, untouched cups of tea sitting cold in front of them.

"Oh, it's you!" Tonks said in relief. "Sorry about that," she said, gesturing toward the open doorway that used to contain a door. "I'll replace it." With a sweep of her wand and a short incantation, the door was replaced. "When we found the house unlocked. . .well, your neighbour warned us about thieves who. . .well, we were worried. Sorry we scared you."

"Why are you home so soon?" Harry asked uneasily. "Is he. . .?"

"He came through the surgery as well as could be expected. He woke up in a flaming rage and there was nothing we could do to calm him down. They sedated him and told us to go home. He could undo all they did with the surgery if he loses his temper like that again while he's healing." Aunt Petunia made this speech in an accusatory snarl, glaring at Harry as if it was all his fault.

He saw her look and understood what was behind it. His face grew stony as he stiffened his back and stepped away his relatives. "I'm going to my room," he told his godfather, then turned on his heel and left.

Remus and Tonks stood still, not believing the scene they'd just witnessed. They heard Harry taking the stairs two at a time. They looked at each other, stunned.

"Um. . .I should probably go check on him," Remus offered after a few uncomfortable moments of silence.

"You go on. I want a word with the Dursleys," Tonks said in an uncharacteristically stern voice. Remus looked at her curiously, but she shoed him out of the kitchen.

As he went up the stairs, there was a knock on the door. "I'll just get that, shall I?" Tonks said quietly. "You lot stay here." She saw Remus starting back down the stairs, trying to see through the convoluted glass in the door. "I'll take care of this," she told him. "You take care of Harry." She opened the door and found the nosy neighbour standing there, a casserole in her hands, a hopeful look on her face. The woman kept trying to look around Tonks, who was expertly blocking access as well as the view of the house with her body.

The Time of Destiny

"Oh, hello. We met earlier. I'm the next-door neighbour?" the woman simpered, trying to get on the good side of this suddenly formidable-looking young woman.

"Yes, I remember," Tonks said sweetly. "I also remember your saying you'd bring over a casserole! How nice of you. With so many in the house, it will be welcome. Thanks!" She started to close the door.

"Wait! I'd like to see Petunia. I want to know how Vernon is," the woman pressed.

"He's doing as well as can be expected. He came through the surgery and is resting now. The hospital sent Petunia and Dudley home because Vernon's asleep and won't notice they're gone. They need to rest right now. They've been through a terrible ordeal. I'm sure you understand," Tonks replied, a charming smile on her face.

"Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. Well. . .tell them I called, then, all right?"

"I certainly will. And I'm positive the casserole will be much appreciated." This time, Tonks did manage to get the door closed. She stood to one side, keeping an eye on the woman outside but staying out of sight herself. She sensed a movement on the stairs and saw Remus standing there, wand at the ready, prepared to back her up if she needed it. She smiled at him, and went back to watching the woman outside the door, who finally stopped standing on the step and left, going unerringly to the other next-door neighbour's house. From there, the story was bound to spread like wildfire.

Tonks nodded at Remus as she turned away from the door. He headed upstairs while she carried the dish into the kitchen. "Mrs. Nosy whatever-her-name-is, lives on that side?" she said, nodding her head in the appropriate direction, "dropped off this casserole and said to tell you she called. She asked about your husband and you lot. I told her what she needed to know – and no more than that." She put the casserole in the oven to stay warm.

"Are you cutting us off from contact with our neighbours?" Petunia asked tremulously.

"No, certainly not. But I want us to have a few things straight before you start spreading around, um, shall we say, 'coloured versions of the truth.'"

Petunia's eyes widened in shock. "Coloured versions. . .well, I never. . .!"

"Yes, you have. You do it on a regular basis. I didn't have to spend much time here at all to see how things are. The way your neighbour looked at poor Harry when we were walking past, you'd think he had the plague. He hasn't done anything to deserve that, but YOU. . .you and your family tell lies about him all the time. You tell people he's a criminal, that he goes to school at St. Brutus's Secure Centre for the Severely Criminal Mind or whatever the bloody hell you call it! He's a GOOD BOY! Not a criminal! But your neighbours are scared of him – because of you! You are despicable people. I cannot tell you how many stories I've heard about you, things wizards I trust have witnessed or overheard when you've been out, or even in your garden but none of us were allowed, by Dumbledore's orders, to interfere. Harry was to grow up in as normal an atmosphere as possible. The atmosphere here wasn't even normal for Dudley, poor kid. You've ruined him. At least Harry had the strength of character to withstand the treatment you gave him and turn out all right."

The Time of Destiny

"How dare you. . .?" Petunia spluttered, incoherent with rage.

"Oh, ducks, I haven't even begun. You and Dudders, here, and I are going to have a little talk. It will take a while. I'm going to point out the error of your ways, and tell you the truth about your nephew."

The Time of Destiny

Chapter 2 – The Life and Times of Harry Potter

"Harry? Are you all right?" Remus asked as he crossed the boy's room and sat next to him on his bed. Harry lay on his side, curled in a tight ball of misery, a mixture of rage and anguish plain on his face. Remus put his hand on his godson's shoulder and felt the tension there.

"Hell of a day, eh?" he commented, hoping to get Harry to open up a little. The boy didn't respond. "You know, if a book were written about how to do everything wrong in personal relationships, and in rearing children in particular, I think the Dursleys would be the main subject. They've pretty much done it all now, haven't they?"

Harry lay still, lost in his own world of pain. He could hear Remus speaking, but the words weren't making sense to him. All he could think was, *She's blaming me. And she's right. He had that heart attack because he was angry with me.*

"Sometimes I think your head is transparent," Remus commented with an odd smile.

That got Harry's attention. "Huh?" He turned onto his back and looked at his godfather, his eyes sad, but curious, as well.

"You're blaming yourself, aren't you? She blamed you and you accepted the blame, although you know in your heart you didn't do anything wrong."

"I made him angry."

"No, you didn't. He was angry because Ron and Ginny showed up on his doorstep. But he had no right to be angry about that. He got angry because he's a petty, small-minded, mean, heartless, selfish, bigoted, prejudiced, rotten old sod. That's why."

A small smile tickled the corner of Harry's mouth. "I've never heard you talk that way about anyone."

"I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. The werewolf in me would love to just rip Vernon Dursley to shreds – and in some ways, that isn't such a bad idea," he said with a soft chuckle, "but I fight that part of my nature all the time. I try to be considerate of other people in the hopes that the kindness will be returned. And in truth, it's my nature to be kind, just as it's yours and was your parents'. The Dursleys don't seem to have that gene in their makeup. I'm sorry you've had to suffer with them for so long. You won't go through this alone any longer. I'm staying with you the entire time you have to be here."

Harry's eyes lit up. "You are? I thought you had to leave after the party on Saturday, or a few days later if I still wasn't well. But I'm so much better, I thought. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Plans can be changed, you know." He smiled at his godson, who looked as if he'd just had a massive burden lifted from his shoulders.

The boy sat up, studying his godfather's eyes closely. "You don't have to do this. It's awful here, but I'm used to it. I'll be all right."

The Time of Destiny

"I'm staying. If they're this bad when I'm here, I can't imagine how they behave when they aren't being observed by strangers." Remus shook his head. He'd never met such horrible people who weren't Death Eaters, small-minded people who shunned werewolves and other people who were "different" somehow, or some other type of evil wizard.

"Still. . .there's no reason for you to . . ."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Remus interrupted with a smile.

At this, Harry's eyes flew open wide in shock. "No! No, I just. . .I didn't. . ."

"You didn't want me to 'suffer' along with you? Or you didn't want me to see how bad it really can be?"

"Something like that," Harry admitted, dropping his eyes in shame.

Remus put a gentle hand under the boy's chin, lifting it so they were eye to eye again. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You have done nothing wrong. I'm so proud of you, in every way. Now stop giving me a hard time about trying to help you, OK?" He smiled warmly, watching the transformation as Harry went from shame to disbelief to acceptance.

"Thank you, Remus," he said humbly. "I can't believe you're willing to put yourself through this, but thank you so much."

"I love you, Harry. I'll do whatever I have to, to take care of you," the man said simply. He reached out and squeezed the boy's shoulder. "We'll be all right, and it will be over before you know it. And then we'll have a great holiday at Grimmauld Place. And we might be able to squeeze in that trip to Rumania if all goes well."

The boy gulped hard, trying to control his emotions. His heart felt full to bursting with gratitude to this wonderful man who willingly set aside so much of his own life to be there for Harry. He fell into Remus's arms, hugging him tightly. They held each other for a long time, Remus rubbing the boy's back, Harry clinging to his godfather, his lifeline to sanity in this insane place, at first desperately, then finally relaxing. "I can't tell you how much you mean to me. My dad chose his friends well," he said, sitting back at last and smiling at the older man. "Well, except for Wormtail," he amended with a chuckle.

"Yes, except for him," Remus said with a smile. "Now, young man, do you want something to eat? Or do you want to rest?"

"I could eat," he said with a grin. "I gave all my food to Ron at the cinema."

"I thought that was quite a nice gesture, and a good bribe as well," Remus teased. "It was a fun afternoon, wasn't it?" He stood up to let Harry get out of bed.

"Yeah," the boy agreed, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and shoving his feet into his trainers. "With any luck at all, Aunt Petunia and Dudley will have cleared out of the kitchen and we can eat in peace."

The Time of Destiny

"We can only hope," Remus replied, clapping the boy on the shoulder as Harry strode past him and opened the door with a grand flourish, inviting his godfather to precede him.

Remus was glad to see Harry looking more cheerful as they descended the stairs. They poked each other playfully as they walked down the hall to the kitchen, chuckling softly as they teased each other in a gentle mock battle. Outside the kitchen door, Harry paused and took a deep breath before walking into the room, bracing himself in case the Dursleys were still there. As they entered, they heard Tonks speaking.

"You and Dudders, here, and I are going to have a little talk. It will take a while. I'm going to point out the error of your ways, and tell you the truth about your nephew."

Harry stood staring at the tableau before him. Aunt Petunia was in a silent fury, apparently too frightened of Tonks to speak her mind. Dudley sat there with his mouth hanging open, his eyes darting here and there as if looking for an escape route. Tonks was glorious, not the funny, klutzy young woman Harry was used to, but an Auror in complete control of her powers. Her eyes were filled with both rage and reason as she stood across the table from Petunia, authority in every inch of her willowy frame.

When she saw Petunia's eyes slide away from her, Tonks turned around and grinned at them. "And here's the man of the hour now. Harry Potter, this is your life!"

"Huh?" the boy said nervously, his eyes wide and confused.

"Never mind. It was an old TV show my dad told me about. When he'd outline all the things I'd done right or wrong during the day, he'd say 'this is your life!'" She smiled at the memory.

"What are you doing?" Harry said, trying to make sense of the scene before him and the things he'd just heard.

"Straightening things out here," she said cockily. "Trust me, mate, all will be well once I'm done."

Harry and Remus glanced at each other uncertainly. As they looked back at her, two owls flew through the window, dropping letters in front of Tonks, and then flying back out of the window.

"Ah-HA!" said Petunia triumphantly, slapping her hand against the table, then shaking her finger furiously at Tonks as she continued. "You're in for it now! They know what you've done to Dudley and that you're threatening me, and they're going to punish you for it!"

"I don't think so," Tonks replied impudently. "Let's see. This one's from the Ministry." She hummed to herself contentedly as she read the parchment, then looked at Remus with twinkling eyes. "They want me to stay here to keep an eye on things so Harry isn't treated unjustly anymore." She waved the parchment in front of Petunia's face. "It's signed by Minister Bones herself!"

Harry's face lit up. "That's brilliant!" He grew thoughtful, then continued, "But Remus is here. You don't have to go to so much trouble for me."

The Time of Destiny

"I asked for this assignment, Harry," Tonks said seriously. "I realized there was a need for a Ministry presence here when I saw your reception at the train station. I went straight to Minister Bones about it, and she's had us watching the house ever since. She thinks a great deal of you, as you know, and she wants to be certain that you're not only safe, but happy. She said she might assign me here if things got too sticky."

He grinned. "Thanks!"

"My pleasure," she replied, patting him on the shoulder. She opened the second letter. "This one's from Dumbledore, telling me the same thing. Orders from the Order. Cool!" She grinned wickedly at Remus, and then turned brightly to Petunia. "There will be one more for dinner."

"*What?*" The woman had that "deer caught in headlights" look, wide-eyed and frozen in fear.

"Get used to me. I'm going to be here a while."

"And I'm staying with Harry however long he has to stay here," Remus said firmly.

"*WHAT?*" Petunia blanched as realization hit her. Suddenly, along with her nephew, who was now allowed to do as much magic as he wanted, she had not one, but *two* adult wizards in her house for however long that infernal boy had to stay!

"We won't be in your way, and we won't impose on your hospitality any more than necessary," Remus assured her. "But we will ensure that Harry is well treated, and that he's given the chance to heal properly from this injury. He will not be abused, yelled at, or blamed for things he is not to blame for. If I hear any of you referring to him in any derogatory way, or treating him with anything less than the utmost respect and kindness. . . ." He left the thought dangling in the air, allowing the Dursleys to put whatever creative spin on it they wanted.

"In the meantime," he continued, "we came downstairs because Harry is hungry."

"That woman from next door brought a casserole," Tonks offered. "It's in the oven. I'm a bit peckish myself. Let's eat! We can talk over dinner." She poked her head into the fridge. "I see stuff for a salad here, Remus. Why don't you work on that while I talk to Harry for a sec? I think the Dursleys have had a tough day and we should do the cooking." She grinned up at him. "Or at least you should. You know how hopeless I am in the kitchen!" They laughed together, sharing the joke. They'd been going out since they'd discovered their interest in each other after the battle in France during Hogwarts' Easter break. Never once had Tonks managed to cook a meal without some mishap or other, whereas Remus was a good cook who enjoyed creating tasty meals. They'd long since worked out the proper division of labour – Remus would cook, Tonks would set the table and provide various forms of amusement, from silly commentary to teasing or tickling Remus or nibbling his ear to distract him from his meal preparations. Their eyes met for a moment, exchanging a look of amusement as they remembered their many memorable meals together.

As Remus washed the lettuce to start making salad, Tonks pulled Harry out of the room. "I want you to do something for me," she began. "You won't want to do it once I tell you what it is, but please, just cooperate with me. It's important."

The Time of Destiny

"What is it?" he said uneasily.

"I want you to get your medals out and put them on. All of them. The actual medals, not just the ribbons. And wear them to dinner." She studied his face. His eyes were wide with surprise and a stubborn expression was beginning to show. "Before you get upset, think about it. I can tell them whatever I want, but you have proof. Those medals. Use them."

"No!" he said, pulling away from her. "I don't like that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?" she asked, honestly curious.

"Showing off. Going on and on about 'famous Harry Potter.' That kind of thing." His face was distraught.

She put a calming hand on his arm. "Think of it as a weapon, Harry. Sometimes you need to use that kind of thing to get what you want, or need. You have powerful tools in your arsenal. Use them. Trust me. It might make life better for you here."

"Why do you care about how my life is here?" He was still very uncomfortable with her idea.

"Because I care about you. You're my friend. You're Remus's godson, and I care about him. And most important of all, you saved my life. Please allow me to return the favour, at least in part," she said earnestly. "Trust me, Harry. If this doesn't work, I'll do a Memory Charm on them and they won't remember what happened here tonight. All right?"

He stood thinking for a few moments. "You'll Memory Charm them to make them forget?"

She raised her right hand. "I promise. Witch's Honour."

He nodded slowly. "All right, then. I'll get them. I hope your plan works, but if it doesn't. . ."

"Memory Charm, no problem," she assured him. "Oh, do you have your Omnioculars here?"

"Yes."

"And they still have the battle recorded on them, right?"

"Yes."

"Bring them down too," she said seriously. "We're going to give them an education they won't forget – unless, of course, I have to Memory Charm them," she added with an impertinent grin. "Don't forget to dress properly."

Harry looked at her doubtfully for another moment, then nodded and disappeared up the stairs.

In the kitchen, Remus had the salad made and was slicing some bread. He glanced at Dudley.

"Would you please set the table?"

Dudley flinched away from him, and then sneered at the man. "No!"

The Time of Destiny

"Sorry?" Remus responded mildly.

"I said no! You can't make me!" the boy said, crossing his arms over his huge belly and sticking his lower lip out in a massive pout worthy of a four-year-old.

"In a well-balanced household, everyone helps with the chores. Your mother isn't your slave. Neither is Harry. Tonks and I certainly aren't here to serve your whims. We're happy to help out with whatever work needs to be done, but you will help too, or you won't eat."

"You can't do that! Mummy, tell him he can't do that!" he wailed.

"You can't order my son around like that in our home," Petunia began.

"I'm merely looking for good manners in your son, but he apparently doesn't have any. Get up, Dudley. Set the table." When the boy stubbornly refused to move, Remus Vanished the chair he was sitting on. Dudley fell to the floor with a loud thud and a grunt of pain. "Up," Remus repeated pleasantly. The boy reluctantly got to his feet and started getting the dishes needed for the meal. Petunia was trembling with fury, her nostrils white and pinched, her mouth a thin line as she forced herself to not react to what was going on.

As she helped Remus set out the food, Tonks pulled the curtains closed as well as doing a spell to make the windows opaque to outside viewers, and preventing any sound from being heard outside the house. "Now we have privacy," she said with satisfaction. "We don't need that nosy neighbour peeping or listening in!"

A short time later, the table was set, if quite sloppily, and everything was ready. Harry came in just as Tonks was pouring wine for the adults. He looked magnificent in his dress robes with his medals glinting on his chest, the Order of Merlin medallion, hanging from its beautiful ribbon around his neck, gleaming brilliantly in the kitchen light.

"What the heck are you dressed up for?" his cousin sneered.

"Dudley?" Tonks said sweetly. "Shut up or I'll close your mouth for you. I'll be doing most of the talking tonight. We don't need to hear anything you have to say." She glanced up at Harry. "What would you like to drink, sweetie?"

"I feel a need for pumpkin juice, wearing my robes," he joked nervously. "Water's fine, thanks." He sat down and placed his Omnioculars on the table next to his plate.

"Pumpkin juice?" Dudley said, a disgusted look on his face.

"Dudley. *Silencio*. Don't say you weren't warned," Tonks said, ignoring his horrified reaction to being silenced. She chuckled. "Oh yeah. You can't say you weren't warned, now, can you?" Her wry comment made Remus smile and surprised Harry into a snort of laughter despite his nervous state. "Harry, dear, would you like some wine, as well?"

Harry was shocked. Nobody had ever offered to let him have wine with dinner, as if he were an adult. He noticed she hadn't offered Dudley any. "Um. . .yeah, sure!" he said, an uneasy smile on his face. Tonks poured him a glass of wine, and set a glass of water beside it.

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"If it's too strong for you, we can water it a bit. I don't suppose you're used to drinking wine," she said with a smile.

"No. Butterbeer's the strongest thing I've had," he admitted.

"Then remember to sip the wine, don't just drink it down, and be sure you eat," she advised.

"OK," he said, sitting up a bit straighter and feeling he might manage this evening's "presentation" after all, if Tonks was going to be this solicitous.

Since his return to the dining room, Petunia had stared at Harry, taking in the sight of the tall, broad-shouldered young man in his elegant dress robes, gazing at each of his medals in turn with wide eyes, then looking at her nephew's face as if she'd never seen him before. She'd shuddered when Dudley was silenced, but didn't comment, nor did she say anything until Tonks sat down and started serving the food. Petunia studied the Omnioculars lying beside Harry's plate nervously. "What's that?"

"That, Mrs. Dursley, is part of my presentation for the evening," Tonks said breezily. "We'll be studying the life and times of one Harry Potter, educating you about the genuinely world-famous hero who lives quietly in your smallest bedroom for a tiny part of the year. Once I'm done, I expect a complete change in attitude from both of you, or there will be consequences."

"Consequences?" Petunia gulped.

"You heard me," Tonks warned sternly. She looked at Remus and Harry and grinned. "Let's eat!" She served everyone, giving Harry a huge portion and Dudley a small, but fair, portion. Dudley looked offended, gazing imploringly at his mother, but she was staring fixedly at the Omnioculars, as if they would jump up and bite her.

As everyone tucked in to their food, Tonks began speaking. "I'm going to start at the very beginning, because I want to be sure Dudley knows the truth about everything, not the lies you've made up," she said, looking significantly at Petunia. "I suspect he's never heard the real story of how his cousin came to live here.

"Once upon a time, a wonderful couple named James and Lily Potter had a beautiful baby boy named Harry. They were murdered by the most evil wizard of the age, Lord Voldemort, when Harry was just fifteen months old. Voldemort tried to kill Harry, as well, but something about that sweet baby just stopped him. He sent a Killing Curse at Harry, something no one else has ever survived, but it didn't kill that precious little boy. It just gave him that scar on his forehead. Somehow, Voldemort's power was destroyed by baby Harry and the evil bastard lost his body. For years, he possessed animals or people to stay alive." She went on, telling them about Harry saving the Philosopher's Stone, about him conquering the basilisk and Tom Riddle's revived memory to save Ginny Weasley's life, about him clearing the names of Sirius Black and Hagrid, and his exploits in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, after which he battled Voldemort himself.

Dudley's face went from resentful and inattentive to reluctantly interested as Tonks' story went on. Every so often he would glance at his cousin, who was sitting with his eyes downcast most of the time, his body tense and still, or at his mother, whose expression

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changed from fury to resentment to shock to denial and back to fury again at various points in the story.

Petunia gasped and said, "No!" when Tonks told about James and Lily's ghosts coming out of Voldemort's wand and helping Harry escape. "That's not possible!"

"I said I would be telling you the truth, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Don't argue with me," Tonks warned. Petunia closed her mouth, her eyes huge. As Tonks continued watching her, the older woman dropped her eyes and went back to picking at her food.

Tonks told them about Harry and his friends forming Dumbledore's Army, and about the battle in the Ministry of Magic, trying to keep that part brief because she could see how it pained both Harry and Remus to remember Sirius's death.

"That was just before Harry returned here last summer. You might remember hearing news reports about mysterious deaths all over the country, and strange signs in the sky. Those incidents were Voldemort's followers, the Death Eaters, doing what they consider 'fun,' torturing and killing Muggles. That's what happened to Harry's friends, the Ashers." She watched Petunia and Dudley for their reactions. Both flashed startled eyes at her. "Yes, that's right. Voldemort had new followers he was training, and he turned them loose on lots of innocent families, many of them right here in Surrey. Voldemort himself was with them when they attacked the Ashers."

She glanced at Harry. He'd gone very still, staring at nothing, his eyes tortured as he remembered that night. "I'm sorry, Harry, but they need to know. It's part of the story." He glanced at her briefly, his agonized heart in his eyes, but said nothing. He'd been at least picking at his food. Now he sat completely still, his eyes unfocused, his hands in his lap, his head and shoulders bowed as if expecting a blow.

"Harry became ill after they died, in part because of his grief. He very nearly died. Once he returned to school, he was attacked repeatedly. There was a plot to kill him by putting various students and even one staff member under the Imperius Curse – that means they have to do what they're commanded to do by the wizard who cast it, even if they don't want to. Only a few wizards can fight off the Imperius Curse – Harry's one of them. He was in the hospital wing a great deal last term because of all these attacks, but none of them succeeded, as you can see. He continued training the D.A. and came up with the idea of making his friend Ron Weasley the general, since he's a chess master and good at strategies, and using battle plans such as Muggle military units do. He made his girlfriend, Ginny Weasley, head of the Healer Squad, as she's studying to be a healer. Hermione Granger, his other close friend, was given the job of head researcher and assistant to the general, as well as being second-in-command. You'll see how effective these plans Harry created were when you look in the Omniculars." She stopped to take a sip of wine and eat another bite of dinner, letting what she'd said so far sink in.

She turned to Harry. "You need to eat, luv."

"I, um, I'm not hungry."

"Yes, you are. Try small bites, OK? You need to eat something. I'm sorry this is so hard on you," she said, patting his arm comfortingly.

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"She's right, Harry. Do try to eat something," Remus urged him.

Harry glanced up, looking from his godfather to Tonks and back again, then nodded, sighed, and forced himself to start eating again.

"That's better," Tonks said approvingly. "Now I'll get back to my story. Where was I?" she asked Remus.

"France is next, I think."

"Oh, right! Thanks. On a trip to Rumania a few months ago, where he and Ron were taking a hippogriff – a hippogriff is half horse and half eagle," she explained when Petunia and Dudley looked up in confusion at the word. "Think of it as a horse with a funny head and talons on its front feet and eagle's wings. And yes, they're real. Anyway, while they were taking this hippogriff to Rumania to become part of the breeding program there, the boys were attacked. Ron and the hippogriff were both wounded. Harry took care of them while waiting for help to arrive. We got there and found Ron doing fairly well, but Harry was in the middle of a battle with Voldemort himself, as well as many of his followers, on top of a cliff. Remus, Arthur Weasley, Mad-eye Moody and I joined the battle, as did Ginny Weasley, and later Ron fought as well, despite his injuries. Voldemort threw Ginny off a cliff twice during the battle, and Harry saved her both times. He had to jump off a one-hundred-foot cliff to rescue her the second time, but he did it and both of them came back to fight again. He saved my life during that battle, killing the two Death Eaters who had me down and defenceless.

"On our way back home from delivering the hippogriff to Rumania, Harry was seriously injured when we were attacked again." Tonks didn't know if the Dursleys knew about Harry's scar pains or not, but she wasn't going to reveal that secret to them if she could help it. Calling the cause of his injury an "attack" was close enough to the truth and wouldn't lead to any uncomfortable questions – she hoped. "While he was recovering, there was a diplomatic nightmare because of that battle, when the French Ministry of Magic protested about British wizards fighting on their soil. Dumbledore and Harry went to a meeting and straightened everyone out, preventing all kinds of diplomatic problems between our countries.

"During the last Quidditch game of the year, Harry caught the Snitch – winning the Quidditch Cup in the process – but the Snitch was a Portkey that took him to Voldemort. There was quite a battle between Voldemort, the Death Eaters and Harry before Harry was able to get away long enough to send a message for help. Remus, Professor Dumbledore, Arthur and Molly Weasley, several other adults and I joined the D.A. members in battling the Death Eaters. We lost several good people in that battle, and some students died as well. In the midst of this battle, Harry and Voldemort were duelling madly. Harry managed to block spells from hitting some of the D.A. members at times, while fighting for his life himself." She stopped speaking, gazing at Harry with something approaching awe in her eyes. "It was incredible. I've never seen anyone fight as brilliantly as he did, or as desperately, and yet he was still trying to protect other people at the same time." She rubbed her eyes impatiently, took another sip of wine and sat quietly for a few moments.

Petunia spoke up. "Wait. You. . .you said. . .you said he *killed people*?" she said in horror, looking from Tonks to Harry. When her eyes settled on her nephew, she looked as if she were about to vomit. "He *killed*. . .?"

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Tonks slammed her fist on the table, making the silver and glasses jump. "*WE. ARE. AT. WAR!* What part of that do you not understand? In a kill or be killed situation, what the bloody hell would *you* do? Of *course* he's killed! And it hurts him every time he does it. This boy has a wonderful soul, a gentle spirit, but the heart of a warrior. Yes, he will kill when he has to – and then he grieves for the families of those he's killed, children who've become orphans like him because *both* of their stupid parents with bollocks for brains made the incredibly bad choice to join Voldemort." She stopped speaking, her chest heaving with emotion, and glanced at Harry. He sat motionless, his elegant dress robes bedecked in beautiful medals but his face bereft, his eyes hollow and pain-filled.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. I'd hoped to avoid that topic altogether. But if we're going to tell the truth, it has to be the whole truth. Do you agree?"

He raised heartbroken eyes to her. "Are you sure this is the right thing to do?"

"I think it's a worthwhile effort, yes," she replied.

He looked at his godfather. "And you? Is it worth all this, do you think?"

Remus nodded and said, "Yes, I think it's worth a try. I'm sorry it's so hard on you."

"How about a Cheering Charm later?" Harry said with a feeble attempt at a smile.

"You're on," Remus replied, patting his godson on the arm.

Dudley was bouncing in his seat, trying frantically to speak.

"Oh, all right, then. But if you annoy me again. . ." Tonks warned him as she removed the Silencing Charm.

"Thank you!" Dudley gasped. "OK. Let me get this straight," he said, his round face contorted as he tried to get his mind around a fact he just couldn't accept. "Harry – this Harry right here – he's killed people. Right?" Tonks nodded. "I don't believe it. How could he? I don't get it." He looked thoroughly confused. "And if it's true, why isn't he in jail?"

Tonks tried her best to be patient with him. "Ducks, I know you're a bit thick about some things, so I'll say this slowly. Harry is a soldier in what you might consider our army. He actually created the army you'll see fighting in the Omnioculars. He's our main weapon in the war against the bad guys. He's the most powerful wizard alive other than Dumbledore and Voldemort, and he's still quite young. When he is fully trained and comes into his powers completely, he'll outshine both of them, I suspect." She looked at Harry fondly, who was gazing fixedly at the table, trying to tune out her voice. "And he simply hates to hear that kind of thing. Sorry, Harry."

He didn't react, and she left him alone.

"Dudley, you will see proof of what I'm saying in these Omnioculars. There's something like a film inside that was made of the battle. You'll see Harry in the centre of most of the pictures, since his girlfriend was holding this set of Omnioculars. You'll see what I'm saying is true." The room was silent for a few moments.

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When Tonks began speaking again, she leaned earnestly toward the Dursleys, trying to drill into them the importance of what they were hearing. "Harry nearly died from his injuries in this battle with Voldemort. The whip lashes you'll see in the Omnioculars cut him to the bone – you could see his ribs showing in many of his wounds. He lost a tremendous amount of blood, and had a lot of internal damage as well. But despite these horrible injuries, he got out of his own hospital bed and used the healing powers you saw him use on your husband today to save one boy's life, and tried to save another's, but poor Seamus was too badly injured for Harry to help him."

She glanced at Harry and saw unshed tears glittering in his lashes. "I'm sorry, Harry. I know how painful this is for you." He just sat up straighter, taking a deep but shaky breath, and nodded at her to go on.

Tonks decided not to go into many more details, since it was so distressing for the young man. "As a result of all these things, Harry was given these medals." She got up and moved to stand beside him. She rubbed his back comfortingly for a moment before going on. As she spoke, she indicated each medal in turn. "This one is for the battle in France I mentioned. This one honours him for being injured in that battle. This one is for the Battle of Little Hangleton – which he has on these Omnioculars and we'll show you in a little bit. This medal is for his injuries in that battle. This pretty one is the Golden Star with Mystic Cluster. It's given for extreme valour, and has only been given once before in the past hundred years. This one is the Golden Wand Award for his coming up with the idea to use battle strategies and organizing the students into an actual army that performed brilliantly in battle. This large medal around his neck is the Order of Merlin, First Class. I can't touch it without his permission. It's spelled to repel anyone but its owner, except when it's being presented, or when the owner has given permission for someone else to touch it. That's what keeps people like you, Dudley, from stealing it." She grinned cheekily at the boy, who'd been eyeing the medal avidly. "Yes, it's pure gold, quite heavy, and extremely valuable. It's only worn for ceremonial occasions, which is why Harry is wearing his dress robes, so he can wear it properly. But the important thing for you to know about the Order of Merlin is that it's the highest award given in our world. It's the equivalent of the Victoria Cross in your world, but it's given even more rarely than the Victoria Cross. Maybe that will help you understand what an honour this is. The First Class medal has never before been given to anyone under the age of fifty. Harry is the youngest recipient in our recorded history, which goes back thousands of years."

She put her hand on Harry's shoulder, patting him fondly, then gazed steadily at Petunia. "This is the young man who lives in your home for only a short time each year. He's a hero, not a trouble-maker. He's an honourable young man, not a hooligan. He's so famous, many books were written about him before he ever got to Hogwarts, and more have been written since then. I'm sure many are being created as a result of these battles and his receiving these medals. He's in our history books, over and over, as well being featured in many books wizards read in *other nations*. He deserves your gratitude for protecting you all these years, not the misery you've given him his entire life. Think about that while you watch this."

She looked at Harry. "Are they set on the battle?" she asked, indicating the Omnioculars. He nodded wordlessly. She picked them up and operated the dials, scanning to find the scene she wanted. "All right. Mrs. Dursley, watch this. Dudley, you'll have a turn in a moment."

"No," Petunia said in a quavering voice.

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"*I. Insist*," Tonks growled through clenched teeth, glaring into the other woman's eyes while fingering her wand. She held out the Omnioculars, shaking them under the older woman's nose until Petunia finally put a trembling hand on them. "Be careful with them."

Petunia finally took the binoculars-like instrument in both hands and held it up to her eyes, her hands trembling so hard, the eyepieces were bouncing around in front of her face.

"Hang on," Remus said, then put a Levelling Charm on the Omnioculars which held them perfectly still no matter how hard her hands were trembling. "Better?"

Petunia gulped, glanced at him and then nodded ever so slightly.

"Look through the eyepieces," Tonks instructed. "Ready?" She touched a button, and the recorded battle began to play out before Petunia Dursley's astonished eyes.

The scene she saw in the Omnioculars was mid-battle. Harry was fighting Voldemort, their spells being cast so quickly, they created a rainbow of light arcing between them. Each man ducked and rolled, dodging or blocking the spells as much as possible. Both were bloodied but still fighting furiously. Occasionally, Harry would shoot a spell off to one side, blocking a spell from hitting one of his allies. Suddenly, Voldemort's wand spouted whip-like lashes, which slashed Harry's back and side to the bone. Petunia screamed and dropped the Omnioculars, which Tonks caught deftly.

"The whip, right?" she asked. Petunia nodded wordlessly. "Horrible, isn't it?" Petunia nodded again. Tonks held out the Omnioculars. "Watch the rest of it." Several minutes passed as Petunia sat looking into the instrument, trembling so hard it seemed she would drop them again at any moment. She gasped from time to time, but held on to the Omnioculars, totally involved with what she was watching.

The others in the room could hear Ginny screaming, "*HARRY! NOOOO! NOOOOOOO!*" from the instrument in Petunia's hands.

Harry shuddered at the sound, remembering flying in front of Ginny as a phoenix and taking the Killing Curse that had been aimed at her.

Petunia lowered the instrument slowly, her eyes wide in shock. "Where did he go?"

"Who?" Tonks asked kindly, taking the Omnioculars from her quivering hands.

"Him," she said, lifting her chin toward her nephew. "Where did he go?" She looked up at Tonks, then glanced nervously at Harry for a moment before dropping her eyes.

"Did you see the two birds attack Voldemort?"

"Yes. It was horrible."

"It was necessary. They pecked out his eyes. One of those birds was Harry. He's an Animagus. One of his forms is a phoenix. This information is not something you can share with anyone, but to be completely honest with you, I have to tell you that. He was also the bird who flew in front of Ginny and took the Killing Curse for her. That's why his scar is different now. He's

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survived two Killing Curses. Ginny would have died if it had hit her. Harry is the only person who's ever lived through it. No one is quite sure why he can do that."

"Dumbledore. . ." Harry began, then quieted.

"What is it, Harry?" Remus asked gently.

He looked at his godfather, keeping his gaze on him as he replied. "Dumbledore thinks my mother's love protects me. She died trying to save me. He says her protection is in my blood and in my skin. That's why I have to live with Aunt Petunia part of the year, since she's my mum's sister. And that's why Professor Quirrel couldn't bear my touch. He died from me just touching him."

"A man died from you touching him?" Dudley said with a shudder.

"Yes. That was my first year at Hogwarts," Harry replied quietly.

"You killed someone when you were eleven years old?" Dudley said in horror, thinking of all the times he'd provoked or even attacked his cousin, both before and after Harry was eleven.

"I didn't mean to," Harry said with a shrug. "He was possessed by Voldemort at the time, or he might not have died. I didn't know it would kill him for me to touch him. It just . . . happened."

The room was quiet for a few moments. Petunia's nervous voice broke the silence. "He. . .how can he be a bird? Is that what you said?" she said, bewildered.

"He can change into an animal's form, with that animal's abilities, so if he's a bird, for instance, he can fly. The Animagus transformation is extremely difficult. It's very rare for wizards to manage it. There were only seven Animagi registered in the last century. Harry's father and his godfather Sirius were both unregistered Animagi, and now Harry is an Animagus himself." Tonks looked at the boy, admiration in her eyes. "He's such a talented wizard, simply amazing. If I can get you to appreciate him even in part. . . ." She took a deep breath, studying the Dursleys' faces. "I see you don't believe me." She turned to Harry. "Would you mind?"

"Mind what?" He seemed to be numb. All these memories being brought up were so painful to him. He kept pushing them away, trying to stay calm.

"Would you show us one of your Animagus forms?" Tonks asked.

He looked at Tonks uneasily for a long time before answering reluctantly, "Which one?"

"The phoenix," she prompted.

He glanced at his godfather, who nodded. "K," he said reluctantly. He sat quietly, glancing up at his aunt when she shrieked as his black hair quickly changed into scarlet feathers which soon covered his body. His body shape changed as the feathers spread, and in a moment, a phoenix sat where Harry had been.

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Petunia sat panting, trembling hands at her mouth, her eyes popping in shock. Dudley was utterly still, as if he thought moving might make matters worse somehow.

Remus handed Petunia a glass of brandy. "I know it's a lot to take in," he said kindly.

She downed the brandy in one gulp and stared at the bird, which had hopped up onto the table and spread its wings as if stretching. "H-h-h-harry?" she whispered. The bird walked across the table, carefully lifting its long golden tail to avoid dragging it in any dishes. It had brilliant green eyes and a slight zigzag shape above its right eye, a lighter colour in the red of its feathers.

"See the mark on his forehead? It looks like his scar. That's his identifying mark, although the green eyes are also an identifying mark, since real phoenixes have black eyes," Tonks pointed out.

The bird backed away from Petunia and spread its wings, lifting into flight, soaring around the room before landing in Harry's chair and becoming a tall young man with black hair and round glasses again.

"That's some trick," Dudley said in awe. "How'd you do that?"

"Magic," Harry snapped.

"That . . . that stuff in these glasses. . .that film. . .it's not real. It can't be. It would have been on the news," Petunia said, trying to make sense of things.

"Harry? We've gone this far with it. Would you mind showing her your scars?" Tonks asked gently. "Please don't be angry with me."

He gazed at her in shock. He felt as if he were a side-show freak, being displayed for his relatives' entertainment.

Remus sensed his godson's emotion. "I'm sorry, Harry. If you don't want to, you don't have to."

"Can you give me any good reason why I should?" the boy asked, his voice breaking, his face greatly distressed.

"It's even more proof than your medals or the Omnioculars, something that may be more understandable to them," Tonks said reasonably. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it before. I should have talked it over with you first."

"Yes, you *should* have!" he snapped, leaping to his feet so quickly that his chair fell over. The air began to hum, the vibrations of Harry's anger making the china rattle in the china closet.

"I'm sorry," Tonks said, backing down immediately. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"What's happening?" Petunia said nervously as she glanced at her china closet. "Why are the dishes rattling? And you," she added, looking at Tonks, "are you. . .afraid. . .of him?"

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"No, of course I'm not afraid of him," Tonks snapped back, "but I do have the greatest respect for him, and I've upset him. I didn't mean to do that." She turned to Harry. "You know how I bumble around. I had what I thought was a great idea and just blurted it out. I didn't mean to hurt you, Harry," she said sincerely. "Please forgive me."

He stood still for several moments, his back stiff, his face stony. Finally, he took several slow, deep breaths and rolled his shoulders, forcing himself to relax. When he did this, both Tonks and Remus relaxed as well, and the dishes stopped rattling, all of which Petunia noticed right away.

"You ARE afraid of him!" she said triumphantly. "Why are you trying to sell us this load of rubbish about how wonderful he is when you're scared of him?"

Remus and Tonks looked at each other uneasily.

Harry gazed steadily at his aunt. "Because I'm dangerous when I'm angry, and they know it."

Remus started to say something, but Harry cut him off. "When I get angry, Aunt Petunia, things happen that I have no control over. Remember Aunt Marge inflating? Remember the door blowing off the cupboard last summer? Those are mild compared to what happens if I lose my temper now that my magic's been refined and I'm so powerful that I scare *myself*!" He said all this in a bitter tone of voice, snarling as he spoke. "You want proof? Here's proof." He stood and yanked off his robes, tearing the shirt he wore under them as he tried to remove it as well. He Vanished the shirt in disgust then turned around, showing them his chest, left arm, back and side, which were laced with a network of wide, angry red scars. "There. Happy?" The Order of Merlin medal lay on his bare skin, sparkling beautifully in the light as his heaving chest moved it. He pulled his robes back on and summoned his chair, dropping into it like a stone.

Petunia's eyes and mouth were wide with shock. She had to swallow back the bile that threatened to overwhelm her, the sight of those horrible, livid scars on his body sickened her so. After what seemed hours, she managed to control her nausea and find her voice. "What. . . what happened to you?" she asked tremulously. Dudley's mouth still hung open stupidly, after his initial shout of surprise.

"You saw the whip lashes come out of Voldemort's wand," Harry snarled. "That was *real*. That's what happened. He ripped me to the bone." He slid his hand self-consciously down his side. He hadn't had time to get over being so horribly scarred. The addition to his forehead scar wasn't that obvious, now that the swelling and redness had disappeared. But these on his arm, side and back were large, thick and ugly. He hadn't looked at his bare back in a mirror since just after he'd started getting well. That single glance was enough, and he'd never looked again. He knew Ginny, Ron and Hermione would never comment on the scars, and that Ginny loved him enough to look past them. But he would never be able to go swimming again without being stared at, he'd never be able to work shirtless on a hot day, or even wear a t-shirt that bared a lot of skin. To be totally protected from people's stares, he'd need to wear long sleeves the rest of his life to cover the ugly scars on his arm. He couldn't bear the thought of using the Quidditch Changing Room showers with his team mates anymore. The scarring was that bad. He didn't think he'd ever want to see more than just his face, where the scars had finally faded away a bit, in a mirror again, unless his body was fully covered. Now he sat with

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his arms crossed protectively across his chest, his robes unfastened but wrapped around him, his Order of Merlin still lying on his bare chest, glittering as it caught the light.

The others in the room were silent for a long time. Tonks was shocked at how bad the scars still looked. She hadn't seen them since he'd gotten well. She'd assumed they were mere lines of discolouration on his body, like his old curse scar on his forehead had been before its recent addition. When she could find her voice, she murmured, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed you to do that."

He shrugged, still resentful.

"What did the healer say about them?" she prompted.

"The whip removed chunks of flesh, so it was difficult to join the skin cleanly to close the wounds. They're healing as well as can be expected," he answered shortly. "They'll stop being red after a while. He didn't know if the swelling will ever go down or not."

Tonks reached over and rubbed his arm comfortingly, tears in her eyes. "I'm an awful person, Harry. I should never have. . . . I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me? How dreadful of me."

Harry snatched his arm away, turning angry, hurt eyes on her. "Yes, it was dreadful. This is your only chance to do this kind of thing. I won't tolerate it again. Now finish what you started." He locked his eyes on the tablecloth in front of him, his face hard and closed, his body tense.

Remus and Tonks could see him fighting to control his temper. They remained silent for a while, giving him time to cool off. As the silence grew long, Tonks decided it was time to finish what she'd started, just as Harry had said.

"Mrs. Dursley, Dudley, we've presented evidence that should help you understand who Harry is in reality," she began. "He's not the boy you've always thought he was. He's not a freak. He's not stupid. He's not a criminal. He deserves the tremendous respect he's earned from those who know him and those who don't, as well. I could have put a spell on you to make you treat him well, but I respected your intelligence enough to present proof to you. Now what are you going to do with it?"

"What do you mean?" Petunia asked warily.

"Are you going to treat him better?"

"I . . . well. . . um. . . ."

"You do know I have killed people," Harry sneered. "What makes you think I won't kill you if you annoy me enough?" He stopped, fighting down the anger rising within him again. "Have you managed to work out yet why I haven't killed you after some of the things you lot have done to me? I could have, you know, many times, but I *didn't*. I think what Tonks is trying to do here is to get you to leave me alone so I won't lose my temper and do something all of us will regret. You should think about that." He quieted again, remembering how Molly Weasley had been seriously injured the previous summer when Harry's raging emotions broke every piece of glass in the Grimmauld Place house.

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Everyone was silent. Finally, Petunia asked in a querulous voice, "Why. . .um, why haven't you. . .um. . ."

"I have tried to keep the peace here. You are my mother's only living relative. I think my mum would want me to treat you well. I've done my best to do what I think my parents would want, not that it's done me any good," he snarled.

Remus sighed heavily. "All right. I think it's time to reach a conclusion here and let Harry get some rest."

"Yeah," the boy agreed irritably.

"Fine," Tonks said. "Mrs. Dursley, do you agree to treat Harry as kindly as you treat your own son? To give him proper portions of food, not miserly ones? To speak to him in a pleasant way? To be reasonable in all your dealings with him? And to not tell any lies about him, nor to tell any Muggles anything you've learned here tonight?" She waited for a response. "Mrs. Dursley, what I'm asking isn't difficult. Act like a decent human being toward Harry in every way and you'll get along just fine. Can you do that?"

Petunia glanced from Tonks, to Remus, to Harry, her eyes studying his bowed head. He was refusing to look at anyone.

Harry felt her eyes on him and looked up, gazing back into her eyes. His eyes held no hope, nothing but wariness and weariness. As they looked at each other, Petunia's face changed a bit.

"Would you show me your scar?" she said quietly.

"Which one? I have loads now," he snapped.

"That one," she said, pointing to his forehead. He obliged by pushing back his fringe. The scar had an extra zigzag, was thicker than before, and was still a bit red since it was so new. "Did it hurt?"

"What?" he asked, dropping his fringe and looking at her in confusion.

"The Killing Curse."

"Hurt like hell. It felt as if every nerve ending in my body was on fire, vibrating from electrical shocks, and freezing cold at the same time."

Remus and Tonks looked at him in surprise. No one had ever thought to ask him what the Killing Curse felt like.

"Why?" Harry wanted to know.

"Why did you save that girl?" she asked.

"I saw the spell coming at her," he answered simply.

"Did you know it wouldn't kill you?"

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"No. I didn't think about that. I just wanted to save her life," he snapped.

"You did it because she's your girlfriend and you care about her, didn't you?" she said, trying to figure something out.

"I love her, yes, but I would have done it for other people if I could have managed it," he replied with a shrug.

"Are you thinking he only saves those he loves?" Tonks asked Petunia curiously. She nodded. "Do you think he loves your husband after the way he's treated Harry all his life?"

Petunia stared at Tonks and shook her head slowly. She looked at Harry again. "Why did you save Vernon?"

"Because it was the right thing to do."

Petunia was silent for a long moment, then very quietly said, "Thank you."

Harry looked up at her, startled, then just nodded.

"Dudley?" Tonks began. "Remember all those things I asked your mother about? I want you to get along nicely with Harry. You won't tell lies about him. You won't tell anyone anything about the wizarding world or that Harry's a wizard or can do magic, or that magic is real. You won't mistreat him in any way. If you do, that jelly thing Ginny did to you will seem pleasant. Do we understand each other?" The boy nodded dumbly.

"Mrs. Dursley, there's a party at the Weasleys' this weekend," Remus commented quietly. "They've invited you to it already, but you turned them down. I'm sure if you wanted to come, you'd be welcome. And if you did come, you'd see how Harry is respected and loved. You'd meet a lot of marvellous people who would be kind to you despite the way you've treated him all his life. The Weasleys are wonderful people. I think you might like them if you gave them a chance."

Harry was looking at Remus with a horrified expression on his face. "Not the party, Remus!" he begged.

"We need to make the gesture," his godfather replied. "It's the proper thing to do." He turned back to Petunia. "Would you like to come?"

"Vernon needs me," she replied stiffly. She glanced from face to face again, and swallowed hard. "But . . .um. . .thank you for the invitation."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, but Tonks said, "I think it would be good for you to come to the party, Mrs. Dursley. If your husband doesn't need you for a few hours that afternoon, you really should join us." It sounded a bit like an order.

Petunia got the message and nodded, but wouldn't give in completely. "If Vernon doesn't need us, I'll think about it."

"Mum, no! We're not going to a party full of freaks like that, are we?" Dudley burst out.

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"Dudley? What did I tell you?" Tonks warned pleasantly.

All of the colour drained instantly from Dudley's face. "Oh. Um. . .sorry?" he said, trying to put on a charming smile and failing spectacularly.

"That's better," Tonks replied serenely. "You may go to bed now, Dudley. But I've spelled the telephone and computer so you can't share any news at all about Harry. If you try, whatever you're saying or typing will turn into gobbledygook, and then only goblins will be able to understand it." She smiled sweetly at him. "And I have it on good authority that they have tremendous respect for Harry Potter." Dudley sat there with his mouth hanging open and his eyes bugged out as Tonks added, "Good night, ducks." She Banished his chair from the table so it hit the wall near the doorway with a thud. He took his cue from that and leapt to his feet, racing up the stairs as fast as he could go.

"I'm tired. May I be excused?" Harry asked Tonks.

"Of course! Thank you, Harry. Again, I'm so sorry. . ."

He cut her off. "If it works, it might – I said 'might' – be worth it. If not. . .I would probably appreciate a Memory Charm too."

"But in the meantime, I owe you a Cheering Charm," Remus reminded him. With a few waves of his wand, the spell was cast and a now-smiling Harry bounded up the stairs, in much better spirits than he'd been a moment before.

"How did you. . .what happened to him?" Petunia asked nervously.

"What do you mean?" Remus asked kindly.

"He seemed . . . happy, all of a sudden."

"That was a Cheering Charm. You heard the two of us talking about it. It cheers you up for a while. By the time it wears off, he'll be fast asleep and won't need it anymore."

Petunia sat there staring at him in amazement. "That kind of thing actually works?"

"Like magic!" Tonks responded cheekily. "Remus, how about helping me with the dishes? You know how clumsy I am." The two of them went to work cleaning up after the meal, leaving Petunia sitting at the table pondering all the things she'd learned that evening.

The day after the presentation, Tonks, who was staying in the spare room in the Dursley house now that the Ministry and Order both wanted Harry to have a twenty-four hour Auror guard, knocked gently on Harry's door.

"Who is it?" Harry called warily.

"It's me," Tonks said brightly. "May I come in? Are you decent? Better yet, are you indecent? Or how about Remus? Is he indecent?" She giggled at her own silliness.

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Harry chuckled. "We're both quite boringly decent. Come on in." He was sitting on his bed, a book in his lap, his ink and quill on the bedside table, rolls of parchment and other books spread all over the bed. Remus was sitting at Harry's desk, equally surrounded by books and parchment. The small bed he'd conjured for himself was tucked tightly against the wall.

"What's up?" Harry said as she came in and plonked herself down on the edge of his bed, a grin on her face and a twinkle in her eye.

"I had an idea," she began.

Harry groaned. "I think I had enough of your ideas last night."

"You'll like this one!" she said. "You need to learn to drive. It's a great skill for Aurors to have. Your aunt took a taxi to the hospital for some reason."

"I imagine Uncle Vernon blew up about how much it cost to park there," Harry told her, and then he grinned. "I bet she won't tell him how much it costs to take a taxi."

"Yeah, whatever. So I was thinking. Why don't we take your uncle's car and teach you to drive? I'll fix it up with your aunt – she can even come along if she wants."

"That'll be the day," he snorted, picturing Petunia's pinched face as she watched him learn to parallel park. "I couldn't do it if she was looking, you know."

"I'll take care of everything. You need to learn, and this is the perfect opportunity. I'm here with nothing to do but guard you, and I'm bored! I'll bet you'd like to get out a bit more than you have been, too. I think it would be fun to teach you how to drive," she said with a saucy grin. "How's your head?"

"I had a slight headache, but it's gone. It seems to bother me most when I first get up in the morning. So it's a lot better than it was," he replied.

Remus was watching all this with a bemused expression. "So Harry's going to take a driver's test and all that? Does he have to take classes to get a license? And do you really think the Dursleys would put him on their insurance?"

"Not a problem," Tonks said dismissively. "All you need to do is learn how to drive, and the way you fly, it will be easy for you. I'll take care of the rest. OK?"

Harry grinned. "If you can make all that happen, it would be really cool. I'd love to learn to drive! Yeah, OK!"

A short time later, Tonks, Harry and Remus were driving away in the Dursleys' car. She'd left a note for Petunia that they'd needed to run an errand and would be back soon. "No point worrying her unnecessarily," she reasoned.

"But. . ." Harry protested.

"Hush! I have everything under control!" she declared.

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He snorted with laughter. At least he wasn't to blame for whatever happened. And if Aunt Petunia did try to blame him, Tonks would Memory Charm her and get him out of it, he was certain. He sat back and enjoyed the ride, smiling at the thought of taking the wheel himself in a few moments.

They arrived at a closed supermarket with a large, empty car park. "Right, then. We'll do it here," Tonks said. She opened the boot of the car and, under its shelter in case any Muggles were watching, waved her wand, conjuring up several traffic cones, which she set out to mark parking spaces and as set of roads and junctions. "I'll show you what I want you to do, then you do it," she instructed.

The lesson went by very quickly. Harry knocked over a few cones at first, and the car lurched forward and bumped hard to a stop as he learned how much pressure to put on the pedals and when, but overall, he was doing very well. Parking was difficult for him at first. During the first few tries, he knocked over nearly all the cones and almost ran over Remus, who was standing outside the car trying to help Harry judge the distance to the cones. Numerous tries later, parallel parking was no longer a challenge. When he finally got it right, Harry whooped with laughter as Tonks not only cheered, but did a cartwheel in the parking lot.

"Very good, Harry!" Tonks said, leaning into his window as she straightened her clothes after her enthusiastic display.

"I didn't know you could do cartwheels," Harry said, laughing. "You're always going on about how clumsy you are!"

"When I was little," Tonks said with a smile, "I saw a gymnastics competition on the telly at my Muggle grandparents' house. The things they did! Cartwheels, flips, walking on that beam, throwing themselves between those two poles with complete abandon – it looked like great fun! I decided then and there that I was going to be a gymnast when I grew up! But I've never been very good at it, and I never got any lessons in it either. I worked so hard at it for a while, walking along the tops of fences and trying to do flips and so on, but cartwheels are the only skill I mastered."

Harry chuckled at her reply.

She crooked her finger at him. When he leaned toward her, she put her lips by his ear and whispered, "That's our secret, OK? I don't want to blow my image!"

He nodded, a huge grin on his face.

In her normal voice, she said, "That's about all you need to know to get started. We'll drive in traffic a bit later. Hang on, you'll need a licence." She got into the back seat and opened her rucksack, digging around in it looking for something. "Drat it all, I know it's in here somewhere." Finally, she came up with what she was looking for. "Ah-HA! Here it is!" She waved a small pink plastic card around, quite pleased with herself. She held the card up at Harry's eye level, showing him one plain face of it. "Smile, Harry!" she said, and a moment later, a Muggle photo of Harry was on the plastic card. She handed him a bit of Muggle paper and a ballpoint pen. "I need your signature," she said. He signed his name and she looked it over approvingly. With a wave of her wand, all the information required of a driver's licence, including Harry's signature, was on the card along with his photo. She pulled out the required

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plastic wallet and green A4 paper, copying the proper information onto the green paper, assembled the entire thing and said, "Ta-da!" as she handed it to him.

Remus finished putting the cones back in the boot, Vanishing them once they were all stowed out of Muggle eyesight, and climbed into the backseat with Tonks.

"What is this? Fake I.D.?" Harry said, holding the licence in both hands and looking from it to Tonks curiously. "Nice photo, though," he admitted. "Wish my fringe covered my scar better."

"Hang on, then. Comb your hair. Check the mirror, make sure you like it. I'll redo the picture." She took the licence from him and waited until he was happy with his appearance, then she held the licence up at his eye level and redid the photo. "There, how's that?"

"Brilliant! That's the best fake I.D. I've ever seen," Harry complimented her.

She leaned in and replied in a stage whisper, "It's not a fake."

He looked up in surprise. "Huh?"

"Aurors need all kinds of I.D., passports, and so on, in a variety of identities for when we do undercover work. This licence is just as real as your aunt's. It has been duly registered with all the proper authorities. When I put the spell on the plastic card that made it into a licence, every necessary task and registration was performed as well, including getting you the proper insurance. This is a real driver's licence, mate. Now, let's go and drive in some traffic!" she said cheerfully.

"But. . .but. . .," he stuttered. "How can you do that? Is it legal?"

"Perfectly legal, except for the minor problem that you aren't an Auror yourself. This is an 'Auror's Only' type of privilege, BUT. . ." she paused dramatically, "the Minister hinted that I should use my best judgment on how much to tell you about the programme. She's determined you're going to be an Auror, since you said that's what you want to do. I'm here to help you along a bit! And besides, a boy your age simply ought to know how to drive!"

A couple of hours later, Harry pulled into the Dursleys' driveway and turned off the ignition, a huge grin on his face. He had proven to be a very good driver, not rattled by traffic, careful at junctions. His Quidditch training had come in good stead, since he already knew how to be aware of dangers in his surroundings. He was very pleased with himself, and with Tonks. "That was great! Thanks, Tonks!"

"No problem, Harry. We can't have Aurors who can't drive! Well, we do, but it's loads easier if you know how to handle all kinds of transportation, and since you grew up in the Muggle world, and I've spent a lot of time there, as well, we have the advantage of being used to traffic. You should see how some of these blokes mangle the Ministry's cars when they're first learning!"

"I'm proud of you, Harry," Remus said as they walked toward the door. "I don't think I could have conquered driving as quickly as you did, particularly that parking bit!" Harry beamed in response.

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Somehow, Harry's driving lesson remained a secret from the Dursleys, which pleased him greatly.

The few days between Tonks' "presentation" and the party sped by. Petunia and Dudley spent as much time as possible at the hospital with Vernon, but when they were at home, they were distantly polite, which seemed to be all the good manners they could muster most of the time. Tonks watched Harry's reactions carefully. He, too, was distantly polite, and quite wary, as well. It was obvious he didn't trust them to be able to keep up the façade of civility very long.

On Saturday morning, Tonks asked Petunia, "How's Mr. Dursley doing?"

"As well as can be expected," Petunia replied stiffly.

"You didn't stay as long yesterday," Remus noted. "Is he not up to visitors?"

Petunia seemed to be battling with herself, not really wanting to answer, but remembering her promise to be civil. "He's sedated, so he didn't know we were there. I saw no point in staying very long."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Remus said kindly. "Is he in much pain?"

"I don't think so. They've sedated him because he keeps flying into a rage. They're afraid he's going to undo the work the surgeons did on him. They've asked us to stay away for several days to give him more time to recover," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia," Harry said sincerely. He could see the toll this entire experience had taken on his aunt. She had always been a thin woman, but with this stress, she was hardly eating at all. She sat twisting her hands nervously most of the time. Harry might hate his relatives, but his kind nature also made him sympathetic to her suffering in spite of himself.

Petunia looked at him nervously, her mouth a thin white line. In truth, what Vernon was raging about was Harry. She couldn't get him distracted no matter what she said. He was simply furious, saying Harry had caused his heart attack, Harry was at fault for him missing so much work, Harry this, Harry that. . . it was an endless angry litany unless he was sedated. Petunia had seen Harry working to save Vernon. Whatever her husband thought about him, the boy had done his best to save his uncle's life. That fact was causing Petunia problems, as was all she'd learned from Tonks a few evenings ago. Petunia found she had a great deal to think about these days.

"Well, then," Tonks said brightly to Petunia, "if you can't visit him anyway, you're free today! Are you coming to the party with us?"

The older woman's eyes widened in shock. She wanted to say no, oh, how she wanted to say no! But Tonks's story about Harry had piqued her curiosity. *The boy does have all those medals, she mused. All the wizards we've seen him with treat him with respect and seem to have real affection for him. Maybe there is something there. . . no! Vernon would be so angry if we went! But then again. . .* Ever the nosy person, Petunia was sorely tempted in spite of herself.

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"Mrs. Dursley, if you stay at home, you'll brood about your husband's illness, I know you will," Remus said gently. "At least a party is a distraction. But we won't force you. It's your choice."

Petunia looked from Remus to Harry to Tonks, then back to Harry again. "Well?" she said hesitantly.

"Well what?" Harry replied uncertainly.

"Do you want us to come?"

"Not Dudley. He'd be likely to be turned into a Brussels sprout before he'd been there five minutes," Harry said seriously.

"Brussels. . .?" Dudley said, shocked. "No, Mummy, I don't want to go! You shouldn't either! Those people are danger. . ." he trailed off, seeing three pairs of wizard eyes drilling into him.

"Dudley can stay at home. He's spelled so that he can't say or do anything to endanger us. He's free to go visit his little friends or whatever he wants to do," Tonks said easily. She glanced at the boy. "Remember – there are consequences if you say the wrong thing." She laughed as he grabbed his crotch and ran from the room. Harry and Remus chuckled at the sight.

"If you don't enjoy yourself, we'll bring you home early," Remus offered. "Harry's well enough to Apparate back when he's ready to return."

Harry chuckled, then quipped, "See you in September, then, Remus."

Remus grinned at him. "You don't have to stay here much longer, Harry. You have to admit it's been going pretty well lately, right?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, it's an improvement. So how are we getting to the party?"

"If your aunt comes with us, we'll drive. If she doesn't, we'll Apparate or floo," Tonks replied.

"Do you know how to get there the Muggle way?" Harry asked in surprise.

"That's what maps are for, m'boy! Even wizards use them at times!" she teased. "I have directions. No problem."

"Ron said we're going to play Quidditch this afternoon. I can't wait! I miss flying," Harry said excitedly.

"Flying? Quidditch?" Petunia said hesitantly.

"It's our sport. Like soccer on broomsticks?" Harry replied, trying to be patient with her. "I've already got my broom in my pocket," he told Remus happily.

"How can you. . .?" Petunia asked, intrigued in spite of herself.

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He pulled out a small bundle from his pocket, unwrapping a soft cloth to reveal a perfect miniature racing broom. "This is my Firebolt, but with a Shrinking Charm on it. You've seen how it normally looks. This makes it easier to take it with me if we Apparate or floo there."

"Floo?" she asked.

"Traveling by fireplaces. That's why the Weasleys were in the chimney here a couple of years ago," he explained. "They'd tried to get here by the Floo Network, but you had the fireplace blocked up."

"Our fireplace is still blocked up, so you can't travel by what-you-call-it," she pointed out.

"Floo Network," Harry replied. "And yes, we can. There are lots of places where you can get on the Floo Network. You just have to know where to go." He studied his aunt's face. Somewhere in there was the blood of his mother. Somewhere in there was someone who had known his mother her entire life. If she only would, she could tell him so much about his mother, his grandparents, maybe even a bit about his dad. Would she ever give him a chance to know about his family? She was behaving a good deal better since Tonks's presentation. Should he take a chance with her? He swallowed hard. "Do. . .do you want to go with us?"

Petunia studied her nephew's face. Her sister's eyes looked out of that face. For many years, she'd hated her sister. Perfect Lily, beautiful Lily, talented Lily, and then WITCH Lily! She'd hated it when Lily went off to that wizard school and left her, Petunia, behind. She'd hated the way her parents fawned over Lily, astounded that a magical person had appeared in the family. She hated the way Lily could do so many amazing things that she could never, in her wildest dreams, do. As a result, she'd spent all of Harry's life rejecting him harshly, not wanting to admit there was any kinship there at all . . . but those were her sister's eyes, especially now that he was nearly a grown man. He often showed expressions just like Lily's, and his look of reproach was hers to a "T." So was his temper.

Harry would be leaving forever in a short time. Guilt about how she'd treated him had nagged at Petunia from time to time all of his life, but Vernon was so adamant in his rejection of the magical world, she'd gone along with him happily in whatever he wanted to do to her hapless nephew. She studied the boy's face. He'd grown into a handsome young man, despite that horrible scar and the other scars on his face which had faded considerably in the few days he'd been home. If she was honest with herself, which she rarely was, he was nearly everything she'd hoped Dudley would be, but wasn't, despite her best efforts. If she allowed herself to think fairly, she realized Harry had always been well-mannered and sweet when he wasn't provoked, just like her sister. He was a hard worker, if a bit grumpy about it at times. He was quiet and reserved most of the time. How had he turned out so well? Why hadn't Dudley turned out as well as her nephew? She chided herself for judging her son harshly, wringing her hands again as guilt washed over her.

Since Vernon had been in hospital, Petunia had had a great deal of time to think about her life, to think about what might face her on Judgement Day – oh yes, she believed she'd be judged someday, and every time she looked at Harry, a twinge of guilt reared its ugly head. She'd give a lot to assuage the guilty feelings, or get rid of them altogether. She sighed. *I have a chance to at least try to improve things here*, she thought, fighting to quell the rebellious voice in the back of her head that reminded her Vernon would most assuredly NOT approve of what she was thinking.

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"All right. I'll come with you," she said at last. If she'd expected whoops of joy from Harry, she would have been disappointed, but then again, she hadn't expected them at all.

Harry tried to mask his shocked expression when Petunia agreed to go with them. "Um. OK. I think you'll like the Weasleys once you get to know them." He kept his fingers tightly crossed behind his back as he said this.

Some time later, Harry, Remus, Tonks and Petunia were bowling down the motorway on their way to Ottery St. Catchpole and the Weasleys. Harry was driving, much to Petunia's astonishment, and doing it quite well. She asked no questions despite Harry's raised eyebrows at her when he slid into the driver's seat. Petunia was determined to stay quiet and just observe things today, to try to stay out of trouble so these wizards wouldn't hex her somehow.

Harry and Remus were in the front seat. Tonks had taken charge of the seating arrangements, saying the "men needed the room for their long legs." Now she sat in the back, giving Harry suggestions on his driving from time to time, and giving him directions as needed to get them to their destination. She was also keeping an eye on Petunia, ready to intervene if the woman tried to give the boy any trouble. Harry and Remus laughed and talked for a long time. Neither had seen this part of the country from a car before, only from broomsticks.

Tonks sat back and watched the two of them enjoying each other's company. She studied Remus's profile as he turned to speak to Harry. *C'mon, Tonks, old girl, tell me what you really think*, she mused. A warm smile spread over her face. *I think he's fine. Pretty darned close to perfect.*

As they pulled in to the Weasleys' drive, Petunia gasped.

"Oh, it's a Muggle-Repelling Charm, Aunt Petunia," Harry said quickly, realizing what she was seeing. "Hang on, you'll see what it really looks like in a sec." He did the Revealing Charm and heard another gasp from his aunt. He looked at The Burrow, trying to see it the way he thought his aunt would and realized it simply wasn't a perfect little boxy house from Surrey. He sighed, hoping she would behave herself and not embarrass him in front of his friends or hurt anyone's feelings.

"Did the Weasleys get another car?" Remus asked when he saw the fairly new sedan parked in the shade by the drive.

"Not that I know of," Harry mused. He wondered who else had driven out to the party. He supposed they'd soon find out.

When he parked and got out of the car, he saw a dainty body hurtling toward him, long red hair streaming behind her.

"Harry! Harry, you're *here*! HARRY!" Ginny called, laughing with delight.

Harry ran to her and wrapped his arms around her, her momentum making them spin around before he could slow her enough to plant a warm kiss on her upturned mouth. "I've missed you so much!" he murmured as he hugged her.

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They were soon surrounded by redheads as several of Ginny's brothers surrounded them. Greetings were exchanged with much back-pounding, hand-shaking and laughter among the friends. They quieted when they saw Petunia emerge from the car.

"Hello, Mrs. Dursley," George said politely. "Did you bring Dudley with you?" He smiled as he ducked down to peep in the backseat.

"Um. . .no. Dudley had other plans today," Petunia said nervously, glancing from one twin to the other as they put on totally innocent faces, acting merely politely interested. These were the ones who'd given her Dudders that sweet that made his tongue swell up so much. She would be careful to watch what she ate and drank around these people.

Molly arrived and hugged Harry warmly, then turned to Petunia. "I'm so glad you were able to join us. I'm Molly Weasley, and these are my children. That's Bill over there, Percy, Charlie, Fred – no, wait, that's George. Sorry, dear! This one's Fred, and this is Ginny." She turned to smile at Harry. "Charlie came home for the party, isn't that lovely? He was so happy to hear the news about you and Ginny." Harry nodded and grinned at the young man as Molly continued. "Ron's in the house with Hermione and her parents. They'll be right out."

"Oh, is that the Grangers' car, then?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"Great!" Harry said, glad Hermione's parents were able to attend the party.

Arthur extended his hand to shake Petunia's. "I'm so glad you could join us."

Petunia nodded mutely to the sea of redheads surrounding her, ignoring Arthur's outstretched hand.

"How is your husband?" Arthur asked kindly, withdrawing his hand but still trying to do the right thing.

"As well as can be expected," Petunia said nervously, then clamped her lips shut as if she might catch some awful wizarding germ if her mouth was open more than a second at a time.

Harry heard someone calling his name from the direction of the house. He turned and saw Hermione and Ron running to meet him, the Grangers trailing behind them, looking bemused.

"Harry! Hi! How are you?" Hermione said, hugging him as soon as she reached him.

"How you doing, mate?" Ron said, punching him gently in the shoulder.

"I'm great. Good to see you. Hermione, I'm glad you could come! When are you leaving for your holiday?" Harry said, grinning at his friends. It seemed like a lot more than six days since they'd all been together.

"We leave on Monday. I'm glad we could come too!" she said.

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"Hello, Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger," Harry said politely. "It's nice to see you again. This is my aunt, Petunia Dursley. You remember my godfather, Remus Lupin?" They nodded. "And this is Tonks." The Grangers shook hands and exchanged greetings all around.

As the adults chatted, Hermione linked arms with both Harry and Ron, and Harry put his arm around Ginny. The four friends wandered off to catch up on each other's news from the last few days.

Soon tables all over the garden were simply groaning with food. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione ate until they thought they'd burst. Molly had gone out of her way to make everything they all loved. Ginny had made a list of Harry's favourite foods for her mum, and she'd gone to extra trouble to make fresh treacle tart as well as steak and kidney pie for him.

"Having fun, Mrs. Dursley?" Arthur asked politely. "You don't have any food. Molly's worked on this meal for days. Please try something."

"Thank you," Petunia said shortly. "I'm not hungry just now."

"Everything is just lovely, Mrs. Weasley," Mrs. Granger said. "Thank you so much for inviting us."

"Yes, it's marvellous," Mr. Granger added. Both of them had noticed Petunia's air of disapproval. They couldn't understand it, but they had heard enough about the horrible Dursleys from Hermione to avoid saying anything to her that might set her off.

"Try some of these, Mrs. Dursley," Tonks suggested, holding a platter of devilled eggs in front of the woman as she stuffed an egg into her own mouth. "They're wonderful!" she enthused after she'd managed to swallow.

Petunia daintily took a devilled egg and put it on her plate, cutting it into tiny bits with her fork, then taking a great deal of time eating it. Finally, she began to relax as she watched the happy people around her laughing and enjoying each other's company. The scene was no different than any company picnic she'd been to, except for the odd look of the house and Arthur and Molly's clothing, and the use of pumpkin juice as the beverage for most of them. There was even a Muggle couple here, much to her amazement. Tonks had told her the Grangers were dentists, but Petunia hadn't managed to find anything to converse with them about, despite them being the only Muggles around. The young adults and teenagers were all dressed as Muggles, so they looked like any other young people except for those odd green leather boots on the man with the fang earring and ponytail. Bill? She thought that was his name.

Molly saw Petunia looking at Bill's boots as he walked over to the serving table to pick up another jug of pumpkin juice. "Do you like his boots? They're dragon hide, quite expensive, but nothing's as durable as real dragon hide."

Petunia actually flinched at the word "dragon." "Dr. . .dragon hide?"

"Oh, yes. Charlie works with dragons in Rumania. He got Bill those boots on a wonderful discount. Lovely, aren't they?" Molly enthused.

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Petunia turned her full gaze on Molly. "Dragons. *Dragons?*"

"Didn't Harry tell you about them? He fought a Hungarian Horntail as part of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I tell you, that boy is a magnificent flier. I've never seen anything like it, and our Charlie was known as a great flier when he was at Hogwarts. Ron and Ginny and the twins are quite good, but Harry? He's amazing."

Petunia's eyes were wide, but she remained quiet, just nodding as she let the information sink in. Something Tonks had said about the Tri-Wizard Tournament fit in with what Molly was saying. If Petunia approached all this information slowly and carefully, she might manage to make sense of it eventually – or else she'd just accept the fact that she'd gone mad and was hallucinating.

Harry did his best to stay away from his aunt all afternoon, but his curiosity got the better of him from time to time. When he glanced her way, he saw her sitting nervously, her eyes wide, her hands often twisting in her lap. She would respond when spoken to, but only in monosyllables. Molly Weasley tried repeatedly to engage her in conversation, and to get her to eat something, but nothing they did seemed to help.

Harry, Ginny, Ron, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie, Remus and Arthur all wanted to play Quidditch. Percy sat working at the picnic table, saying he didn't have time to play Quidditch because he had an important report to finish. The breach between him and his family was still there, so nobody minded his not joining their play. They were all astonished he'd even shown up, but considering the party was for Harry and the Ministry thought Harry was golden just now, the ever-ambitious Percy's joining them did make a certain kind of sense. Hermione led a cheering squad of herself, her parents, Tonks and Molly.

Petunia sat there speechless as the men and girl zoomed overhead on broomsticks. One of those twins was doing the commentary. None of it made sense to her.

"And it's Potter playing both Chaser and Seeker again for the Weasley-Potter team, since they're shorthanded. Mum!" Fred called down, "are you sure you don't want to play? Tonks? Want to join us? Hermione? We could use one more!"

"No thanks," Molly said with a laugh. "My Quidditch days are long behind me."

"I'm quite frankly dangerous on a broom if I'm not just travelling somewhere," Tonks said with a cheeky grin. "If you think I'm clumsy on the ground, you really don't want to see me trying to do aerobatics on a broom!"

"And I'm not that fond of flying," Hermione replied, then smiled sweetly at Ron, "unless Ron's doing the flying and I'm just a passenger." She laughed as Ron's ears turned pink, but he grinned at her and blew her a kiss.

"Anytime you want, sweetie," he called, determinedly ignoring the fact that her parents were sitting right beside her as well as the teasing hoots of his twin brothers.

"Right! Then it's Harry, Ginny, Fred and Remus against Bill, Ron, Charlie, George, and Dad, then? The balls are away and we're off!" Fred said.

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Remus was playing Keeper, Fred was Beater, Ginny was Chaser and Harry was both Chaser and Seeker. On the Weasley team, Ron was Keeper, George was Beater, Bill and Arthur were Chasers and Charlie was Seeker. The unevenness of the teams didn't seem to bother anyone.

As she watched the action above her, Petunia gradually let go of her disapproval enough to be amazed at the fact that all these people were riding broomsticks and doing it amazingly well. Harry was, by far, the best flier out there, as whichever twin was commentating said repeatedly. It was obvious, even to her inexperienced eye. He zoomed past everyone at breakneck speed, looping some, hovering upside down for a moment over that girlfriend of his just long enough to kiss her, then racing off with a laugh after that big red ball. He snagged it as one of the Weasley men tried to pass it to another. Petunia couldn't keep straight which team any of them were on, except that she knew that that Lupin man who was staying with them was on Harry's team, as was Harry's girlfriend. Flying on broomsticks. What a strange thing to do. But when it was done really well, as was true of most of the people playing, it was almost. . .thrilling, almost beautiful. Lupin seemed a bit out of practice. He lumbered along on his broom, not doing aerobatics like the young people. The Weasleys' father wasn't very quick either, but she heard one of the twins teasing him about how ancient his broom was. The two older men's brooms looked quite shabby and beaten up compared to Harry's and his girlfriend's. Even that boy who her nephew said was his best friend, Ron, had a nice-looking broom like Harry's. Those brooms seemed well-polished and the ends were neat, as opposed to some of the others being flown at the moment.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Molly asked Petunia. "Quidditch is such an exciting game, even when they're just playing for fun. You should see them in a real game, though. Ron plays Keeper, and Harry's Seeker, and they're both just brilliant. I expect they'll be scouted by a professional team when they finish Hogwarts. Ginny plays Chaser on their House team, but she wants to be a healer, not play Quidditch professionally. I think the boys would love to play Quidditch after they finish school, though." Molly smiled up at her family, pride in her eyes, then glanced back at the other woman. "Isn't it fun?" she said, encouraging Petunia to join in the conversation. She hadn't had much success in getting the other woman engaged in friendly conversation, but she wasn't going to give up.

Sensing Molly's determination to have an answer, Petunia nodded. "Yes. I had no idea they went so fast."

"Oh, you should see them when they really go at it! Tell you what, I'll ask Harry, Ginny and Ron to race when they're done playing. They're all on Firebolts. Harry gave Ginny her broom after she had a fall this past school term and he had to catch her. He wanted her on the safest broom possible, bless him. She's so thrilled with it. Ron bought his with some of the money the Ministry gave him with one of his awards." She sat smiling up at her daughter as the girl soared above them, squealing with glee as she nabbed the Quaffle from one of her older brothers. "They're international quality racing brooms, those Firebolts. They can go up to 150 miles per hour! That's how Harry was able to save her when she fell. Ron told us he saw her fall before Harry saw her. Harry was after the Snitch and far above her AND at the other end of the pitch. Ron raced to save her, but his Cleansweep 7 is no match for a Firebolt. That's one of the reasons he bought a Firebolt as soon as he had enough money."

"Your daughter fell off a broom?" Petunia asked, finally understanding what Molly was talking about.

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"A wicked boy at school cast a spell at Harry that should have made him fall, but Harry was going so fast, he shot right past the spell and didn't see it. Ginny just flew into the path of it before she could stop and it made her broom stop flying." She shuddered, remembering the horror she'd felt when she'd heard about the fall. "She fell over fifty feet. Harry saved her life . . . again." Tears were in her eyes, as she thought of all the times Harry had saved her daughter's life.

"Again?"

"Oh, yes. He saved her from a basilisk her first year at Hogwart's, and then. . ."

"A basilisk?" Petunia was intrigued despite herself. "What's that?"

"A nasty great snake – this one was probably fifty feet long. Their fangs are poisonous, but the worst thing is, their eyes can kill you if you look at them. If you just see a reflection of their eyes, you're petrified. Nasty things, basilisks. Harry killed it, but it bit him and he would've died if it hadn't been for Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes."

After a moment's thought, Petunia mused, "Harry says that great red bird of his is a phoenix." She bit her lip before she said anything else, remembering the warnings she'd been given about mentioning anything she'd learned about Harry. She didn't know if Molly knew Harry was an Animagus who could become a phoenix. To be safe, Petunia decided, she would just have to act as if she didn't know anything about such matters.

"Oh, yes, Merlin's a phoenix as well – I forgot you've seen one in person," Molly said cheerfully. "That's a rare privilege, that is. Not many wizards have seen real phoenixes, and Muggles – well, I imagine it's even more rare for a Muggle to see them."

"It looks like a red parrot to me," Petunia commented. "Nothing special, just big."

"That's a glamour Harry put on Merlin to carry him through the train station. If you look in Harry's room, you'll probably see Merlin as a phoenix now."

"Oh, I don't open his door at all," Petunia said with a shudder.

Molly laughed. "I don't blame you. Teenagers certainly can trash a room, can't they? I have to admit that Harry is a bit neater than any of my boys, well, except for Percy, of course. Nobody's as much of a fanatic about tidiness as Percy. But when Harry stays with us, his part of Ron's room is always much tidier than Ron's side."

As they watched the Quidditch game above them, Molly told Petunia more stories about Harry's adventures, each one more amazing than the next. Tonks had covered much of the same ground, but with Harry right there, she'd been careful to keep her stories simple. Molly felt no such restraint, and praised Harry to the skies, telling his aunt all the adventures she'd heard about from her children and elsewhere.

After a while, the game was over, with Harry's team victorious due to his beating Charlie to the Snitch. The Weasleys, Harry and Remus formed a milling, laughing mob above the women on the ground, talking about tactics that did and didn't work, pounding each other on the back in congratulations for a game well played.

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Molly asked Ron, Ginny and Harry to race to show off the speed of their brooms and they complied quite willingly. The Weasleys and Grangers cheered mightily as the three fliers zoomed three times around the pitch. Harry started showing off and was very nearly beaten by Ron, but managed to pull off a win by the tip of his broom.

Just after they landed, Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, giving him warning of impending danger. He shivered with a sudden chill as his eyes searched for the threat he knew was coming. "DEMENTORS!" he cried suddenly, pointing off in the distance. Amid a volley of angry voices, the group raced toward the advancing Dementors. Hermione and Tonks ran to join the battle. Molly herded Petunia and the Grangers toward the house.

"Not to worry, dears. They all have excellent Patronuses thanks to Harry's teaching them how. Remus taught Harry how to do a corporeal Patronus when the boy was just thirteen, did you know that, Petunia?" she said conversationally as she steered them toward the house.

The Grangers, having heard about Dementors from Hermione, understood the danger. They raced ahead and ran inside, running to the window to see what was happening. Petunia stopped and looked behind her just as she and Molly reached the house. She couldn't see what the wizards were fighting, but silvery shapes were emerging from their wands. Harry's was, by far, the largest. His stag rampaged around, tossing its antlers as if it was attacking and throwing things in the air. It lowered its head and charged over and over, with Harry running along behind it sending it off in different directions after each encounter.

Suddenly, Petunia shuddered with cold and screamed. She felt clammy hands on her somewhere. She heard Molly's voice as if at a distance.

"Arthur! Arthur, they're here at the house!" Molly cursed herself for never mastering the Patronus charm as she tried to think of a way to protect Harry's aunt. "ARTHUR!"

Arthur looked at his wife in horror. "HARRY! The house! My Patronus isn't as strong as yours!" Arthur's Patronus, a dog, ran toward the house, but wasn't nearly as fast or strong as Harry's stag. It would never get there in time.

Harry turned back toward the house and yelled, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" A huge stag emerged from his wand and raced toward the house with gigantic strides. Harry ran behind it as fast as he could. He could see a Dementor already had its hands on his aunt. "*GO! GO! GO!*" he cried, urging his Patronus to greater speed. Other Dementors were gliding around the house. Harry cried "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" again and sent another stag to clear out the rest of the Dementors. His first stag had reached its target and tossed the Dementor away from Petunia just as the monster lowered its face to Kiss her. Harry gasped in horror as his aunt collapsed at the stag's feet.

Arthur's Patronus finally reached the house and chased after the departing Dementors, nipping at the trailing ends of their robes.

Harry fell to his knees beside his aunt. "Aunt Petunia! Aunt Petunia, are you all right?" When she didn't respond, he looked up at Molly. "It didn't actually Kiss her, did it? I thought I got to her in time!"

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"I don't think it Kissed her, Harry. Maybe she's just in shock," Molly said, her face creased with worry as she knelt next to the fallen woman.

"D'you have any chocolate?" Harry said as he bent over his aunt.

Remus ran up and knelt at his godson's side. "Here, take this," he said, pushing a bar of Honeydukes best into Harry's outstretched hand.

Harry broke off a piece of chocolate and forced it between Petunia's tightly closed lips. "Eat this, it will help. It's just chocolate, it won't hurt you. How are you feeling?"

Petunia was breathing shallowly, her face ghostly pale, her eyes still wide with fright. As the chocolate melted in her mouth, warmth spread through her and she finally blinked, then looked straight at Harry. She sat up with a start, leaning shakily against the wall of the house.

"James?" she murmured hesitantly. She reached out and cupped Harry's face in both hands, her eyes flying over his features. "James? James!"

Harry's brow furrowed in confusion. "I'm not James. I'm Harry. James was my dad."

Petunia gathered her legs under her and knelt in front of him, running her fingers through his hair with one hand, stroking his cheek with the other. "James! Oh, I thought I'd never be happy again, and yet, here you are! James, you saved my life!"

Harry tried to get out of her grasp without hurting her, but she held on. "Aunt Petunia, it's me, Harry!"

"You were amazing out there," she murmured tenderly. She gazed at him, her eyes soft and misty, a gentle smile on her lips. She suddenly looked twenty years younger. "Your hair is so silky. I've always wanted to get my hands in it." She laced the fingers of both hands in his hair now, smoothing it away from his face, relishing the soft thick mass of it. "When you were fighting just now, you were marvellous. You were beautiful, as if your face was lit from within, just gorgeous. You were so strong, so brave – I thought there would be magic sparks coming out of your hair, you were showing such power. You were brilliant. I've never had the chance to see you show so much power before. James, I . . ."

"*I'M NOT JAMES! I'M HARRY!*" he cried in horror, leaning away from her.

She held on, bending toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck, her cheek next to his. "Thank you for saving me," she murmured against his ear. "Do you care for me at all, James? Do you? You must, to have fought for me."

She kissed his cheek and temple repeatedly, then pulled back, looking at him with an expression Harry knew meant he was about to be kissed on the mouth. He pulled back sharply. "I'm HARRY! What's wrong with you?" He stood up on shaky legs, staring down at her in horror. She had unnerved him. She was talking as if she was in love with his father. That couldn't be. . . could it? Did his mum know? Did his dad?

The peculiar glaze in Petunia's eyes cleared and she said, "Well, of course you're Harry!" She got to her feet and looked around her. "What happened?"

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"Don't you remember? A Dementor was going to Kiss you, and my Patronus chased it away. Then you called me *James*," Harry said, desperately confused. "You acted as if. . .it seemed. . .you *cared* for him."

The Weasleys, Grangers, Remus, Tonks and Hermione stood in shocked silence around Harry and Petunia. Remus had passed chocolate around and they all chewed quietly, staring at the bizarre scene before them.

"Me? Care for James?" She tittered, her hand fluttering nervously in front of her face. "James?" She looked uncertainly at Harry, then sat down hard on the steps into the house.

Harry squatted in front of her. "Aunt Petunia. Talk to me," he said seriously.

She stared at him as if she didn't know him for a moment, then her eyes cleared again. "James," she sighed, her voice barely above a whisper. "What a lovely man, what a kind man. He was so sweet to me. Nobody that handsome had ever been so dear, so considerate to me. *Lily*," she spat suddenly, her thin, horsy face twisted in disgust. "*She* was the pretty one. *She* was the talented one. She was the *witch*, so of *course* she'd bring a *handsome, charming* young man home. My parents were so taken with him, and so proud of her. Beautiful Lily could do no wrong in their eyes! They loved James as soon as they met him. Lily always got everything she wanted in life. Things were always easy for her. When I met James, I knew he was everything I'd ever hoped for in a man. I loved him so." Tears began to trickle down her face, her shoulders sagged and she covered her face with her hands, her body trembling. After a moment, she scrubbed at her eyes, then dropped her hands between her knees and continued speaking. "When James and Lily married and moved away, I decided I'd show my parents. I married a corporate executive who'd take good care of me, not drag me around on adventures the way James was doing with Lily, from what we heard. When we had Dudley, I thought my parents would be so excited. They liked him well enough, I suppose, but they never did take to Vernon. Then Lily had you, and all I heard was 'Harry this' and 'Harry that.' It was enough to drive one mad."

Petunia looked up at him, studying his face seriously. "It was my parents who died in the car crash, not yours. They died when you and Dudley were only a few months old." She dropped her eyes and was silent for a few moments.

Everyone held their breath, not wanting to break whatever spell had finally opened up Petunia's heart so she could tell Harry the truth about his parents and his life with the Dursleys.

Petunia studied her hands for a few more moments before speaking again. Her face began to change back into the Petunia Harry knew as she said, "Then Lily and James," her voice dripped with disgust again, "went and got themselves blown up, if you please, and we got landed with you."

She looked up at Harry, her face hard and resentful, but as she gazed at him, her eyes softened again. "You should have been my baby. You looked so much like James. You were such a beautiful baby." Her voice hardened as she continued, "But you *weren't* my baby. James was gone. I couldn't forgive him for ignoring me and marrying Lily. I couldn't forgive him for getting himself blown up."

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Harry stood up and backed away from her, unnerved and disgusted by what she was telling him, but still wanting to hear it in spite of all of that.

She got to her feet, moving to stand right in front of Harry, putting her hands on his face again. She ignored his flinch as she touched him. "What a sweet little boy you were. But I'd spent years poisoning Vernon's mind about the wizarding world because of my being so jealous of Lily. Beautiful Lily. Talented Lily. Fortunate Lily. And here I was, saddled with her son. James's son. . . ." She stroked his cheek gently as fat tears rolled down her cheeks, then smoothed his fringe back off his forehead, exposing his scar. The sight of his scar seemed to bring her to her senses. "Oh! I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. . ." She dropped her hands and took a hesitant step back from him.

"Shouldn't have what?" Harry asked softly, determined to control his anger and revulsion long enough to get the rest of the story out of her. "Tell me the rest."

"The rest?" She seemed confused again.

"Why did you treat me so badly? I've never had a hug from you in my life, until just now when you thought I was my dad! You've *never* kissed me before." His temper was rising despite his best efforts to keep it down. "My whole life, I thought I must smell bad or something, because nobody would touch me, nobody would hug me, nobody even wanted to sit next to me. My birthday was just another day to you, not anything special like Dudley's or yours or Uncle Vernon's. Christmas wasn't any better. All of you hated me and I never knew what I'd done to make you hate me. I tried so hard to please you!" Unshed tears sparkled in Harry's black lashes. He would not cry, he *would not cry!* "I thought something was horribly wrong with me, but I could never figure out what – until I learned I was a wizard. Then things started to make sense, but you still treated me dreadfully. Why?"

"I don't know," she admitted with a hopeless shrug. "At first, it was because I was so . . . so hurt, so angry with James that he'd died so young and left me with hopeless dreams and his son that wasn't *my* son. And then you started doing odd things that frightened Vernon. He didn't grow up with any wizards around him, so he didn't understand, but *I* did." Her temper was rising. "I knew you were a wizard. I was *livid* that the whole cycle was starting again, with you smarter, more handsome, more talented, better mannered and sweeter spirited than my own son, *and a wizard to boot!*" She was so enraged, she spat the last words out venomously. Her sudden flash of anger dissolved just as quickly into an air of mortification. She covered her mouth with her hands, a horrified look on her face as she realized what she'd said. In a few moments, her shoulders sagged, her face haggard with grief and shame. "I'm . . . I'm sorry, Harry. None of it was your fault. I'm so sorry." She glanced up at him nervously, tears streaming down her face. "Can you forgive me?" She reached out a trembling hand toward his arm.

Harry flinched away from her, his face angry and confused. "Do you think it's that easy? You can say you're sorry and I can simply forgive sixteen years of *hell*? You kept me locked in a tiny dark cupboard full of dust and spiders! Everything I owned was Dudley's broken or outgrown cast-offs, nothing that fit me, nothing new, nothing nice, not ever, not one damned thing, *ever!* You told lies about me, humiliated me in so many ways, made me feel worthless and horrible and *always in the wrong* no matter how hard I tried to do what you wanted! All I wanted was for someone to love me, or at least accept me as a decent human being, and all I

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ever got was rejection, hatred, disgust. . . . And now you want me to *forgive you*?" He backed away from her, turned and ran toward the woods over the hill.

Everyone stood still, looking from Harry's rapidly retreating back to Petunia, who stood shaking where he'd left her. Ginny took off after Harry, Ron and Hermione close behind her.

"You. . .you. . .how could you!" Molly exclaimed after a few moments of stunned silence on everyone's part. "That dear boy did nothing to deserve the treatment you've given him, and now you tell him you treated him that way because you were *lusting after his father*? How *dare* you! You absolute *cow*!" She whipped out her wand and pointed it at Petunia. "No. Calling you a cow insults cows everywhere," she growled, and turned Petunia into a pile of steaming cow pats.

"Molly!" Arthur cried, wrapping his arms around his fuming wife before she did anything else. "That's enough. Calm down. This isn't helping Harry." He glared around at his family. The twins, Bill and Charlie had recovered from their surprise and were now doubled up in laughter.

Percy looked aghast. "Oh dear," he muttered, "this won't do, it won't do at all. The paperwork involved. . .tsk, tsk, it will take forever to get this straightened out at the Ministry."

"It's not the Ministry's problem," Arthur assured him. "We'll take care of it ourselves."

"You will leave her exactly like that," Molly snarled. "She earned it. Let her enjoy it for a while."

"Yeah, Dad, let her enjoy it for a while," Fred said, barely containing his giggles.

"I think some nice posies would help," George said, conjuring a bunch of petunias which were now growing in the cow pat. "Petunias for Petunia. Fitting, what?" He and Fred held onto each other as their laughter overwhelmed them.

"Is she in any pain?" Mrs. Granger asked, her eyes wide and a bit frightened.

"No," Arthur assured her. "She's in no pain."

"Good riddance," Mrs. Granger said in disgust. "Well done, Molly! I wish I could do that kind of thing. That hag deserved that and worse! That poor, dear boy!"

"Go, Mrs. Granger!" Fred chortled.

"Now we know where Hermione gets her stropiness," George added approvingly. "Well done!"

Mrs. Granger beamed under their praise. Mr. Granger just scratched his head and looked bemused.

Tonks and Remus looked at each other uncertainly, smiles playing around their mouths. The sight of the steaming cow pats before them tickled their senses of humour greatly, but they felt responsible for Petunia in a way, as well. "What should we do?" Tonks asked Remus quietly.

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"I think the Weasleys are right. Let her stew for a while," Remus said, fighting the grin that kept trying to break through his control. He got out his wand. "I'll put a fence around her so nobody steps in it. She's probably aware enough of her situation that she'll remember it when she's herself again. And I think she should remember it. Maybe it will make Harry's life a bit easier, or even make her a better person." With a wave of his wand, a low garden fence appeared around the small bed of petunias and the pile that was their flowerbed.

"You're such a dreamer, Remus," Tonks said sweetly. "That's one of the things I love about you.

"A dreamer? Me?" he replied lightly, but his heart lifted at her words.

"Yes, you! Thinking this experience will change that nasty woman. You're a dreamer! But dreams do come true sometimes. Maybe this one will," Tonks said, gazing up at him with sparkling eyes.

"What else do you love about me?" he teased as he wrapped his arm around her and led her away.

"Oh, loads of things. You're strong, but gentle, sweet, sensitive, caring, a great kisser. . . ." She had to stop because he was demonstrating his kissing prowess at that moment, which caused the Weasley twins to hoot triumphantly.

"Tonks and Lupin sitting in a tree. . ." Fred and George began.

"BOYS!" Molly snarled, effectively quieting them.

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Chapter 3 – Hairy Harry and the Beetles

Harry stormed over the hill and into the valley beyond, stopping just at the edge of the woods that bordered the Weasley property. He stood there panting, not knowing what he wanted to do, just that he'd needed to get away before he hurt someone.

Ron, whose long legs had let him easily pass both girls as they ran after Harry, came up behind him. "All right, there, Harry?" he said, bending over with his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

"No!" Harry snapped. "How can I be? How *weird* was that, for her to think I was my *dad*? For her to say she loved my dad? All the crap I've been through all these years was because of her fancying him! And she was going to *kiss* me!" He shuddered at the thought of how near a thing it had been. He'd seen the passion in her eyes and felt her breath on his lips, the pressure of her hands on the back of his neck pulling him to her. "Ugh. I need a shower. I need to bathe in some horribly caustic cleanser to feel clean again – or better yet, use it as mouthwash! Bloody hell!" Rubbing his hand roughly over his mouth, he tried to eradicate the feeling of her breath on his lips as he tramped around, not really pacing, more stamping his feet into the ground hard as he walked restlessly back and forth. "How gross was that? Eauw!"

"Grossed me out, for sure," Ron replied sympathetically. "Pretty awful stuff, if you ask me." He could sense his friend's temper simmering just below the boiling point. "Going to blow off some steam, mate?"

"Wish I could. I don't want to damage your parents' property," Harry said, doing his best to fight down the rage simmering within him.

Just then, Ginny and Hermione finally caught up with them.

"Harry! Are you all right?" Ginny cried, rushing to him and wrapping her arms around him.

"Please go away, Ginny. It's not safe to be near me right now," he said, trying to disentangle himself from her gently.

"Harry, she's mentally disturbed. I've read about such things in. . ." Hermione began.

"STOP IT!" Harry cried, shoving Ginny away from him and sitting down hard, his hands over his ears, his face on his knees, his whole body vibrating with tension. "Just stop it! I don't want to hear it! I don't want to think about it! Just leave me alone!" Ginny got up from where she'd fallen, went to him and started gently rubbing his back, trying to comfort him.

Ron and Hermione stood gazing at him uncertainly. Ron reached out and pulled Ginny away from Harry, whose trembling was becoming more violent.

"He's gonna blow," Ron said nervously. "We need to get away, put a shield over ourselves. Hurry!"

"NO!" Ginny cried, wrenching her arm out of her brother's grip and running to her boyfriend's side again. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly, her cheek resting on the back of his bowed head.

The Time of Destiny

Harry crossed his arms over his head as if fearing a blow. His face was on his knees, his body bound up in an agony beyond their comprehension. He was so focused on his pain that he barely noticed Ginny was there. Suddenly, she wriggled under his arms and into his lap, burrowing a place for herself between his chest and his legs. She pushed his head up a bit, laced her fingers in his hair and rubbed his forehead with her thumbs, trying to massage away his scowl.

"Didn't I tell you to go away?" he growled, both furious and scared of his rage. "What does it take to get through to you? You're in danger here! I can't control it!"

"Yes, you can. I know you won't hurt me. Stop pushing people away when they're trying to help you," she said seriously.

"*I don't want to hurt you!*" he snapped desperately.

"You won't," she assured him in a serene voice. She slowly, gently, pulled his fingers away from his head one by one and finally got his arms unbent and wrapped around her instead. She tenderly kissed every place Petunia had kissed him, over and over.

"What are you doing?" he asked warily.

"Making it better," she said, continuing her soft kisses on his temples, his cheeks, his forehead. She removed his glasses and kissed his eyes and nose, his chin, his lips, murmuring endearments all the while. It took a long time, but she finally got him to relax a bit. "There, isn't that better?"

He sighed deeply, leaning his cheek on top of her head. "You drive me crazy, you know that? You put yourself in such danger. . . ."

"You controlled your temper beautifully. I'm so proud of you!" she said, peeping under his fringe at him. She kissed his chin. "Got your dimple."

"You can have it, and anything else you want, as long as you leave me alone when I'm that angry in the future," he grumbled.

"Nope, that won't do. If I'd left you alone this time, you'd still be out here being grumpy. You had a right to be angry. Now it's time to get over it and move on," she said practically.

He sat up and stared at her in disbelief. "How am I supposed to move on from *that*? My aunt. . ."

"Is bonkers. Or probably something much worse, actually. Mum was busy hexing her when we ran over the ridge," Ginny said, a twinkle in her eye. She looked at her brother. "Did you see what Mum turned her into?"

"Nah. I was too busy trying to catch up with Harry before he hurt himself," Ron said with a shrug.

"I haven't hurt myself with my temper," Harry protested.

The Time of Destiny

"Can we say 'Grimmauld Place'?" Ron teased. "Glass storm? I think you hurt yourself sodding well that time."

"Oh, well, yeah," Harry conceded, hanging his head and shaking it. "Point taken. Thanks for looking out for me."

"No problem. You do keep life interesting, y'know," Ron said with a chuckle.

"Interesting, huh? Bloody hell, I could use some boredom in my life," he replied with a hint of his crooked grin.

"Harry?" Ginny said as she ran her hands through his thick black hair. "Have you ever tried a different hairstyle?"

"You call this a style?" he joked with a snort of derisive laughter.

"Seriously, have you?"

"Like what?"

"Have you ever tried having long hair?" She was pulling his hair in various directions, smoothing parts of it, making other parts stand up straight. "Like Bill's, down your back a bit, past your collar. I bet there'd be some curl in your hair if you let it grow long enough."

"My hair is determined to stick straight out given the least opportunity," he replied, tilting his head to study her face. "I'd look like I'd stuck my finger in a light socket with it standing up in a great black halo. What are you on about?"

"Grow it for me?" she urged. "I want to see!"

"Are you simply determined to make fun of me, or is this more of your pirate stuff?" He was amused by her in spite of his still-grouchy feelings.

"Could be. It's not hard for you to do, is it? Won't you do it for me?" she pleaded.

He sighed dramatically, and then that thoughtful look crossed his face and within moments, glossy black hair cascaded in sumptuous waves down past his shoulders. "How's this?"

"Oooooo, gorgeous!" both girls squealed.

"I'd love it if my hair had waves like that," Hermione said with a sigh. "And it's so shiny and beautiful!"

"It doesn't stick up at all!" Ginny said, then added quietly, "and you don't look a thing like your dad."

"What about the fringe?" he said, intrigued in spite of himself. If it made him look less like his dad to his aunt, it was worth considering.

"Grow it to match the rest and let's see how it looks, then," Ginny replied.

The Time of Destiny

Harry grew his fringe so that he now had long waves falling down each side of his face. His scar was exposed and, since it was now doubly thick and had the extra zigzag as a result of his taking the Killing Curse for Ginny in their latest battle with Voldemort, it was much more noticeable.

"Um. . .no," Ginny said carefully. "I think you need a little something over your forehead."

"Scar's that bad, huh?" he said, reading the truth in her eyes.

"It's not bad, Harry, honestly," Hermione said, tilting her head to study it seriously. "But it's less obvious with your fringe."

"OK," he said, and shortened his hair in front until he had a fringe again. "Better?"

"Yeah," Ginny said happily.

"Um, mate?" Ron said. "A suggestion?"

"What?"

"Since I've had my hair long, I've realized girls have to deal with hair in their faces a lot. So I get mine cut on a bit of an angle down the sides so it isn't long enough to blow in my face. It's either that, or wear it in a ponytail like Bill. Or you could tuck it behind your ears, but girls do that, so you might not want to. Anyway, it's your choice," he finished with a shrug.

Harry ran his hands through his hair, pulling it in front of his face and finally looking at what he'd created. Heavy, lustrous waves spilled through his fingers. "Bloody hell! I look like a girl now!" he said in disgust, starting to get the thoughtful look that meant he was changing his hair or beard.

"No! Don't shorten it!" Ginny protested.

"You're too big to look like a girl," Hermione said wisely, "too broad-shouldered, and your face is too masculine for anyone to think you're a girl."

"Especially if you have the beard too," Ginny said with an excited wriggle.

"Crikey, girl, don't do that!" Harry protested with a laugh, wrapping his arms around her to hold her motionless. She was still sitting in his lap and her wiggling was having some effects he couldn't act on right now.

Ginny giggled, knowing what she was doing was driving him mad. "Sorry, sweetheart," she said, not at all sincerely, but she did at last sit still.

"Come here, mate," Harry said to Ron, who obligingly sat down beside him. "How long is your hair, really? It curls under so much, it's hard to tell."

Ron pulled his hair out to its full length along the sides of his face and at the back.

The Time of Destiny

A few moments later, Harry's hair was about the same length as Ron's on the sides, a bit longer at the back, and his pirate beard with its two grey stripes had returned as well. "How's this?" he said, glancing around at his friends.

"Brilliant!" Hermione replied excitedly. "You look a lot older, for one thing, and not much like yourself."

"Not that there's a thing wrong with looking like yourself," Ginny said supportively.

He kissed her on the nose, then turned to Ron. "What do you think?"

"You look like those rock stars I've seen on the telly at Hermione's," Ron said bracingly. "They're cool. Looks good on you, mate."

"It does, honestly," Ginny said, running her fingers through his hair and watching the waves bounce as she released them. "Your hair is absolutely beautiful, baby."

Harry snorted. "Nobody's ever said that about MY hair!"

"She's right, though," Hermione agreed. "And it looks great on you."

"It really does," Ginny insisted. "If you weren't already my boyfriend, I'd have to go after you, you're so handsome!"

Harry snorted with laughter again, gave her a squeeze and helped her get off of his lap so he could stand up. "All right, then. If you lot have finished beautifying me, let's go back. Your parents are having a party and we're missing it."

As the four friends walked back across the ridge, they could see the party had quietened down somewhat. The twins were sitting still, a rarity in itself, staring at a clump of flowers surrounded by a low garden fence. Smiles tickled their mouths from time to time, and when they glanced at each other and then back at the little clump of flowers, they chuckled and elbowed each other merrily. Remus and Tonks were off at the edge of the garden, their arms around each other and deep in conversation. Arthur was chatting with his older sons and the Grangers, and Molly was glaring at the flowers inside the little fence.

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione stopped and looked at the tableau in the Burrow's front garden, wondering what had happened in their absence. Suddenly, Molly glanced up and noticed them.

"Where have you been? I've been so worried! Who's that with you? Harry? Is that you?" she asked anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm Harry," he said with a grin, glad his new look was so different. "Where's Aunt Petunia?"

"Um. . .," Molly began uneasily, "I, um, I. . ."

"Mum hexed her!" George chortled.

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah! Your aunt makes great cow dung! I'm glad Mum never hexed us that way!" Fred agreed.

Harry's eyebrows disappeared behind his fringe. "You turned her into. . .cow dung?" he said in disbelief.

"Yes, and I'm not sorry!" Molly said defiantly, then instantly backed down. "Well, I will be if you're troubled by it, dear, but I thought she deserved it. I didn't want to upset you at all, but. . ."

"It's OK, Mrs. Weasley. I'm glad you haven't used that hex on me, either," Harry said, a snort of laughter escaping him. "She's so paranoid about being neat and clean, this has got to be the worst possible punishment for her. Well done!"

"What have you done with your hair, Harry? It could do with a trim," Molly said, fingering her wand hopefully.

"I don't need trims, you know that," he reminded her. "Ginny suggested it. She and Hermione thought if I looked this different, Aunt Petunia might remember that I'm me, not my dad."

"Oh! That's a good idea, actually," Molly agreed. "Well done," she said to the girls. "It looks. . .nice, Harry. Oh, your hair doesn't stick up anymore! Maybe it wanted to be long."

"Yeah, that's what Ginny said," he replied. He glanced over at the twins, who were still staring at the mound of flowers. Fred was pointing to something and George was sniggering. "What are you two up to?" he asked them as he sat down beside them.

"Watch," Fred said, pointing to the mound of flowers. "It moves." He giggled, then snorted with laughter as the mound trembled.

"What's going on?" Harry asked. "Why's it moving?"

George and Fred looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"What? Tell me, I could use a good laugh," Harry said, beginning to chuckle along with them.

"Beetles," George said.

"And flies!" Fred added cheerfully.

"They've discovered this nice fresh pile and are exploring it!" George said.

"What?" Harry replied in shock. "No way!" He leaned closer and studied the mound under the flowers. Sure enough, beetles and flies were moving into the mound. "Eauw, gross!" He watched the movement of the insects with interest for a few minutes, then sighed heavily, getting to his feet. "Um, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Yes, dear?" Molly said, looking up from picking up the dirty dishes after their meal.

"Is my aunt going to remember this experience?"

The Time of Destiny

"Oh, yes!" she said with tremendous satisfaction. "That's one of the wonderful things about this hex. The person is fully aware of what goes on while he's in this state. Ginny did a similar thing to Dudley when she turned him into a jelly at their house. He remembered everything, didn't he?"

"Yes," Harry replied thoughtfully. He looked at the mound topped with petunias, their pretty colours disguising the disgusting mass beneath them. "Um. . .I'm in favour of her being punished, and I think what you did is quite brilliant, actually. . .but there are beetles and flies in there now. She hates insects. They'll drive her mad. Of course, she's not too fond of dung, either. . . ." He snorted with laughter in spite of himself.

"I suppose she's been punished for long enough," Molly said with a sigh, then leaned toward the mound and said sternly, "FOR NOW!" With a wave of Molly's wand, Petunia Dursley appeared with a mass of petunias on top of her head.

"Boys!" Molly called warningly to the twins, her eyes snapping. Petunia's reappearance seemed to have triggered Molly's temper again.

"Oh, all right," Fred said resignedly, and Vanished the flowers from Petunia's head.

Petunia stood there trembling horribly, her face ghastly white, her nostrils pinched with tension, her eyes bugging out of her head. That was nothing to the expression that appeared when a beetle made its leisurely way out of hiding in her hair. It dangled above her eyebrow, its feet still tangled in her hair, and seemed to wave "hello" right in Petunia's eye.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" she screamed, swiping madly at her face to rid herself of the bug.

The Weasley children stood around her laughing their heads off. Remus, Tonks and Arthur chuckled in spite of their best attempts to avoid it. Even Molly's mouth twitched a bit, threatening to smile despite her still-raging temper.

Harry stood uncertainly, sorely tempted to laugh but concerned about what his aunt was going to do in retaliation once she was home. Then again, with Remus and Tonks there, she wasn't likely to get very far in any form of revenge against him. With that comforting thought, a snort of laughter escaped him at last.

Hermione had both hands held nervously over her mouth, her eyes huge. Her parents were wide-eyed but began giggling just after Harry started laughing.

A grinning Tonks finally came to Petunia's rescue. "C'mon then, dearie, let's get you cleaned up," she said, putting her arm companionably around the older woman's shoulders and trying to lead her toward the house.

Petunia dug in her heels. "No. Um. . .no thank you," she said timorously. She glanced at Tonks, then took the younger woman's arm off of her shoulders, touching Tonks's hand as if it were filthy, then actually wiping her hands off on her trousers. Petunia stepped away from the young witch and gave the rest of the gathering a withering look as she ran trembling hands through her hair, rummaging around until she had all the bugs displaced. She shuddered violently all over, then ran her finger around the collar of her shirt to be sure no bugs were

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still dallying there, and brushed off the rest of her clothing after that. Deciding she was now insect-free, she shook back her hair and straightened her shoulders, doing her best to regain her dignity.

"If you don't mind," she said as regally as possible to Tonks, "I believe I'm ready to go home now."

"Right, then," Tonks said cheerily. "Go on and get in the car. I'll be right there."

Petunia made her way shakily to the car door and managed to get into the back seat. She found her pocketbook and opened it, taking a tissue out and dabbing at her face and neck as if she were dirty. She stared straight ahead the whole time, trembling violently all the while, her mouth a thin white line.

"Is she going to be all right?" Hermione asked Molly in concern.

Everything about Petunia's attitude and actions rubbed Molly the wrong way, on top of her miserable behaviour toward Harry earlier. Thinking he was James, indeed! And treating him dreadfully all of his life because she was still jealous of her dead sister! Molly was positively livid with that. . .that Muggle! "Yes, that barmy bitch will be just fine once she realizes she's actually clean," she spat.

"Molly, dear," Arthur reproved her gently. "Language. The children. . ."

"The children are adults, as I keep being reminded by all of them, and have probably heard much worse," she snapped. She managed to slow her breathing a bit and turned to Harry.

"Harry, dear, are you quite all right? It's been a bit of a rough afternoon for you."

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered, smiling at her with genuine affection.

"Well, I'm afraid I haven't done much to improve wizard-Muggle relations today," Molly said apologetically, "nor have I been a good example to you children. I'm sorry."

"You've done nothing to be sorry for, Mrs. Weasley," Harry assured her. "You were brilliant. I hope you'll teach me that hex – I know a few people who deserve it!"

Remus and Tonks had been conferring near the car. Remus looked up at Harry. "Are you coming with us? I don't want Tonks to have to drive back alone."

"D'you mind if I Apparate back later?"

"You're still not well, Harry. If you feel the least bit tired, use the Floo Network, don't Apparate," Remus warned him. "I mean it – don't do it if you're the least bit tired. You don't want to splinch yourself."

"All right," Harry agreed.

"We'll make sure of it!" Molly promised. "Thanks for coming. Sorry you won't get to see the fireworks. I'm sure the twins have put together an exciting show."

The Time of Destiny

"Probably not as exciting as the one we saw here this afternoon," Fred said, elbowing his twin, who giggled along with him.

"Thanks for having us," Remus said, getting in the front seat with Tonks. "See you!"

Everyone stood waving goodbye as the car drove away in a cloud of dust. They saw Remus's hand waving out of the window as the car rounded the last turn visible from the front garden.

"Well, THAT was fun!" George chortled, clapping his twin on the shoulder and turning toward the boxes they'd brought with them from their shop. "Now let's have some more!"

"Boys!" Molly chided them. "Come here. We need to have a family council."

Harry glanced around at the Weasleys, then started to move away from them, since he wasn't really a part of the family.

"That means you, too, Harry, Hermione," Molly insisted. He moved closer, standing uneasily between Ginny and Hermione. Once her brood was gathered around her, Molly said, "What happened here today was disgraceful. We should be ashamed of ourselves." She looked at all of them sternly. "Especially me." She crossed her arms over her ample bosom and glared at all of them. "I hope I never see such behaviour out of Weasleys again!" she snapped. "Especially me," she added in a grumbling undertone.

"Mrs. Weasley, may I say something?" Harry offered hesitantly.

"Of course, Harry, dear," she said graciously.

"I think you lot are brilliant. Thank you for standing up for me. Thank you for turning her into a cowpat – that was a wonderfully appropriate thing to do, I think. If anyone should be ashamed, it's me, for letting her come."

"Oh, no, dear, we insisted she come!" Molly began.

"How about this?" Arthur interrupted. "We all agree there was a hitch in this afternoon's festivities, and we get back to enjoying ourselves?"

There was general agreement to that, although Fred and George could be heard muttering that they still wanted to learn that Cow Dung Hex, but they doubted their mother would teach it to them, now that she felt guilty for what she'd done.

The rest of the evening went beautifully. The twins' fireworks were a huge hit with everyone. Before he knew it, Harry had to tell his friends goodbye and go back to Privet Drive.

"It was a brilliant party, Mrs. Weasley," he said, leaning down and hugging her. "Thank you so much!"

"Oh, bless you, dear, it was our pleasure!" she said, patting his cheek and pulling him down into another hug. "Do forgive me for my rudeness to your aunt. I hope she doesn't take it out on you, what I did to her," she said, pulling back to look at him with worried eyes.

The Time of Destiny

"If she gives me a hard time, Remus and Tonks will sort her out, don't worry," Harry assured her.

Molly pulled him down again, holding him tightly. "You are such a sweet boy, Harry. I do love you so." She kissed him on the cheek and finally released him, both of them blushing. "And you're quite handsome with your new look." She fiddled with his hair a bit before finally backing away from him.

"Oh, Mum, give over!" Ron said, "You're embarrassing him!"

"Actually, I enjoy it when she fusses over me like that," Harry said with a fond smile at Molly, who blushed again in return.

"Harry, we could give you a lift home, if you'd like," Mr. Granger offered.

"Thanks! That's very kind of you, but Surrey is out of your way, and I can Apparate with no problem," Harry said with a smile. "I'm glad you were able to come to the party."

"It was our pleasure," Mr. Granger said sincerely. "We don't often have the chance to visit in wizard homes, so this has been quite an adventure for us."

"I hope your aunt won't bother you any more," Mrs. Granger said, her brow furrowed in concern.

"With Remus and Tonks around, she's behaving much better than usual," Harry replied. "It was nice to see both of you again."

"Lovely to see you, as well," Mrs. Granger said sincerely. She and her husband finished their goodbyes and went to the car, where they waited for Hermione to kiss Ron goodbye. When the couple finally parted, Hermione got into the car and the Grangers drove away while everyone waved.

Fred sidled over to Harry before Harry could embrace Ginny to kiss her goodbye. "Oy, Harry, before you go, could we have a word?"

"Sure! What's up?" he asked. "The fireworks were brilliant! Thanks so much!"

"Our pleasure!" George replied. "We'd like to ask you something."

"Yeah," Fred agreed, putting his arm over Harry's shoulders and leading him away from the rest of the family.

"What are you doing over the holidays?" they asked together. "We'd like you to work for us."

"What do you mean?"

"To work in our shop, of course!" Fred said cheerfully.

"Really? That's brilliant! I'd love to!" Harry said excitedly.

The Time of Destiny

"Ron's going to work for us too," George told him. "We used up so much of our stock in that battle, and we have loads of orders, and this big Ministry contract to fill . . ."

"So we need to manufacture the stuff as quickly as possible," Fred finished for him.

"That's where you come in," they said together.

"Me? What do you mean?" Harry replied, confused.

"We heard about your little episode in Potions," Fred began.

"When you speeded up a two hour process and got finished in forty minutes," George continued.

"That kind of thing would do wonders for us," Fred concluded.

"I don't know exactly how I did it," Harry began.

"Just come to the shop as soon as you're allowed out and we'll go from there," George replied, slapping him on the back.

"We trust you to figure it out as you go along," Fred added.

"I might be able to come as soon as Monday, as long as there's no heavy lifting involved," Harry said eagerly.

"Heavy lifting is for labourers – and Levitation Charms," Fred said with a grin. "You're a specialist, not manual labour! See you Monday then!"

"Yeah! See you!" Harry replied with a happy grin.

"So you're going to work in the family business, are you?" Ginny said, wrapping her arms around his waist as he came to kiss her goodbye.

"You knew?"

"Everybody did but Percy, I think. The twins couldn't keep it quiet. Mum's going to be livid if they take advantage of your powers. That's what they'd like to do," she explained.

"I'm happy to help out, and it will be great to be working in Diagon Alley, seeing them and Ron every day. Are you going to work there too?"

"Mum needs me to help her with some things here, and she gets lonely with everyone gone," Ginny said quietly. "But yeah, I'll be there on Saturdays! That's the busiest day in the shop, and they said I could help on the counter. I think that will be great fun!"

"And it will make it easier for us to get together for dates, too," he said, holding her close and kissing the top of her head. "I miss you so much."

"I'm right here, silly!" she teased, smiling up at him.

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah, but I'll be leaving in a few minutes and won't see you for a whole week!" he said mournfully.

"Then make this kiss a good one, because it's going to have to last us a while," she said, staring at his mouth hungrily.

Harry did his best to make the kiss one she'd remember for a long time. He knew he'd remember it, and that, when he remembered, he'd be eager for many more like it. With a final wave to his friends, he Disapparated and returned to Privet Drive.

When Harry Apparated into his room back at Privet Drive, he found Tonks and Remus there conferring seriously about something.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Dudley," Tonks said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"What did I miss?"

"Well, let's see," Remus said, enumerating things on his fingers. "First, your aunt disappeared into the bathroom and used all the hot water taking a long shower trying to feel clean again. Then Dudley came home from wherever he was and started to take a shower and nearly froze to death because his mum had used up the hot water. I think we damaged her a bit today. Sorry about that."

"That doesn't sound good," Harry said, confused. "How is she now?"

"Her skin's all red and raw. She used something rough to scrub herself," Tonks told him. "We tried to tell her she was perfectly clean, but she didn't believe us. And Dudley's in a right state, having walked into an ice cold shower. He ran squealing down the hall, completely starkers."

Harry snorted a bit. It sounded as if he'd missed something funny. "Why?"

"Dunno. Could've been because there were no towels or flannels left in the bathroom – your aunt took all of them into her bathroom with her. I suppose she used them all. I don't know why he didn't look for a towel before he got in the shower. He still has the remnants of his pig's tail, did you know that?" Tonks said, starting to giggle. "I don't know why he didn't put his clothes back on, but he just held them up to himself, dropping things as he ran. He looked a real sight, trying to cover his front and his back both at the same time, running soaking wet and shivering down the hall, his immense backside flapping in the breeze. The wet footprints are still there, if you want to look. Once he got back in his room, apparently he got dried off and dressed, because he was quiet for a few moments and then he went to the kitchen and started a row with your aunt. They've been going on at each other ever since."

"She's been calling him everything evil under the sun, and he honestly hasn't done anything wrong, as far as we know," Remus said, a line of worry appearing between his eyebrows. "The oddest thing is, she's comparing him to you, and not favourably."

"What do you mean?"

The Time of Destiny

"All those things she said to you at the Weasleys'? She's repeating them here, saying how wonderful you are and what a disappointment Dudley is," Remus replied.

"You're kidding, right?" Harry said, completely confused. "She wouldn't do that."

"That's what she's doing right now, lad," Remus assured him. "Go to the kitchen door and listen, if you want."

"Erm, no. I think I'll let them work this out between them. The farther away I stay from all the Dursleys, the better," Harry said quietly.

"You're probably right. But you should have seen your cousin's wobbly bits jouncing down the hall, with a wee bit of a tail sticking out between his cheeks!" Tonks said, laughing heartily now. "Oh my, what a sight!"

Harry snorted and laughed in spite of himself. "I can just imagine. How awful! I hope it hasn't ruined you for life or anything, to see such a horrible thing!"

"Nah! But I will file it under 'memories I'd almost rather forget!'" she teased. "Now, if you or Remus wants to run starkers down the hall, I'll be sure to enjoy THAT show!"

"Um. . .no thanks," Harry replied with a grin. "I'll leave that kind of floor show to Dudley."

"Ah well, a girl has to try, doesn't she?" she said with a cheeky grin.

Uncle Vernon didn't seem to be making much progress. The doctors wanted to keep him several more days at least before releasing him. Every few hours, anything at all could set his temper off and he was in danger of undoing all the good his surgery had done.

Number Four, Privet Drive, was quieter than it had been any time since baby Harry had been found on their doorstep. Once their row ended, Petunia and Dudley did their best to stay away from the wizards and each other, and the wizards did their best to mind their manners around the Muggles. A quiet, uneasy peace reigned.

On Monday morning, Harry set off bright and early for Diagon Alley. The twins had told him to Apparate to the street right in front of Ollivander's, and then he'd only be two doors down from their shop. He arrived, work robes slung over his shoulder, a huge happy grin on his face, eager to get to work.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter!" Mr. Ollivander called cheerfully from the door of his shop. "I like your new look. It's rather distinguished. I almost didn't recognize you."

"That's the idea," Harry said with a cheeky grin. "I get tired of being me sometimes, y'know?"

"I do understand. I'll keep your secret!" the old wandmaker agreed. "I read about the battles you were in. I cannot tell you how proud I am of you, how much I appreciate your courage. Well done, young man. Thank you for what you've done for our world."

Harry shuffled his feet uneasily, not comfortable at all with this turn of the conversation.

The Time of Destiny

Ollivander clasped the boy's shoulder in one wrinkled, long-fingered hand. "I do understand, you know. War is never easy. I'm sorry about the friends you lost."

"Thank you," Harry said quietly.

The wandmaker patted the boy's shoulder kindly, his face crinkled in a warm smile. "I knew we could expect great things from you, my boy. And you have done them, many great things. But there are even greater things in your future. When you have time, I'd like to talk to you about that."

"About what?"

"How is your wand doing?" Ollivander said, coming closer to Harry and speaking more quietly.

The sudden change in subject threw Harry for only a moment. *Just answer what he's asking, that's probably the safest thing to do*, he thought. "It's great! I'm very happy with my wand."

"No malfunctions, no hesitations, no shaking, nothing like that?"

"Nope, it's fine. Why?"

The man leaned close to Harry and murmured in his ear, "I've had a conversation with your headmaster. I need to speak to you as a result. Come and see me when you have a few moments free, all right?"

Harry looked at him in surprise. "Yes, fine. Will lunch time do? Or after work? I'm starting work with the Weasleys today, at their joke shop." He pointed two shops down to the doorway of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes.

"Either time will be fine. I'll need five to ten minutes of your time, that's all. If it's convenient for you, of course," Mr. Ollivander said graciously.

"OK. I'll see you later, then," Harry replied, waving as he walked on toward the Weasleys' shop. *Now what's he on about?* he wondered.

"HARRY! Great to see you!" Fred greeted him when he walked into the shop.

"Simply spiffing! Glad to have you on our team," George concurred.

"Hi, guys! The shop looks fantastic!" Harry enthused. He hadn't been to their shop since they'd opened it. The walls were covered, floor to ceiling, with shelves, glass cases, and large displays filled with a huge variety of joke supplies. Glittery signs that changed colours and font styles as well as messages, extolled the virtues of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes joke products over any other kind, and described some of the products in florid detail. There was everything from Skiving Snackboxes to Neverending Fireworks to Transfiguration Tasties – "Amaze Your Friends!" – which would give the person who ate them some of the characteristics of a wide variety of animals or fantastic beasts (non-dangerous varieties only) for up to five minutes.

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Harry browsed for a few moments, amazed by the vast variety of things the twins had created. "Wow! I haven't seen some of these before. You guys have been busy!"

"Too right, we have!" Fred agreed.

"Which is why you're here!" said George.

"We need help getting more of these products made, as well as creating new things. We have loads of ideas, but not enough time to do all the work ourselves," Fred explained as they led him to the workroom at the back of the shop. The workroom held a number of long tables with a variety of workstations scattered around, as well. About a dozen people were hard at work slicing ingredients carefully, mixing or stirring various potions, or waving their wands over some mixture or other. Everyone seemed to be working on something different. The twins explained their setup to Harry as they showed him around.

"Hey, Ron!" Harry said in delight, seeing his best mate hard at work dicing daisy roots. "Good to see you, mate!"

"Hi, Harry! What do you think of the place?" Ron said, grinning at his friend.

"I think it's brilliant!" Harry enthused.

"What are you going to get Harry to work on?" Ron asked his brothers.

"We're still sorting that out," George said. "We need to confer with our new colleague a bit before we decide where to put him."

"Put him with me!" Ron suggested eagerly. "We're used to working together!"

"We know that, little brother," Fred assured him, patting Ron paternally on the back.

"So, Harry," George said conspiratorially as they finished the "grand tour" of the facilities, "do you have any ideas on how to speed up our production?"

"You mean with my magic?" Harry asked quietly, looking around the workroom.

"Yeah!" the twins said together.

Harry was lost in thought for a few minutes as he studied the setup of the various workstations. "Actually, I do have an idea, but it's a Muggle thing, not magic."

"A Muggle thing?" Fred said.

"Would it be faster than your magic?" George asked.

"I think so. I mean, I'm only one person, and when I'm not here, production will slow down again, right? Unless I can work out a spell to keep it going without me being here, of course," Harry said, scratching his head in thought. "Hmmm. Nope, I honestly think this Muggle setup will be a big help to you." He looked up at the twins. "Have you ever heard of an assembly line?"

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"No," said Fred.

"What's that?" said George.

"It's where. . .um. . .a conveyor belt of some kind moves a piece of what you're making past a lot of workers. As the piece moves past each worker, that worker does one thing to that piece, adding to it at each station until you have a completed thing, whatever it is you're manufacturing. Each worker does the same thing over and over for lots of parts – that's part of what makes this method of manufacturing things go faster. At the end of the conveyor belt, you have a finished product," Harry explained, hoping his explanation was at least somewhat clear.

"What's a conveyor belt?" said George.

"I don't get it," said Fred.

Harry considered how best to explain what he had in mind, then an idea hit him. "Tell you what. It's better if you see one in action. Then you'll understand."

"Brilliant!" said the twins together.

"My uncle's drill company has an assembly line, and they give tours on Tuesdays at 10 AM – or they did when I was at primary school. I could ring them and see if they still do tours, and get us on one. Then you'd understand," Harry offered.

"A tour of a Muggle business?" Fred said, a gleam of excitement in his eye.

"Does it run on ekeltricity?" George asked, stumbling over the Muggle word.

"Yeah, I think so. We'd have to modify it somehow, give it power without electricity, but I don't see a huge problem there," Harry said, getting more excited about his idea. "I can actually see how to do that kind of magic," he explained, "so it will run whether I'm here or not. I can't see how to speed things up otherwise so that things will keep running when I'm back at Hogwarts."

"You know," Fred said, looking at George seriously.

"Dad would love to see this," they said together, grinning madly.

"Right then, Harry," George said, "can you arrange for us to go, then? Tomorrow? We'll see if Dad can come along too."

"And me!" Ron said, having heard some of the conversation as he passed them on the way to the storage room for more ingredients for his potion.

"And you, little bro," Fred assured him. "Can you do it?" he asked Harry.

"I don't know the phone number, so I'll have to go back home and call from there," he mused, trying to work out the best way to do things. "Shall I do that? Oh wait, we should see if your dad can go tomorrow, so I can give them an accurate number of people for our group."

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A short time later, having received an enthusiastic "Of course!" from Arthur when he was invited on the tour, Harry was back at Privet Drive.

"Aunt Petunia! I'm back for a bit," he called. Hearing no response, he went to the kitchen, found the number he needed in the phone book, and called his uncle's company. Arrangements were soon made for their group to join the next day's tour.

As he hung up the phone, Harry heard an odd sound upstairs. *What's that?* he wondered as he took the stairs two at a time. Some kind of keening sound was coming from his room. Did he have an unhappy house elf waiting for him? Was Merlin all right? He threw open his door and found his aunt sitting on his bed, the framed picture of his parents dancing in the falling leaves resting against her chest, the photo album Hagrid had given him in her hands, opened to a picture of his dad holding baby Harry. His aunt was wailing, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"James! Oh, James, how could you do this to me?" she moaned.

The young wizard's temper flared. "What the sodding hell do you think you're doing? Put those down, they're MINE!" he snarled, snatching the book from her hands and trying to get the framed photo as well. She held on to it tightly, clutching it to her bosom. "Give that to me," Harry snapped. "What are you doing in here?"

"I . . . I needed to clean in here," she began hesitantly.

"*LIAR!* You have never once cleaned in here since I got this room," he growled. "Not even while I was away at school. Get OUT"

"The truth is," she said carefully, still clutching the framed photo to her breast, "I . . . I wanted to see your bird. That Weasley woman told me it was a phoenix and that Muggles rarely get to see them, so I . . ."

"And that's *another* lie!" Harry snarled. "You didn't come in here to see my phoenix. You came to steal my pictures!" He looked at Merlin, who looked rather agitated. "Why didn't you come and get me?" he asked the bird.

Merlin crooned something back at him.

"OK," Harry said with a sigh. "Are you all right?"

The phoenix chirruped once and then was silent, turning his steady gaze back on the distraught woman.

"Did he . . . did he actually speak to you?" Petunia asked, stunned.

"Yes. He says you came in here just as I Apparated into the house and called out to let you know I was here. If he'd thought you were going to be a danger to me, he would have warned me, or attacked you himself. I had to make a phone call. That's why I came back."

"A phone call?"

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"Never mind. Just get out of here," he said, trying to control his temper. He could hear the window panes rattling and feel the floor vibrating in reaction to his building rage.

"Could. . ." she looked pleadingly up at him, "could I have one of these? Just half of one of them?"

"*What?*"

"I'd like a picture of James," she said simply.

"**NO!**" He held out his hand and the framed picture leaped out of her arms. He caught it deftly, then leafed through the pages of the album to make sure she hadn't removed any pictures.

"You're sick, you are. If you had asked for a picture of Mum, I might have given it to you, but no, you will not have any pictures of my dad. You're mental!"

"What's happening? Why is the house shaking?" she said tremulously, suddenly feeling that she was in danger.

He stood there panting, doing his best to regain control of his temper, and to shake off the creepy feelings her obsession with his father gave him. "Get out, or I will throw you out," he snarled. "And don't you ever come in here again. I will hex this door so it will turn you into a toad if you touch it. The same goes for Dudley and any other Muggle who touches this door. Is that clear?" He towered over her as she sat trembling on his bed. "I said to get out. Don't make me move you myself. You'll regret it," he said in a quiet, dangerous voice.

Petunia managed to get to her feet and stumble out of the door. She turned to look at him. His eyes flashed green fire. His rage was such that his long hair was moving around his head as if in a wind, creating a flowing dark halo effect. She expected to see fire coming out of his fingertips as he pointed his hand at the door, slamming it in her face. With him now out of sight, she was able to catch her breath.

What was I thinking? she wondered as she stumbled down the hall to her own room and collapsed on the bed. *What was I doing?* If she was honest with herself, she knew exactly what she was doing. She'd waited deliberately until all those wizards were out of the house, then she'd opened Harry's door and glared at that huge red bird of his before starting to dig through his drawers looking for pictures. She was certain he must have some by now. She knew James and Lily had many friends and that there had been loads of photos taken of them before they died – her parents had copies of most of them, but when they died, Petunia had burned every single picture. She'd spent years denying her feelings for James Potter, but when that Dementor had started to Kiss her, it had forced her to remember the greatest horror in her life: the time she'd actually thrown herself at James Potter as he sat on the sofa in her parents house waiting for Lily to come downstairs. Petunia had never been alone with him before. She took her chance, dropped into his lap and tried to kiss him, telling him she loved him and would do anything for him. James had tried to be polite in his rejection of her, but couldn't keep himself from recoiling in shock at his girlfriend's sister acting that way. Lily hadn't let her forget that incident, giving Petunia filthy looks whenever she caught Petunia staring at him or trying to sidle up next to him, and James was equally cautious around her from then on.

That memory being forced to the surface by the Dementor's presence unlocked the door in her mind behind which she'd hidden her most precious thoughts, memories and fantasies, all of

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which involved James. Now she couldn't seem to get those thoughts shoved back behind the door. Harry's long hair and beard kept her from reacting to him as if he was James now, but when she thought of James, she saw Harry's face as often as James's – after all, she'd lived with Harry for sixteen years, and had only seen James a few times in her life, and that many years ago. The confusion between them was natural, now that Harry was the age James had been when she first met him.

Petunia got up and went to the bathroom, taking two aspirin and wetting a flannel with cold water. She wrung it out fiercely, then went back to her bed and lay down, the flannel over her eyes. She had to survive another two weeks with the boy here. She could manage that, surely? He would be at work most of each day now, so he wouldn't even be here to torment her. But his father's photos would be in the boy's room, just beyond her reach. What was she to do?

"Merlin, help me. I'm going mad here," Harry moaned, slumping on the side of his bed with his head in his hands. He grabbed fistfuls of his hair and tugged in frustration and anger, then moaned and started massaging the sides of his head and his temples. His head was pounding, and he could feel the air around him vibrating in reaction to his rage. The floor was shaking harder, the whole house creaking as magical vibrations rattled it to its foundations. Merlin flew over and sat on Harry's shoulder, crooning soothingly to him as he nuzzled the boy's hair, trying to comfort him. After a while, Harry's breathing slowed, the house stilled, the windows stopped rattling, and the boy finally let go of his hair and looked around his room.

"Did she get up to anything else?" he asked the bird, getting a short chirp as a response. "Bloody hell," he growled shortly, petting the bird as it hopped down and sat next to him on the bed. Harry got up and walked around his room, rummaging in his drawers and peeping under his bed, even taking up the loose floorboard to see if she'd found his hiding place. It appeared she hadn't, so he put his photo album in there and shoved the loose floorboard back in place, putting a hex on it so no Muggles could open it. Then he put the hex on his door that he'd promised his aunt. Any Muggle who touched his door would be turned into a horribly ugly, fat, warty toad, and only he could reverse the spell. He found himself almost, *almost* wishing she and Dudley would dare to touch his door. They'd get what they deserved then! Anger still coursed through his veins but it was at a more manageable level.

When he straightened up from adding the toad bit to the hex on the floorboards, the room swam before his eyes. "Oh, bugger this," Harry said, putting his face in his hands again. His headache was worse, if anything. He rubbed his face distractedly, then got up to find his non-drowsy pain potion. He took a dose and sat on the side of his bed, waiting for it to work. Merlin sat on his shoulder and crooned to him again, nuzzling the spot where Harry's skull had been fractured not that long ago.

"So did I do any damage?" he asked the bird. The sound the phoenix made in response did nothing to make Harry feel better. "Great. Now I'm stuck here again. I can't Apparate when I'm feeling as dizzy as hell and my head is splitting. I'll splinch myself." He threw himself back onto his pillow, his arm over his eyes, willing his headache to go away. The potion didn't seem to be helping.

"Harry?" a cheerful voice said near his cheek.

"Huh?" he said, startled into sitting up and looking around.

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"Harry, are you there?"

He smiled a bit and pressed on the ruby in his ring, saying, "Ginny Weasley." Instantly, her merry face hovered over his ring. "Hi, baby," he murmured.

"Hi yourself, luv! Are you busy? Are you enjoying your job?" she asked eagerly.

"No, not busy. Yes, enjoying the job," he replied carefully, glad she couldn't see where he was.

"What's wrong? You don't look well," she said, her forehead furrowed in concern.

"Actually, I suppose I'm not well," he allowed. "I have a bleeding great headache. I wish you were here to soothe it away," he added wistfully.

"I thought you were better! Did Apparating get to you?"

"No, it wasn't the Apparating," he growled, his face contorting in renewed anger. "It was my stupid bitch of an aunt."

"Harry, calm down! Being angry will only make your headache worse! Was she awful about you going to work?" she asked sympathetically.

"No. I'm at Privet Drive. I came back here to call my uncle's company to arrange a tour for your brothers. I think an assembly line will speed up production in their shop, and they don't understand how it works, so I told them about the tours my uncle's company has every week. When I finished my call, I heard a noise upstairs and found Aunt Petunia in my room." He went on to tell her the rest of the story, rubbing his temples and forehead every so often as he spoke.

"Did you take your potion?"

"Yes. It doesn't seem to be helping. I was awfully angry – the whole house shook hard for a while, but I don't think I actually damaged anything." He gazed at her with sad eyes. "I wish you could Apparate. I could use one of your therapeutic hugs," he said with an attempt at his cheeky grin.

"Hang on a sec, sweetheart," Ginny said suddenly, then her face disappeared from above Harry's ring. She must have covered the ring with her other hand for her face to disappear while they were connected. A few moments later, she reappeared. "Sorry. I'm back. Mum just asked me something, that's all."

"I missed you," he said simply, his eyes sad and lost.

He heard a harsh banging downstairs. Someone was demanding the front door be opened. He heard his aunt talking with someone who shrieked at her and then thundered up the stairs. He sat up and pulled his wand, wondering what was going on.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Ginny asked, noticing the tension in his face.

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"Someone just came in the house in a rage and I don't know who it is," he said tensely.
"They're on their way upstairs."

Just then, the person called from the top of the stairs. "Harry? Harry, dear, are you all right?"

"Mrs. Weasley! What are you doing here?" he said in surprise as he opened the door for her.

"I'm here to see how you are, dear," she said as she shoed him back to the bed and made him sit down. "Ginny told me what happened. Those rings of yours are such a blessing! You wouldn't have told us about this if Ginny hadn't called you just now, would you? No, I'm sure you wouldn't, you sweet boy. You don't want us to worry," she said, patting his cheek. "I'll deal with that cow of an aunt of yours later," she added with a steely glint in her eye.

Harry chuckled a bit at this, but then his expression grew sad and angry again. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"You're not a bit of trouble, dear, not one bit," Molly said, bending down to look in his eyes, feel his forehead, and do all the other things mothers do to check on ill children. "You're looking a bit green, did you know that?"

"Yeah. My headache's pretty bad," he admitted.

"And you took your potion?"

"Yes. It's not helping."

"Right then. I'm off to find a bowl and a flannel and get you started on the road to recovery," she said as she headed for the door.

"Wait! Be careful," Harry warned her. "I hexed the door and I'm not sure I did it right. It's one Ginny showed me. If a Muggle touches the door, they'll turn into a toad – at least, that's what's supposed to happen. But my head was banging so, I may have messed it up."

"I know that hex. Let me check it for you," she said with a smile. With a wave of her wand, she examined the hex on the door. "Hmm. Well done, except that they'll turn into an iguana instead of a toad."

"An iguana? Cool. That's even wartier. Leave it as it is then," Harry said with an amused chuckle.

As Molly swept out of the door, he turned back to his ring. "You look after me even long-distance," he said with a weary smile.

"I do my best," Ginny replied cheerily. "Mum will have you feeling better in no time."

"I'm sure she will. Thanks for sending her." A wave of nausea hit him and he put his head in his hands, moaning.

"Harry? Harry, what's wrong?" Ginny's voice called.

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"I don't feel very well," he replied carefully. In truth, if he moved much at all, he was afraid he'd be sick all over the floor. "It sort of comes in waves. I'll feel better for a bit, then worse again."

"Oh, poor baby," Ginny sympathized. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too," he agreed.

Molly bustled back in, a bowl of water and a flannel in her hands. "Here we go. You'll feel better soon," she promised as she set the bowl down, dipped the flannel in and wrung it out. She wiped Harry's face with the cool flannel, then lifted his hair and put the flannel across the back of his neck. "There, there, dear, you'll feel fine in no time," she assured him.

"Feels good," he murmured, closing his eyes and leaning his head against her.

Molly wrapped her arms around him, smoothing his hair, gently massaging his temples. He was so tall, even seated, that his head reached her shoulder. She kissed the top of his head tenderly. "Poor dear lad. I'm so sorry you've had to go through all this." She rubbed his back comfortingly, then lifted his hair and turned the flannel over so the cooler side would be against his neck. "You know, I'm beginning to like your hair this long," she commented. "It looks nice on you. Such lovely loose curls," she said, running her fingers lightly through his hair as she settled it back over the flannel.

Harry relaxed against Molly's shoulder, savouring the feeling of a mother's touch. "You're so kind to me," he murmured. "Thank you."

"Ah, who wouldn't be kind to a sweet lad like you, Harry?" Molly replied, then remembered his nasty relatives who were anything but kind to him. She leaned her cheek on his hair. "I love you as if you were one of my own, dear. Don't you forget it!" She hugged him and smoothed his hair again, making him smile. She felt the tension leaving his body as her efforts began to help him. "You just relax and let me take care of you, sweet boy," she murmured. *I'm going to take care of that bloody family once and for all*, Molly vowed as she continued to stroke the young man's silky hair comfortingly. *This kind of cruelty will never happen to him again!*

Molly noticed him breathing deeply and relaxing into her shoulder. He nuzzled her neck a bit, which surprised her. "What are you doing, dear?"

He pulled back apologetically. "Smelling you. Sorry."

"Do I smell bad?" she asked, looking down at him in surprise.

"No. You smell like a mother should smell. I was just wondering what my mother smelled like, if she smelled like you." He relaxed against her and inhaled deeply again. "You smell so good."

Molly chuckled. "And what does a mother smell like, you precious boy?"

"Baking, cooking, clean laundry, a warm kitchen. . .home," he murmured contentedly. "All good smells. You smell like strawberries today."

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"Ginny and I were making strawberry jam just before she called you. She smells like strawberries too, I imagine."

"She smells like strawberries a lot, and roses and fresh air. She smells good too, all the time, even when she's sweaty," he said with a chuckle. He raised his head and looked at her for a moment. "Do all women smell this good, or is it a Weasley thing?"

Molly laughed. "You are a charmer, you are," she said, gently pulling his head back onto her shoulder and kissing his forehead as he settled down again. She was touched by the sweetness of this dear boy. How could the Dursleys have treated such a lovely child so horribly all of his life?

They heard the front door open and quiet steps running up the stairs. Molly pulled her wand, but Harry remained calm, recognizing Remus's steps.

As he opened the door, Remus took in the sight of the relaxed boy against Molly's shoulder. "How is he?" he said quietly, thinking Harry must be asleep.

"Hi, Remus," Harry said, lifting his head to look at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Ginny called me. Are you feeling better?"

"A little. I don't feel so green anymore, at least," he said, being careful to move slowly. "My head felt like it would explode for a while there."

Something banged on Harry's door, and then there was a loud cracking noise.

"What was that?" Remus said.

"The appearance of an iguana, I suspect," Molly said tartly.

"An iguana?" Remus asked in confusion.

"It was supposed to be a toad, but I did the hex wrong," Harry explained. "Let's see then."

Remus opened the door and there sat a large, very fat iguana, glaring at them, a half-eaten chocolate bar lying next to it.

"Ah. Must be Dudley," Remus commented, picking up the animal. "I'll just put it in his room, shall I?" A grin tickled his lips as he struggled to hold the wriggling animal. "Behave, Dudley, or I might drop you." With that, the animal stilled, giving Remus as filthy a look as an iguana could muster.

The doorbell rang. "Remus, could you get that?" Molly called. "Mrs. Dursley's in no fit state for company, I suspect."

"Why not?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"I had a wee chat with her while I was getting the bowl and flannel for you, dear," Molly said with mock innocence.

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"And. . .?" Harry asked, a smile tickling his mouth.

"Let's just say she's been in this condition before," the woman said smugly.

"You didn't! In her own kitchen?" he said, chuckling now as he pulled back and looked at her admiringly. "Mrs. Weasley, you're brilliant!"

"Thank you, dear. I'm glad you approve."

"As long as I'm not the one who has to clean it up," Harry said, still chuckling.

Remus entered the room with Healer Pomfrey close behind him. "Hello, Harry," Marcus Pomfrey said. "Scar on my sister's elbow is my password. Remus said you've had a bit of a setback. Ginny tried to explain what happened when she called me, but I was rather busy and didn't understand everything, I'm afraid. Remus filled me in on the way upstairs. So how are you feeling now?"

"I feel a bit green, actually," Harry replied. "My head is still just throbbing with every heartbeat."

"Have you tried healing yourself? Getting rid of the headache, any of that?" Marcus asked.

"I did at first, but my head was pounding so badly, I couldn't sense things properly to try to heal it, so I left it alone before I did some actual damage. I took my non-drowsy potion, but it doesn't seem to be helping much."

"That was wise," Marcus complimented him. "Mrs. Weasley, what have you done for him?"

"Mostly just cold compresses on his face and the back of his neck to help the nausea, and massaging his head just a little. I knew Ginny was going to call you, so I didn't want to give him anything else."

"Well done. Thank you," Marcus said approvingly. "All right then, young man, let's see what's going on with you." He examined Harry's eyes and the sites of his injuries visually, then with his wand, then with a clear quartz crystal. "You haven't damaged yourself, lad. It was the increase in your heart rate and blood pressure that caused the pain."

"I have high blood pressure?" Harry asked in shock.

"No, no, it's an adrenalin response to danger that's natural in the human body. In a wizard's body, it's a much greater response than it is in a Muggle's, because of the magic in our blood. And you have far more magic in your blood than anyone I know of, so when you became angry, you had massive amounts of magic pouring through your body, ready for you to use to protect yourself, attack an enemy, or whatever, but you held it in check, which compressed it even more. If you were completely healed, you'd be a bit tired, perhaps, but probably wouldn't have a headache. The skull fracture is just barely healed, and that's why you have so much pain – that area is still a bit swollen and delicate, so the pressure put on it by your anger caused you a great deal of pain. Having said that, fixing it is a simple thing. I'm going to give you some potion that will help with the pain, and then you need to rest for a while. No Apparating for a few days, and no Floo Network, either, just to be on the safe side."

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"Oh no! I can't go back to work?" he moaned. "I just got started! It was going to be such fun!"

"Here, take this," Marcus said, handing him a brown flagon of potion. "Two large sips. And it's fine for you to work starting tomorrow if you can get there some other way."

Harry took his potion, then looked at him with renewed hope. "May I flash there? Or fly?"

"No flying. No Animagus transformations, either. Those all take too much magic for you right now. What's 'flashing'?"

"Holding on to my phoenix's tail and going with him when he disappears and reappears," Harry explained.

"I don't know anything about that. I have no idea how it would affect you," Marcus said.

"Why don't you try it yourself so you can see what it's like?" the boy suggested eagerly. "Then maybe you'll approve it for me."

"Before we go any farther with that, how are you feeling? Is the potion helping?"

"Yeah, it is. The throbbing is less, and I'm not feeling sick anymore," the boy said, obviously relieved.

"All right, then. This flashing thing. What do I do?" Marcus said, standing up and looking at the phoenix, who surveyed him regally.

"Merlin? Would you take Healer Pomfrey to Diagon Alley, and then bring him back?" Harry asked the beautiful bird. Merlin blinked, then stood up, looking at Marcus expectantly. "Just hold your hand out and grab his tail when he flies overhead," Harry instructed. "Don't worry, you can't let go once he starts to flash. It's a bit like a Portkey that way, but not as rough a ride."

Marcus nodded, looking from Harry to the bird with interest. "I've never done this before, Merlin," he said politely, "so I hope I don't hurt your tail when I hold it."

"You won't," Harry assured him. "Just hang on to him and when you get to Diagon Alley, you can let go. Walk around a bit, then call him and grab his tail again and you'll be back here."

Marcus took a nervous breath and blew it out. "All right. Let's go, Merlin!" He held his hand out and grasped the bird's tail as Merlin flew over his head, and the two disappeared in a flash of light.

"That was a good idea, Harry," Remus said, sitting down on the bed by his godson to wait for the healer's return. "This way, he'll know what kind of stress is involved in that kind of travel." He smiled down at his godson. "Molly, thanks so much for coming. It's good to know you Weasleys are looking after him when I'm not able to," he said, rubbing the boy's shoulder affectionately.

"It was my pleasure, Remus," Molly said, straightening up Harry's room a bit as she spoke. Between Petunia's and Harry's searches, the room was a shambles.

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Remus looked at Harry, a bit of reproach in his eyes. "You should have sent me a message."

"I thought you were probably glad to get back to work yourself, after spending so much time with me. I imagine you're getting a bit tired of me by now," the boy said with a smile.

"No, not at all," Remus said. "It's a pleasure to spend time with you, lad." Harry grinned his appreciation.

With a flash, Merlin and Marcus reappeared.

"Have a good flight?" Harry asked cheekily.

"That was amazing!" Marcus said with excitement. "Just brilliant! There's no sensation of motion at all. You're here one moment, there the next, and there's no tug such as you feel with a Portkey, no dizziness, no stress. It will be fine for you to travel like that, Harry."

"Yes!" Harry responded, pumping his fist in the air. "Ow. Shouldn't have done that."

"Still having some pain?" Marcus asked, sitting on the side of his bed again.

"Just when I move suddenly. It's getting better."

"Good. You need a nap. You'll feel a lot better when you wake up," Marcus assured him.

"I was in a rage on Saturday, as well – my aunt again," Harry said by way of explanation, "but I didn't feel this sick from it. Why didn't I get sick like this then?"

"How long were you angry that day?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know – maybe five minutes or so before I started to calm down."

"How did you calm down so quickly?" Marcus said.

"Ginny, Ron and Hermione ran after me, and tried to talk me through it. Ron tried to pull the girls away – he could see I was about to blow up – but Ginny wiggled into my arms and wouldn't go away, and kept pestering me until I calmed down, finally," Harry answered. He heard her giggle from his ring. "Still there, are you?"

"I never left," she said. "I'm glad you're better."

"Me too. Thanks for the help," he told her sincerely.

Getting back on topic, Marcus said, "You were alone today when this happened. How long was it before you started calming down?"

"I don't know – what time is it?" He looked at his watch. "I was probably in a full-blown rage for, I don't know, half an hour at least, maybe longer, between being angry while Aunt Petunia was in here and trying to get over it, before Mrs. Weasley got here and helped me relax."

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"Then that's probably the reason you feel worse today. It took you longer to calm down. Your anger at what happened is completely understandable. We just have to find a way to help you get over it more quickly when your temper does flare up."

"Get me out of here, then. Aunt Petunia sets me off just by existing these days," Harry replied glumly.

"I'm off to have a talk with Harry's aunt," Molly said, heading for the door as she spoke.

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Once I turn her back into a human, we'll discuss the benefits of being human versus being a pile of cow manure for the rest of her natural life," Molly growled.

Her remark made Harry laugh. "I love to see a redhead angry, as long as it's not at me! Go, Mrs. Weasley!"

"Actually, I think a Memory Charm is in order," Marcus commented. "We can remove her fantasies about your dad, maybe make a few other adjustments as well. How's that?"

"That would be brilliant!" Harry replied eagerly.

"You rest, then, and we'll go take care of it," Marcus said. "Come on, Remus, we may need your input as well."

"Will you be all right here alone, Harry?" Remus asked, his face still worried.

"I'm not alone. I've got Merlin here, Ginny on my ring, and you lot downstairs. I couldn't be in better hands," his godson assured him.

"All right, then. Try to rest. We'll tell you everything when we come back up," Remus promised.

As the adults left his room, Ginny said, "Harry? Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah, a bit. Thanks," he replied, smiling at her translucent face hovering above his ring.

"You look sleepy. Healer Pomfrey said you need a nap. Why don't you sleep for a while?" she suggested.

"I am tired," he said, stifling a yawn, "but I'd love to hear what goes on downstairs."

"Me, too, but I'm sure they'll tell us about it later. If I'm on here, you'll just talk to me instead of resting, so why don't I go and let you sleep for a while? Call me when you wake up, all right?"

"That's pr-pr-probably a good idea," he said, his jaw cracking as he yawned hugely, making both of them laugh. "Oops, sorry!" He smiled at her tenderly. "Love you, baby."

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"I love you too. Sleep well," she said, and then her face disappeared from above his ring. Harry sighed contentedly, turned on his side, tucked his hand under his cheek, and was soon asleep, dreaming of the scent of strawberries and sunshine in Ginny's hair.

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Chapter 4 – Charmed Memories

A short time later, Molly, Remus, Marcus and Petunia were gathered around the kitchen table.

"Did you enjoy being a cow pat again?" Molly asked contemptuously.

Petunia trembled as she gazed from wizard to wizard. "What. . .what. . .?" she muttered distractedly, scrubbing her hands together as if she were washing them over and over.

Molly slammed her fist on the table. "PAY ATTENTION, you ruddy great COW, or I'll hex you AGAIN!" Her fiery red hair nearly crackled with her temper.

Remus put his hand on Molly's arm. "Molly, if you frighten her too much, she simply can't pay proper attention." Molly subsided, but kept a sharp eye on Petunia, who quailed under her gaze.

"Mrs. Dursley," Remus said politely, "this is Marcus Pomfrey. He's a healer at St. Mungo's, the wizard hospital in London. He's taken care of Harry several times recently. He's here today because Harry's in pain again."

"What's. . .what's wrong with him?" she said, turning to Marcus nervously.

"His skull was severely fractured on the train ride home from Hogwarts," Marcus began, looking at Petunia curiously when she shuddered at the word "Hogwarts." "Are you all right, Mrs. Dursley?" he asked in concern.

"Yes, I'm quite all right," she said, pulling the shreds of her dignity together. "We were told he was hurt then. That's why *he*," she said, gesturing haughtily at Remus, "decided to stay with us."

"And it was a wise decision on Professor Lupin's part to stay with Harry," Marcus assured her.

She sniffed dismissively, then glanced quickly at Molly, fear in her eyes. When she saw no threat coming from the redhead, she turned back to the healer. "So what's wrong with the boy now?"

"He was extremely angry for quite a long time today, and the increase in his blood pressure gave him pain to the point of becoming ill," Marcus explained. "You were the cause of his anger, and unfortunately, his friends weren't here to help him get past his anger quickly. We need to do something to avoid such things happening in the future."

Petunia's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?" she said apprehensively.

"I'm going to put a Memory Charm on you so you won't remember your infatuation with James Potter. I'm going to put another spell on you so that you will accept Harry for who and what he is. You will treat him and his friends with respect and kindness. You won't go into his room uninvited," Marcus said, studying the woman before him. He looked at Remus.

"Anything else?"

"I think that covers the important points," Remus replied. "I'm glad you included his friends."

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"I thought it would be safest to cover everything at once," Marcus replied, looking at Petunia and fingering his wand.

"Just a moment," Remus said as a sudden thought occurred to him. "It might be good to add a Cheering Charm."

"Right," Marcus said. "Good idea." He raised his wand and pointed it at Petunia.

"You can't just. . .you can't. . .I won't let you!" Petunia cried, standing up so quickly her chair fell over.

"It's a medical necessity for my patient's health, or I wouldn't do it," Marcus assured her. "It won't hurt you, and it won't affect any part of your life or memory other than changing your attitude toward James and Harry Potter and other wizards."

As she sputtered incoherent noises of protest, he waved his wand and muttered the necessary incantations, effectively silencing her. "There. How do you feel, Mrs. Dursley?"

"I'm very well, thank you," she replied graciously, although her expression was a bit dazed. She'd always been a good hostess, and her company manners came to the fore now. "How are you today, Mr. Pomfrey? Mrs. Weasley? Professor Lupin? How nice to see all of you today. Would you like some tea?"

"Not right now, but thank you very much," Remus replied. He looked at Marcus. "Excellent! Let's go see how Harry is."

"Do you think he's hungry? I could make him some lunch," Petunia offered kindly. "Would you like some as well?"

"I imagine he will be hungry soon, yes, thank you," Marcus replied with a smile. "I won't be here long enough to have lunch, but Remus and Molly might enjoy a bite of something. Thank you."

"Well done!" Molly said as she, Marcus and Remus went back upstairs to check on Harry.

When they entered the room, he woke up and turned to gaze at them anxiously. "Is it done?" he asked.

"Yes, and it went quite well," Marcus replied. "Your aunt is fixing you some lunch now."

"And she offered us tea, asked how we were. . .couldn't have been nicer," Remus added with a smile.

"Wow! Why didn't anyone Memory Charm the lot of them years ago?" Harry said with a hopeful look on his face.

"Maybe they thought it wasn't necessary," Marcus replied with a shrug. "A Memory Charm is an extreme measure, and we try to avoid doing them unless there's no choice. In this situation, with you still healing from a serious injury, I thought there was no better choice than to do the

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Charm on your aunt. In the meantime, young man, you appear to be improving and I have other things to do, so I'll go back to work now, unless you need something else."

"No, that's fine. Thanks so much for coming!" Harry said, pulling himself to a sitting position in his bed. "You're brilliant, you know that?"

"I do have my moments," Marcus said with a laugh. "Take care of yourself, Harry. And you still owe me a Quidditch game!"

"Right! We can play at the Weasleys some Saturday. I'll be in touch!" the boy replied with a grin.

"Yes, Marcus, do come out to The Burrow some Saturday. Just let us know when you're free and we'll arrange a family picnic. It will be lovely," Molly said with a warm smile.

"Thanks! I look forward to it! I'll see myself out. Bye!" Marcus started downstairs, leaving Harry's door open when he saw Petunia coming up the stairs with a food-laden tray in her hands.

"Oh, good, you're awake," she said brightly to Harry. "May I come in?"

"Yes," he replied carefully.

"I brought you and your friends some sandwiches, apples and crisps, as well as drinks. Did that nice Mr. Pomfrey have to leave? Will this be enough food, or do you want something else?" his aunt said with a smile.

"He had to go back to work. This is fine, Aunt Petunia. Thanks," Harry said, studying his aunt's face carefully. "How are you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm absolutely spiffing today," she said cheerfully as she set the tray on his bedside table. "I mean, it's a beautiful day. Good to be alive." Her face saddened a bit then. "Oh dear, I suppose I shouldn't be so flippant with poor Vernon still in hospital." She started wringing her hands anxiously.

"He's getting better, isn't he?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he is. The surgeons are pleased. They are upset that he keeps getting angry, but other than that, he's doing rather well." She forced herself to stop twisting her hands together, satisfying her urge by turning her wedding ring around her finger over and over. A glance at Harry's face calmed her somehow. She smiled broadly at him. "Well, then. I'll leave you to your lunch."

After Remus closed the door behind her, Harry looked at his godfather, his eyes dancing in delight. "I would never have believed it."

"Amazing what a little spell can do sometimes, isn't it?" Remus agreed.

"Brilliant!" Harry agreed, grinning at his godfather and Molly. "Thanks!"

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"You're in good hands now, and apparently on the road to recovery, so I'll pop off home now," Molly said. "You take care of yourself, dear," she added, leaning over to kiss Harry on the temple.

Harry put his hand on her arm. "Wait."

"What is it, dear?" she asked in concern.

Harry stood up carefully and bent his long frame to envelop the short woman in a warm embrace. "Thank you so much. You mean a lot to me. I just can't tell you . . ." He gave her a shy kiss on the cheek, then straightened and looked her in the eye seriously. "Thanks. And tell Ginny I said thanks for looking after me, too."

"I will, dear," Molly assured him, smoothing his hair back from his face fondly. "Sit down and eat with the boy, Remus," she said as the man started to walk her to the door. Remus obeyed, waving to her as she closed the door behind her. Molly went down the stairs and out the front door, leaving Harry and Remus to eat their lunch alone.

"Rats! I've got to send a note to Mr. Ollivander!" Harry exclaimed after waking from another nap late in the afternoon.

"Why? What's wrong?" Remus asked, looking up from his paperwork.

"He stopped me this morning and wanted to talk to me about my wand. I told him I'd meet him at lunchtime or after work, and now I can't do that." He got up and rummaged around in his desk, finding some parchment, a bottle of ink and a quill. "Merlin, d'you mind going back to Diagon Alley? I need you to take a note to Mr. Ollivander for me."

The bird chirped cheerfully and hopped down to sit next to Harry, craning its neck so it appeared to be reading what he was writing.

"Is this all right with you?" Harry asked, a grin on his face as he studied the bird's expression.

Merlin chirped a few times and looked steadily at the boy.

"Right then, let me seal it and you're off!" Harry said. He handed the sealed letter to the phoenix, which took flight and hovered momentarily before disappearing in a flash of light.

"What did he think of your letter?" Remus asked, amused.

"He thought it would do. He said my handwriting is like that of a five-year-old."

"Why would he say that?" Remus interrupted with a laugh.

"Because that's what he thinks. He's said it before," Harry said with a philosophical shrug of his shoulders. "After that, he asked if I needed to send a note to Professor McGonagall as well." His face split in a grin he couldn't suppress.

Remus turned to face him fully, a puzzled expression on his face. "Why would he say *that*?"

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Harry sputtered with unexpected laughter.

"What is it? You're actually blushing, you know," his godfather said, highly amused.

The boy got his amusement under control, then answered, "He thinks McGonagall's hot." He snorted with laughter again.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, it's true!" the boy insisted. "He spent quite a while talking with her when I was recuperating after the battle."

Remus laughed out loud. "Did she know who he was?"

"Oh, I gave them quite a proper introduction. She didn't believe me at first when I told her he was Great Merlin, King Arthur's mage. When I finally had her convinced, she said she'd always been a great admirer of his, so he told me a spell to use so he could speak to her if he was looking right at her. They talked for hours. She giggled like a girl. It was rather sweet, actually. Merlin quite enjoyed it. He's looking forward to visiting her again sometime." Harry lay back on his bed, his arms reaching over his head, and stretched until he could hear joints pop in various places. "I'm glad I can go back to work tomorrow. I'm sick of being stuck in bed all the time."

"I can believe that! So what are the twins having you do?" Remus asked.

Harry told his godfather about the shop, and about his idea of an assembly line of some sort to speed up productions. "So tomorrow," he concluded, "I'm taking the twins, Ron and Mr. Weasley on the weekly tour they have at Uncle Vernon's company."

"That sounds great. Good idea."

"D'you want to come along? We'll be leaving from here," Harry offered.

"It sounds like fun, but I am a bit behind on some things. You lot go ahead and enjoy yourselves. You can tell me all about it tomorrow evening." Remus turned back to his work, then remembered something. "Why were you meeting with Mr. Ollivander? If I'm being too nosy, tell me to push off."

"He stopped me when he saw me this morning. He asked me to come to his shop at lunch or after work because he wanted to talk to me about my wand."

"What about your wand?" Remus asked curiously.

"Dunno. He says he's been talking to Dumbledore and he has an idea of some kind. He asked how my wand has been doing for me, and I told him it's great. I don't know what he could do to it to improve it," Harry said with a shrug. "It never acts up or anything."

"Well, I suppose you'll know what he wants when you meet with him, then," Remus replied.

Just then they heard Petunia call, "Dudley? Dudley, are you up there? Your friends are here."

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"Bloody hell," Harry said, getting out of bed abruptly.

"Careful, there, lad, you probably shouldn't move too quickly yet," his godfather cautioned. "What's wrong? Can I help?"

Harry glanced at his godfather, a guilty grin on his face. "I kind of left Dudley as an iguana, didn't I? Or did you change him back?"

"No, I didn't change him," Remus said, chuckling. "I suppose I should go and see to it."

"The thing is, I spelled the door so I'm the only one who can reverse the spell," Harry said with a shrug. "At least, that's what I tried to do, but I could be wrong. My head was banging so...well, Mrs. Weasley checked the hex and said the only thing I got wrong was that he'd turn into an iguana instead of a toad, and I said that was fine. So it's possible you can't reverse the spell."

"Well, let's see then," Remus said, rising to go to the door with Harry.

"Dudley?" Petunia's voice floated up the stairs pleasantly.

"She's awfully cheerful since she had her Memory Charm," Harry commented. "Wonder why?"

"We included a Cheering Charm with the Memory Charm, just a bit of one," Remus said.

"Probably a good idea," Harry replied, then knocked politely on Dudley's door. "Dud? Your mum wants you. Are you in there?" When he got no response, he cracked open the door to find a very frustrated iguana glaring at him from the floor.

"Now, Dudley, I put you on your bed. Did you fall off?" Remus asked in concern. "I hope you're all right."

"We'll soon find out," Harry said. "Dudley, I'm going to reverse the spell so you'll be yourself again. Remember not to touch my door or any of my things again and you'll be fine, OK?" He got no response beyond an irritated blink from the iguana. "Right then." He tapped the trembling reptile three times and suddenly Dudley was sitting hunched on the floor in front of them. "Feeling all right now?" Harry asked politely. "Sorry about that. I didn't have time to warn you about my door."

"What . . . what did you . . . why. . .?" Dudley sputtered.

"Your mum invaded my room and went through my stuff. You don't let her in here, so you can imagine how that annoyed me," Harry said, stifling the anger that threatened to rise again. "So I hexed the door so any Muggle who touched it would turn into an iguana. It was supposed to be a toad, but I messed up the hex a little. But an iguana is an interesting variation on the hex, don't you think?" he said with a cheeky grin. He held out his hand to his cousin, who remained on the floor. "Your mum said your mates are here. C'mon, I'll help you up."

Dudley stared at the offered hand, his eyes wide in fear.

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"No tricks, honest," Harry assured him, holding his hand out patiently.

"I thought you went to some job today," his cousin said suspiciously.

"I did, but I had to come back to make a phone call. That's when I found your mum messing around in my things. I blew up and got a bleeding great headache as a result. I'll go back to work tomorrow," he explained. "Come on, then, get up." When Dudley still didn't take his hand, Harry straightened up and turned to leave. "Whatever."

"Wait!" Dudley cried as Harry and Remus left the room.

The two wizards turned back. "What?" Harry asked.

"What was that mess in the kitchen? Did you hurt my mum?"

"The mess was your mum, but she's herself again," Harry replied.

"That mess was my *mum*? But why?"

"Because she was in my stuff, doing things she oughtn't. She won't do it again," Harry said seriously.

Dudley blanched. "Did you. . .hurt her?"

Harry's temper flared. "I just told you *HOW* many times? She's been calling for you. She's downstairs. Your mates are here. Now go and play nicely with your friends, and remember, Tonks's curse is still on you, so you can't talk about spending the afternoon as a reptile, or the mess your mother used to be. She's fine, you're fine, you've had a nice afternoon of doing nothing, which is normal for you anyway, so go play with your bloody friends and *leave me alone!*" He turned and stormed down the hall, slamming the door to his room behind him. A moment later, the door opened quietly and Remus came in, to find Harry facing him, wand at the ready, fury on his face.

"It's me," Remus said mildly. "Only a wizard could have opened the door, remember?"

"Yeah, that's right," the boy agreed reluctantly, then dropped onto his bed with a thud. "Damn. My headache's back." He put his wand and glasses on the bedside table and rubbed his eyes wearily.

"You did it to yourself that time," Remus said quietly. "Dudley didn't do anything to make you that angry. His questions were understandable."

"I have a lifetime of reasons to be angry with Dudley," Harry growled. "He wasn't helping matters much."

"I hate to say it, but you're being a bit unreasonable," Remus chided him gently. "He and his mother have been through a lot today, not to mention the strain they're under from your uncle's illness and Tonks and me staying here. That's a lot of pressure for them to bear."

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"You're too good-natured," his godson responded vehemently. "I'm not like you." He glared at Remus as if everything was his godfather's fault.

"No, you have James's temper, that's for sure, and a good bit of your mother's as well," Remus commented, standing quietly, his arms crossed over his chest, studying his godson with serious eyes. "That's not a bad thing, actually, but you need to be judicious in your use of it."

"Huh?" Harry said, looking up at his godfather with a perplexed expression on his face. He put his glasses back on so he could see Remus clearly. "What are you on about?"

"Your temper creates tremendous power, Harry," his godfather replied. "If you harness that energy, you'll be an even more powerful wizard than you are now. That's an amazing concept, but it's true." He waited while the boy digested this bit of information. "But this is neither the time nor place for you to display the quite awesome power of your temper. Control is the key." He glanced around the room. "Where's that Foe Glass I gave you for Christmas?"

"Um. . .," Harry muttered, a guilty look on his face as he rummaged around in a few drawers. "Here it is," he said in relief as he pulled out a drawer and retrieved the pocket-sized mirror which showed enemies approaching.

"Have you ever used it?"

"I forgot I had it, honestly," the boy said, looking at it. "Sorry."

"No problem. You've been pretty busy. Just set it on your bedside table. Then you'll know who's outside before they come anywhere near your door," Remus suggested.

"OK," the boy said, setting the Foe Glass up so he could see it from his bed. He glanced uncomfortably up at his godfather. "You distracted me right out of my anger."

"That's what I was hoping to do," his godfather said with a grin as he sat back down at the desk ready to get back to work.

"Remus?" Harry said quietly.

"Mmm?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to blow up at you like that."

Remus turned to face the young wizard. "That's all right, Harry. I know this is a hard time for you, as well. Some anger is to be expected at times, but Dudley honestly didn't deserve your wrath just then. He's the one who needs an apology from you, not me, although I do accept it with due gratitude and all that," he said with a smile.

"OK. I'll talk to him later," Harry agreed.

After several quiet minutes, Remus asked, "Head still hurting?"

"A bit."

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"Take your potion, then."

"I'm sick of taking potion," Harry grumbled but he got up and took his dose obediently, then went back to bed and fell asleep soon thereafter.

Remus looked at the boy and sighed. His dark lashes against his pale skin made him look even paler, the dark circles under his eyes even more prominent. The long black curls splayed across his pillow and the neatly trimmed beard made him look much older, strange and different than the Harry that Remus knew so well. But no matter what the façade was, he was still James and Lily's beloved son, who was now loved by Remus as well. Sometimes he had no idea how to help his godson through the painful morass that, all too often, was the boy's life. Remus wished he had a Time Turner and could save James and Lily from Voldemort in the first place, or at the very least, take Harry back to the day he'd been dropped on the Dursleys' doorstep. Given the chance, he'd die to protect his friends, but if he couldn't manage that, he'd snatch baby Harry up and take him far away to let him grow up in peace and happiness. But alas, no such thing could happen, so they'd just have to deal with Harry's life as it came.

"Come on, then!" Fred encouraged, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "Time's getting on!" He, George, Ron and Arthur were all impatiently milling around in Harry's small room as he rushed around trying to finish dressing, combing his hair and trying to find his bloody missing shoe. Harry finally dug out his other shoe from where it had been kicked under the bed, put it on, tied it and stood up, breathing a sigh of relief, which was difficult to do, as crowded as his room was at present.

"There," Harry said finally. "Let's go!"

"About time!" George teased, punching Harry in the shoulder.

"If you lot hadn't been an *hour* early, I would have been ready on time!" Harry protested, laughing at the guilty faces surrounding him.

"The early bird catches the worm," Fred intoned with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Time and tide wait for no man," George added.

"Whatever," Harry said with a grin. The five of them thundered down the stairs and out the door.

"Aunt Petunia agreed to let me use the car," Harry chortled when they reached the drive. "Get in!"

"She agreed?" Ron said, shocked. "What spell did you use for that one?"

"Apparently the attitude adjustment she had yesterday really worked!" Harry replied as he started the car's engine. "Seat belts, everyone! Don't want to get a fine for not using them." Ron didn't have much trouble, since he was in front and there was only one choice of buckle for him, but the twins and Mr. Weasley were in an awful mess. "No, Mr. Weasley, wait. You're getting tangled with George's belt there. Hang on." Harry finally got on his knees in

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the driver's seat so he could face backwards and show his passengers which belts fastened where. Amid much laughter, they traveled to the drill factory with no real incident until they got to the entrance to the parking lot.

"We've got an employee's sticker on the car, so I suppose we can use Uncle Vernon's parking spot," Harry reasoned. He turned into the employee car park, never having been there before, and was surprised to see a security guard there. "Uh-oh."

"Is there a problem, Harry?" Arthur asked in concern.

"I'll take care of it, don't worry," he assured them, hoping he would be able to talk himself out of any trouble they might be facing.

"Hullo, there," the grizzled old security man said, leaning into the window on the driver's side. "This is Mr. Dursley's car. Who are you lot?"

"I'm his nephew. My aunt said I could use the car today. My friends wanted to go on the tour of the factory," Harry explained, putting on what he hoped was his most charming smile.

"How is Mr. Dursley? I was sorry to hear about his heart attack," the man said, noting on his clipboard, "Dursley nephew and four visitors for tour" as he spoke.

"He's doing better," Harry replied.

"And how's your auntie holding up, poor old luv?" the old man said, apparently interested in gossip.

"She's fine," Harry said quickly, wanting to get away from the man's questions, but then he realized "she's fine" wasn't exactly the best impression to give the man. "Erm. . .well, she's doing as well as can be expected, under the circumstances," he amended.

"Ah well, that's understandable. Make sure she eats. She's such a thin woman to start with, if she doesn't eat, a puff of wind would be able to blow her away," the man said kindly.

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he just smiled at the man and drove in, looking for Vernon's parking space. Before long, they were parked and heading into the office area.

"Hello. I'm Harry Potter. I arranged for five of us to be on the tour today," he said politely to the receptionist.

The young woman looked at Harry, then at the four redheaded men behind him, her eyes widening. Redheads were somewhat rare, and here was her reception area, full of them! And this handsome man in front of her was certainly appealing, with his brilliant green eyes, his roguish long hair, elegantly trimmed beard and charming smile. She wondered how old he was. The streaks of grey in his beard on either side of his chin made him look older, as did something about his eyes, but his smile was a young man's grin.

"Yes," she said, "I have you down for the tour. Are you from around here, Mr. Potter? And your friends?"

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"They're from out-of-town, just down to visit me for the day. I took this tour when I was little, on a school field trip. I thought my friends would enjoy seeing how things are made in a factory like this. I'm glad you're still giving the tours," he said, doing his best to be charming and polite.

The woman's eyes sparkled up at him. "We've been giving weekly tours for the last twenty years," she said, wishing she had something more interesting to say. "A nice feature is the shop at the end of the tour, where you can purchase Grunnings drills, drill bits and other tools we make here." She liked his looks, the sound of his voice, his long legs and broad shoulders – and oh, my, one of the redheads was equally tall, with long hair curling past his shoulders and the brightest blue eyes she'd ever seen. She smiled at Ron, then glanced back at Harry, not sure which one to flirt with first. And then there were those twins. . . .

Harry ignored her flirting glances, turning to grin at Arthur. "A shop full of tools, Mr. Weasley! You'll love that! I imagine they'll have batteries, as well, since some of the drills are cordless."

The man's face lit up in delight, just as Harry had expected. "Batteries! Oh, how lovely!" Arthur exclaimed, nearly bouncing on his toes in his excitement.

"The tour will start in a few minutes," the woman told Harry, wondering how to get his attention, or that of the tallest redheaded man with him. A bit breathless, she added, "I'll call Cherilynn now. She'll be your tour guide and should be here in a few minutes." *Damn*, she thought, *I let Cheri have the tour guide job because all we ever get through here are families with loads of kids. I should have kept that job for myself!* "Could I get you some coffee? Tea?" *Me?* she added silently, hoping one of the young men would notice and fancy her.

"Right. No, thank you, we're fine," Harry said, a bit unnerved by her steady gaze. "We'll just wait over there," he added, indicating a small seating area across the room. He pulled his friends into a huddle before letting them sit down. "Remember. Be careful what you say. If you have a question, it would probably be best if you ask me first, so we don't make any mistakes around so many Muggles." When he got nods of agreement from all of them, they all sat down.

A pretty young lady with a clipboard in hand came to a stop in front of the group. "Good morning, and welcome to Grunnings Drills. I see we have a local person, Mr. Potter, and four out-of-towners, the Messrs. Weasley?" she said, glancing around at the five men before her. "Mr. Potter? HARRY Potter?" she said suddenly, looking at Harry more closely.

"Erm. . .yes?" he said hesitantly, wondering what kind of trouble he was in now.

"Harry? It's Cherilynn! Cheri from junior school? Lunch? Eh?" she said excitedly. "I didn't recognize you with the beard and long hair, but it's you, it really is! Nobody else has brilliant green eyes like that, and you still wear those round glasses!"

"Cheri? Cheri Drummond?" he said, standing up and gazing down at her with a huge grin on his face.

"Oh, wow!" Cheri said, impressed by his six-foot-three height, "you're not a titch anymore!"

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Harry laughed out loud. "No, I had a wee bit of a growth spurt last summer."

"And you're not a skinny little fellow either," she added, openly admiring his broad shoulders and muscular chest.

Harry chuckled. "They feed me well at school."

"I'm so glad, Harry. I've worried about you all these years," she said sincerely.

"Why?" he wondered.

She leaned in to speak to him more quietly. "Because you never had any more than a piece of toast for lunch at school, and you were so skinny and small. I didn't think your aunt and uncle were feeding you very well," she said seriously.

"They weren't, but at my school, they take very good care of us."

"Obviously!" she said, giving him an appraising look.

He smiled at her. "What are you doing here?"

"Just a holiday job. My dad works here, you know. He got me in. I do whatever odd little office jobs they need done. Sometimes I'm the receptionist, other times I do the tours, sometimes I deliver the internal post, or bring in office supplies. I'm so glad it was my turn to lead the tour, so I had this chance to see you!" She grinned at him, truly excited to see him after all these years. "Speaking of tours," she said, consulting her watch, "we should be off!" She turned to the Weasleys. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I just haven't seen him in so many years! What a lovely surprise!"

"These are my friends, Ron, Fred and George Weasley, and their dad, Arthur," Harry said, indicating each Weasley in turn. He glanced down at the pretty, dark-haired girl next to him. "This is Cheri Drummond, who kept me from starving for several years. She shared her lunch with me as many days as she could."

"When I could sneak around Dudley and his gang to get it to you, anyway," she said with a disgusted shake of her head. "Have you met his cousin?" she asked the Weasleys.

"Erm, yes," Arthur replied carefully.

Cheri laughed. "From the looks on your faces, I can tell he hasn't changed much. I used to have to sneak food to Harry, then get away quickly before Dudley and his gang noticed. Otherwise, they'd beat up Harry and steal all of my lunch as well as my spending money. Nasty little boys."

"Nasty big boys, as well," Harry assured her.

"Really? No improvement?"

"Not that I can tell," he replied.

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"What's Dudley doing these days, other than trying to bully you?" she asked.

"He goes to Smeltings, like his dad did. He's just hanging around over the holidays. He doesn't get summer jobs. And he doesn't bully me anymore."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that! Do you work over the holiday?"

"Oh yeah! Last year, I worked for a tile shop, and this year, I'm working for them," he said, indicating the twins.

"You have a business? What do you do?" she asked as she led them to a storage room where she outfitted each of them in a hard hat and safety glasses.

"We have a joke shop in London," Fred offered.

"We design and manufacture joke items, and sell them," George explained.

"Joke items?" she asked, confused. "What are joke items?"

"Like, um, fart machines," Harry responded quickly, saying the first Muggle joke product he could think of.

"And fake wands," Fred added, holding one out.

Harry cringed inside. What if it didn't work for a Muggle? What if it did?

Cheri took the wand and said, "What does it do?"

"Magic!" George chortled. "Give it a wave!"

When she waved it, it turned into a rubber chicken, making her laugh. "How did that happen?" she asked.

"I told you," Fred replied. "Magic!"

"It made you laugh. That's what they do, make things that make people laugh," Harry explained. "They need to increase production, so I thought seeing how the assembly line here works might help us to work out a way to produce things more efficiently in the shop."

"It might, at that!" she agreed. "Come on, then."

As they toured the factory, Harry had to keep pulling the Weasleys back inside the yellow-and-black striped lines that marked where it was safe to walk. The Weasleys were astonished by the big overhead cranes that moved along tracks in the ceiling to carry heavy loads around the plant. All too often, they walked with their eyes on the overhead cranes, their mouths gaped open, and paid no attention at all to where they were going. The assembly line itself, with its constantly moving products and the many busy hands of employees fitting the same part over and over on tools as they flowed by, was a huge education for all of them. Arthur managed to remember to mumble his questions to Harry. Fred and George peppered Cheri with questions, but somehow managed to ask things that would sound logical to a Muggle.

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They were both flirting outrageously with her, as well. Ron just followed wherever he was led, enjoying himself immensely. When they finished the tour, they wound up in a shop that offered all the tools Grunnings made, as well as parts and accessories.

"Wow!" the twins together said as they finished the tour. "That was bloody brilliant!"

"Yeah! Cool! Thanks for bringing us, Harry," Ron added.

Arthur was lost in absolute bliss, gazing around the little shop with truly delighted eyes.

"Dad looks like a kid in a sweet shop," Ron confided to Harry.

"Yeah. You'd think he was having fun," Harry said with a cheeky grin.

"I think he'll be flying like a kite for weeks after this, he's so excited," Ron said sagely. The twins called to Harry and Ron, wanting to show them something. Ron joined them, but Cheri held Harry back.

"Can we get together for lunch sometime?" Cheri said, keeping her hand on his arm and leaning in toward him, looking at him with sparkling eyes. "I'd love to catch up."

"Erm. . .I'd enjoy that, but. . . ." He looked into her warm hazel eyes, and smiled. "You were always pretty, but you've grown into a real beauty, Cheri. I'll bet you're beating the boys off with cricket bats."

"You're so sweet! Just one thing – I'm not going to play hard to get with you, Harry. How about that lunch?" she said, dimpling as she smiled up at him.

"Um. . .I have a girlfriend," he said apologetically. "We're promised." He held up his ring to show her.

Cheri deflated, dropped her hand from his arm and sighed. "Oh. Well, that's understandable. You've turned into quite a handsome man. And a sweet one, as well, but then again, you were always sweet when you weren't angry."

His ears turned quite pink at her comment. He was glad his hair was long enough to hide them. "I haven't changed that much. I still have an awful temper."

"And you're still very sweet," she countered. "I'm so surprised that you already have grey in your beard," she said, studying his face seriously. "It made me think you were much older when I first saw you."

"Erm. . .I was badly ill for a while last year, and when my beard grew in after that, it had these stripes," he said with a shrug. "My girlfriend likes the beard and long hair, so I grew them for her for the holiday. She likes the stripes."

"How nice," Cheri replied, feeling a twinge of jealousy for this girlfriend she didn't know.

"Harry," George said, "come and explain this stuff to Dad, would you?"

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"Sure," he agreed, giving Cheri a little wave as he was dragged away.

"Ah, now that I have you to myself, what are you doing Friday night?" Fred said, his eyes twinkling merrily.

"Excuse me?" Cheri replied, startled. She hadn't seen the other twin sneak up behind her.

"Friday night? What kind of date do you fancy?" Fred persisted. "Are you busy? Or spoken for?"

"Um. . . ." She looked at the tall young man in front of her seriously. He was nowhere near as handsome as Harry, but she'd always liked dark-haired boys, probably because she'd always liked Harry. This redhead was funny and charming and rather sweet. Why not try something different? All of the men on her tour had been good company.

"I'm not busy, and I'm not spoken for," she said, smiling at him. "As for what kind of date I fancy. . . I'm not particular. What would you like to do?"

"Dunno. I don't know what there is to do here – I'm not from around here, y'know," Fred said, trying to contain his excitement. He'd fancied Cheri from the first time he'd spotted her crossing the reception area to take them on the tour. Then she'd reacted so strongly to Harry, and flirted with him, and Fred had felt greatly disappointed. But Harry being Harry, he was true to Ginny, as well he should be, surrounded as he was by her father and brothers. Fred grinned. "You tell me what you like to do, and we'll find someplace to do it."

"How about dinner and a film, then? Do you like films?"

"I've never been, actually. My brother Ron, and our sister have been with Harry, of course, but George and I haven't been."

"How could you grow up not seeing films?" she asked in surprise.

"We live out in the country, and Ottery St. Catchpole is the nearest town. It doesn't have films."

"But you work in London now. They have loads of films there," she replied, her head tilted in curiosity. She'd never met anyone who hadn't been to films before – well, except for Harry, of course, but his relatives had never let him go anywhere as a child. She was glad to hear he was enjoying life more now.

"We've been busy building up our business and haven't spent much time exploring Mug. . . most of London," Fred replied, glad he'd caught his slip of the tongue. "Where shall I pick you up?"

Cheri pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down her address and phone number. "I don't live that far from Harry. If you know how to get to his place, he can give you directions from there," she assured him. She and Fred soon had a time worked out and chatted amiably as the rest of the Weasleys finished looking through the shop. Harry bought a small cordless drill and a spare battery for Mr. Weasley, who gaped in delighted astonishment when Harry handed it to him.

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"Harry, you shouldn't have," Arthur said when Harry handed him the bag.

"I wanted to. Consider it a souvenir," Harry said with a smile.

"Thank you!" Arthur said excitedly. Harry and Ron chuckled as they watched Arthur examine every inch of the drill like a small child with a fabulous new toy at Christmas.

Harry left his friends and walked back to where Cheri was standing. "I guess we're done here, then," Harry said brightly. "Thanks for the tour. It's great to see you again."

"It's wonderful to see you, Harry. I'm so glad you've done so well. Where is this school of yours, anyway?"

"Um. . .it's a small private school in Scotland. My parents arranged for it when I was born."

"I know Scotland a bit – we have relatives up there. Where is it? What's the school's name?"

"Um. . .Hogwarts. It's near Hogsmeade," he replied, hoping he wasn't telling her too much.

"Hmm," she said, her finger tapping her lips as she thought. "Nope. I can't place them. Well, I'm glad they're taking such good care of you. Stay in touch, all right?"

"Yeah," he agreed, not really planning to. He didn't need Cheri around to make Ginny jealous. "See you."

"Bye!" she said as he and the Weasleys headed out the door.

In the parking lot, Fred and George pummeled each other gleefully. "Whoo-hoo! What a great day!" Fred said.

"Yeah! Now we just have to sort out how to make that system work for us!" George agreed.

"No, I meant it was a great day because I got a date with Cheri!" Fred chortled.

"Well, yeah, that's great too," George agreed, looking a bit miffed. He'd been interested in her as well, but hadn't moved as fast as his twin this time. George wouldn't let that happen again!

"I know of another factory tour that might be helpful," Harry offered, trying to quash the rare storm he could see brewing between the twins.

"Really? Where?" Ron asked helpfully, seeing what Harry had noticed about his brothers.

"A place that makes chocolates in Guildford, not too far from here. I thought it might help in the manufacturing of your sweets to see how they do it," Harry offered. "I can call them and see if we can get on a tour today. I just now remembered that place. That was another factory we visited when I was in school years ago." He also remembered Cheri trying to sit with him on the school bus on that trip, and being frightened away by Dudley and his gang, as well as by the derisive comments of their other classmates. She'd always tried to be a friend to him, but she couldn't take the harsh comments, teasing and bullying the other children aimed at

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Harry and anyone who dared to try to befriend him. It was all she could manage to sneak food to him at lunch time. He sighed, glad his life had taken a turn for the better since then.

A few hours later, Harry and the Weasleys were stuffed with chocolates from their factory tour, and filled with ideas for ways to improve the manufacturing side of Weasleys Wizard Wheezes. They returned the car to Privet Drive and all but Harry Apparated to their jobs. Harry called Merlin to him and flashed to Diagon Alley, eager to get started on his holiday job.

"The day's nearly gone," Fred commented, "but what a great way to spend the day! Two factory tours, loads of new ideas for manufacturing our goods, and a date with a beautiful girl!"

Ron and Harry shared a grin, ignoring George's offended look.

"I saw her first," George muttered darkly.

"Give over, mate," Fred said cheerfully. "Maybe she's got a sister! Hey, Harry, does she?"

"Not that I know of," Harry replied, then went back to concentrating on the notes he'd made after each factory tour. "Come here, guys, let's talk about this," he suggested. The twins and Ron all gathered around the table where Harry had spread his notes. "I think we can use the chocolate-making process for the sweets, with a few variations, and the drill assembly line process for most of the other things," he commented, "but the jobs for each task need to be combined and put in specific order, so things run smoothly." He looked at the twins seriously. "I'm not the strategist here, Ron is."

"Yeah, General Weasley, how should we order the troops?" Fred asked cheekily.

"Are you serious? You want me to figure this out for you?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Yeah, why not?" George replied. "You're more logical than either of us. We're the creative type, y'know."

"Yeah, so I've heard," Ron said with a chuckle. "I do have some thoughts about how to reorganize the production, but I should take a bit of time working some stuff out before I start throwing ideas around."

Harry was busy drawing something.

"What are you up to, mate?" George asked, looking over his shoulder.

"I'm trying to work out how to make a conveyor belt go without electricity," he muttered. "I know there are spells to make it happen, but it's the combination of spells with the conveyor belt idea and the mechanized processes of some steps in the manufacturing that are going to increase productivity. And we'll have to work out how to fit all of this within this space," he added, glancing around at the small work room.

"Blimey," Fred said to George, "he sounds like a bleeding executive or something!"

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"Yeah. And we have him dicing daisy roots. We need to rethink his job assignment," George said with a cheeky grin and a snort of laughter.

"Ha, ha, very funny," Harry said, grinning. "It's likely to take me a while to work this out. Can you give me a few days to work on it?"

"Of course! We want this to be done right first time. You and Ron put your heads together and get back to us when you have something worked out," George said.

"Don't go into too much detail until you run it past us, though," Fred put in. "We have some ideas of our own. We may as well include every good concept we can come up with."

"Yeah, we don't want to have to redo any of this any time soon!" George agreed. "As for the size of the space – we can probably put a permanent Engorgement Charm on it somehow," he said with a questioning look at his twin.

"I'll get in touch with Professor Flitwick and ask him about that," Fred agreed, reading his twin's mind as usual.

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the work day pouring over diagrams, notes, charts, and walking around the small work space, writing down what was done for each step of each process, how many people worked on each process, and so on, so they'd have as complete a picture as possible of what the mechanized assembly line would need to do.

At close of play, both of them were tired and didn't feel as if they'd accomplished much, despite having created huge mounds of parchment of both saved and discarded ideas.

"Reckon it's time to go home," Ron said, stretching until his back cracked. They'd been bent over their work without a break for hours.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, looking at his watch. "Oh, I need to see Mr. Ollivander first."

"What for?"

"Dunno. He asked me to call in yesterday, but of course, I never got back here. I sent him a note saying I'd see him today. I'll do that before I leave," Harry said as he straightened up his work area and called Merlin down from where he'd perched on top of an open door.

"I'll walk with you," Ron offered. "I'd like an ice cream before I leave Diagon Alley. I just love working here, don't you?" he said with a grin.

"Yeah, the shop is brilliant, and I love Diagon Alley. It's going to be great fun to be here every day," Harry agreed as they left the shop and glanced at the shops surrounding them.

"I wanted to talk to you about what to do with my money," Ron said quite seriously. "I've never had a bank account, but I think I'd like to put at least some of it in the bank for safekeeping."

"That's a good idea, mate," Harry agreed. "You can get an interest-bearing account so your money actually earns more money, rather than just sitting there gathering dust."

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"Really? Wicked!"

"We can go to Gringotts and get the manager there to explain things to you. He's the one who helped me set up the fund with the money from Colin's poster and Famous Wizard Card sales," Harry replied.

"Great!" Ron said, grinning happily.

Mr. Ollivander was outside his shop, his hands in his pockets, apparently enjoying the sunshine when they passed.

"Mr. Ollivander! Hi! Sorry about yesterday," Harry said as they neared him. "I have time to talk to you now, if that's convenient."

"Yes, certainly! Thank you for coming!" Mr. Ollivander said, an edge of excitement in his voice. The man seemed to have boundless energy, which was amazing in someone as ancient-looking as he was. Harry wondered if he was the "original" Ollivander, since the shop's sign said they'd been making wands since 382 BC. Nah, that just wasn't possible. . .was it? He'd have to ask Remus or Dumbledore some time.

Merlin flew to Harry, landed on his shoulder and ruffled his hair a bit with his beak and chirped a few liquid notes, then flew up to perch on the brace of a nearby shop sign.

"Who's this?" Mr. Ollivander said curiously. "I don't recognize him, and I thought I knew all of the phoenixes in England."

"He's mine," Harry said, glancing up at the bird. "His name's Merlin. He's been away visiting somewhere and just let me know he was back whenever I'm ready to go home."

"Merlin! What a wonderful name for him. When did he come to you?" Mr. Ollivander said, watching the magnificent scarlet bird cleaning his feathers.

"When I was recovering after the Battle of Little Hangleton."

"Yeah, Merlin helped Harry get better, and helped Harry save Colin Creevey's life as well," Ron said. "He's cool, Merlin is."

"I quite agree, Mr. Weasley! How is your wand doing?" Ollivander asked, smiling at Ron. "Willow, fourteen inches, unicorn hair, if I'm not mistaken, correct?"

"Absolutely," Ron agreed, amazed by the man's memory. "It's great! Works much better than my brother's old wand did."

"The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Weasley. A hand-me-down wand never works as well as one that has chosen you," Mr. Ollivander said, tapping his nose with his finger and giving Ron a wise look. "Now, Mr. Potter, I do need to speak to you." He looked at Ron and hesitated.

"I don't have any secrets from Ron," Harry said. "What's up?"

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Ron's curiosity kept him standing where he was. He knew he should excuse himself and go get his ice cream, then go home, but Ollivander was acting mysteriously and intensely about something, which was quite intriguing.

"Well, then, young gentlemen," Ollivander said, agreeing after a moment to Ron's presence, "if you would come into my work room. . ."

Ron nudged Harry suddenly.

"What?" Harry said, confused.

"Password?" Ron whispered.

"Password?" Ollivander repeated. Apparently, the man had excellent hearing. "Ah yes, Professor Dumbledore said I would need a password with you. A safety precaution, he said."

"Yes," Harry agreed. "It seems to be necessary for me these days. Sorry."

"Yes, I quite understand, but I'm not sure what you would accept as a password from me," the old wizard said, his head tilted quizzically at the young man.

"Um," Harry began uncertainly, then thought of something. "What was my father's wand especially good for?"

"Yes, yes, James Potter's wand was excellent for Transfiguration. And your mother's wand was a nice one for Charms," Ollivander said with a smile.

"That's good enough for me," Harry said, returning his smile and following him willingly toward the work area behind the shop, Ron following close behind him, Merlin flying ahead and finding a place to perch.

Just before entering the work area, Ollivander turned back and pointed his wand at the shop door, which closed and locked, and the "Open" sign flipped to say "Closed." He led them into the work area and stopped by a table, where six new wands were under construction.

"I wanted to talk to you about your wand, as I said. Professor Dumbledore told me about your surviving The Refiner's Fire. I'm so glad you made it through safely, Mr. Potter!"

"Me, too," Harry replied grimly, remembering bits of the agony he'd suffered the previous summer.

"He told me also about the tremendous increase in your powers that resulted from surviving that illness, which is why I asked you about your wand. You're certain it hasn't given you any trouble, no stuttering or shuddering or slowness in response, none of that?"

"It's been fine, honestly," Harry assured him.

"Excellent! Professor Dumbledore told me you are doing very well with wandless magic. I wonder. . .have you tried using your wand on the same spells you do wandless?"

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"When I was first learning how to do them, yes. Now that I can do them wandless, why should I?"

"Power, Mr. Potter. Much more power! I am, as you might imagine, a bit prejudiced, but wands focus and concentrate magical power in ways wandless magic cannot. If your wand is performing well for you, that's wonderful! But I had an idea while talking with Professor Dumbledore, and I wanted to talk to you about it." He gestured toward stools by the workbench. "Please, gentlemen, be seated."

"OK." Harry couldn't imagine what was going through Ollivander's mind, or why Dumbledore had revealed Harry's prowess at wandless magic to him. He glanced at Ron as they both sat down and saw that he was equally confused.

"Professor Dumbledore also told me about," Ollivander glanced around as if someone might be listening, then leaned in close to Harry and whispered, "your Animagus transformations. I'm particularly interested in the phoenix and thestral forms."

Harry was shocked. Dumbledore had told someone about those Animagus forms? He knew his headmaster wouldn't share such information lightly. "Um. . .why?"

"I believe I can make you a much more powerful wand, Mr. Potter, one that will simply sing in your hands! It won't have that, um, little problem," he said with an uneasy glance at Ron, "that yours has when facing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and will be much more powerful, I believe. It should help you in your battles with him."

"Little problem?" Ron muttered, completely confused.

"Tell you later, mate," Harry said quietly. To Ollivander he said, "That would be fantastic!"

"What I need from you, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said quietly, "is two tail feathers from your phoenix form, two tail hairs from your thestral form, and two of your own hairs. I'm glad you've grown your hair so long – it's nearly long enough for what I need."

"My hair?" the boy said in surprise. "I've never heard of a wand with the wizard's hair in it."

"You do remember that Miss Delacour's wand had a Veela hair core, correct?"

"Yes. But a Veela is a magical creature, isn't it?" the boy asked in confusion.

"That's right," Mr. Ollivander said with an approving nod, as if he was a professor and Harry his student who'd come up with the correct answer.

The young man shook his head in disbelief. Was the old man losing his mind? "I'm not a magical creature – I'm just Harry. Just a normal human being. Well, a normal wizard, anyway. I'm not a magical creature at all!"

"Well, 'just Harry,' you have become something much more than 'just' a wizard. I may be wrong in this, but I believe your hair may have magical properties that will make it an effective core for a wand. If I'm wrong, then the wand won't work at all. If I'm right, it could be a very powerful wand indeed," the man assured him.

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"Would a wand with Harry's hair in it work for anyone?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Perhaps," Ollivander said.

"Then what are you going to do with the extra wands you're making?" Ron said, gesturing toward the six wands lying on the table.

"Yes, why do you need two of each thing?" Harry asked. "And why do you need three different things, my hair, the phoenix feathers and the thestral hairs? How many can you put in one wand?"

"I had planned to make a total of six wands for you, Mr. Potter, although, now that I see you have your own phoenix, if he's willing to donate a feather or two, I would be happy to make one or two more wands for you to choose from." At Harry's raised eyebrows, Ollivander went on, "Never fear. The ones that don't choose you will be destroyed. We don't want that kind of power in anyone else's hands. Of course, I don't believe they'd work in someone else's hands, but it's better to be safe, don't you agree?"

"Absolutely," Harry said seriously. "Are these the ones you're making for me?"

"They may be. I have to see which woods and lengths suit the magical core best. Knowing you, the wand that chose you, and what you've accomplished with your magic – the Animagus transformations, for instance – I was able to come up with some sample wands that may do the job. But once I study these magical core materials, I'll be better able to know which wood to use."

"It would be cool to have a wand like that," Ron said wistfully.

"It might also be quite dangerous," Ollivander said. "If I'm correct in my thinking, these wands will be much too powerful for the vast majority of wizards to use – no offence, Mr. Weasley."

"None taken. I know I'm nowhere near as powerful as Harry. Nobody is but Dumbledore, actually."

Harry punched Ron gently in the shoulder. "Knock it off or you'll give me a big head," he teased, trying not to blush at Ron's compliment.

"It's true and you know it," his friend insisted.

Harry just shook his head and turned back to Ollivander. "OK, you need my hair longer? I can do that, if you want," he offered.

"I'd like to get these wands made as soon as possible. It would take you weeks to grow it long enough," Ollivander said apologetically. "I can make do with the length you have, I believe."

"No, you don't understand. I can control the length of my hair. How long do you want it?" he said eagerly. He was finally accepting Ollivander's idea, and was quite excited by it. A wand that could best Voldemort's? He'd do anything for one like that!

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"You can grow it at will?"

"Or shorten it. Same with my beard. Just put your hand on my back to show me how long you want it." Ollivander put his hand down below Harry's shoulder blades. "Right," Harry said, then grinned at Ollivander's amazement as he watched the young man's hair growing visibly longer. In moments, it was long enough.

"Just there," Ollivander said, smiling in amazement as the shiny black waves reached the desired length. "That's a wonderful ability! Hold still, I only need two hairs. This may twinge a bit," he added as he pulled two hairs out by the roots.

"Ouch!" Harry said in surprise. "Is that all you need?"

"Yes, that's fine," the man said.

"Blimey, Harry, from the back you look like a really tall girl with gorgeous wavy hair!" Ron teased. "Better put it back the way you had it or the twins will be after you for a date!" He chuckled at his own joke. "They've always said it would be fun to date an Amazon."

"Thanks a bunch, Ron!" Harry said with a snort of laughter, running his hands over his long hair. He pulled it around to the front so he could see what Ron was talking about. "Huh. I didn't know it would be so wavy."

"It curls a bit even when it's short," Ron reminded him.

"Yeah, a bit," Harry agreed, running his fingers through the silky length of his hair. "Odd feeling, knowing this is my own hair," he said with a chuckle, then tossed it behind his shoulder and started shortening it. In moments, it was back where he'd had it before, curling softly down to his shoulders.

"Now, Mr. Potter, if you please, the phoenix form?" Ollivander prompted, then clapped his hands excitedly when a phoenix with green eyes appeared where Harry had been sitting. "Oh, how marvellous! No wizard has managed a magical animal transformation in ages! Well done! I'll need two tail feathers, please." He tugged Harry's tail, but the feathers wouldn't come free. "Oh, dear. I forgot to tell you. Phoenixes control their tail feathers similarly to the way you control your hair, Mr. Potter. I can't simply pull them free. You must release them." He tugged again, and this time the two feathers came free. "Wonderful! Thank you so much."

Harry turned back into himself. "I'll need more room for the thestral – it takes up a lot of space," he said apologetically, glancing around at the tiny cluttered work area.

"Not a problem!" Mr. Ollivander said, then waved his wand so all the work tables, benches and stools were pushed against the walls, leaving a large clear area in the centre of the room. "Is this large enough?"

"If I can hold the wings close to my body – but when I first transform, they nearly always seem to be spread at first. I don't know why. I'll try to be careful," Harry said.

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"Wait!" Ron cried, stopping Harry before he transformed. "How about an Engorgement Charm on the room – then you'll have enough space for your wings." He turned to Ollivander. "I've seen Harry as a thestral. He needs a lot more space than this. His wingspan is huge."

"Certainly!" Ollivander agreed, then enlarged the room to three times its normal size. "Is this big enough?"

"Yeah, I think that'll do," Ron said, glancing at Harry. "You reckon?"

"I just live inside the thestral – you've seen it from the outside. If you think it will fit in here, I trust you," Harry said with a shrug. "You'd better stand over there, Mr. Ollivander," he warned.

"Yeah, come on, Mr. Ollivander," Ron agreed. "We need to stay out of his way until he's transformed." He and the wizened old man moved next to the wall and watched in amazement as Harry Potter turned into a huge thestral with a tremendous wing span. Just as Harry had said, when the thestral first appeared, its wings were spread. He folded them to his body as soon as the transformation was complete.

Ollivander was clapping his hands with glee. "Marvellous! Simply marvellous!" he cried. He walked up to the thestral and ran his fingers through its long silky mane, then moved to the tail and felt the hairs there. "I think it's possible the mane hairs will be more appropriate than the tail hairs, Mr. Potter," he said in surprise. "I've never used thestral hair in a wand before, but I feel the magic more powerfully in the mane than the tail. I'll take two from your mane, then, shall I?" he said. "Here we go," he muttered as he pulled two long wavy black mane hairs out by the root.

"Are you certain the tail hairs won't work?" Ron asked suddenly. "Maybe you should take some of those, as well, just in case. I mean, since Harry's already the thestral and all. . . ."

"That's an excellent idea, Mr. Weasley," Ollivander agreed. "All right with you, Mr. Potter?"

The thestral turned its reptilian face toward the man, its green eyes glittering brilliantly against the black hide. It blinked, then dipped its head in a distinct nod.

"Wonderful!" Ollivander said, then took two tail hairs to add to his collection. "Well done! Thank you, Mr. Potter!"

With that, Harry changed back into himself, rubbing the back of his head. "Ouch. You took the mane hairs from the same spot as you took my own hairs," he grumbled.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Ollivander said in dismay. "I had no desire to hurt you!"

"Not a problem," Harry said with a grin. "I was just surprised. I didn't know that part of my head was that particular section of the thestral's neck. It's just kind of interesting."

"And what's sore from the tail hairs being pulled out?" Ron teased.

"You don't want to know!" Harry said with a dramatic grimace, then grinned.

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Ollivander laughed at the boys teasing each other. "And now, your phoenix, if he's willing?"

"Merlin? Do you want to contribute a couple of tail feathers?" Harry asked him. The bird chirruped a few times. "He doesn't want anyone else to have a wand with his tail feathers in it. He's willing to donate them for me, that's all."

"Certainly. I will treat his feathers the same way I will treat yours. They are for you, and you alone, Mr. Potter. Whatever is left over will be destroyed so no one else can touch them or use them in any way," Ollivander assured him.

"All right then. Merlin? What do you say?" Harry asked the magnificent bird. After a brief chirp, Merlin flew down to the work table and released two tail feathers, then flew back up to the top of the door where he'd been perched before.

"Thank you, Merlin!" Ollivander said, smiling up at the bird. He picked up the feathers and stroked them, his face growing very still. "Curious. Quite curious," he muttered.

"What's curious?" Harry asked, beginning to worry that he shouldn't have involved Merlin. The phoenix's identity was supposed to remain a secret from as many people as possible. What had he done, allowing the old man to have two of Merlin's feathers?

Ollivander looked up at Merlin, his eyes alight. "So good to see you again, old friend."

"What?" Harry said, dumbstruck.

Mr. Ollivander smiled at Harry, and gave him a conspiratorial wink. "His secret's safe with me. I don't know if his feathers will work for you, but I'll try them. And if they don't, I will most certainly destroy them along with the other things. These two feathers are far too valuable to risk their getting into the wrong hands."

Merlin sang a short, sweet tune as he stared at the old wand maker. "Yes, I agree," Ollivander said, gazing up at the bird. "I would love to hear how you came to be in that form, and came to be here, as well."

Merlin chirped again.

"Ah, that would be lovely," Ollivander said with a delighted smile.

"What's he saying?" Ron asked Harry in confusion.

"Merlin said he'd come visit Mr. Ollivander while I'm at work, and they can catch up then. Apparently they knew each other sometime in the past," Harry whispered.

"Wicked!" Ron said, impressed. He and Harry both looked at Mr. Ollivander with new respect in their eyes. They'd always known there was something very unusual about the wandmaker, but he hadn't even required the incantation for him to be able to understand Merlin. No one else but Harry could understand the phoenix without the use of that incantation. Harry and Ron each pondered this as Ollivander went on about his business.

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As Ollivander waved his wand to put his work area back as it had been before he had made room for the thestral, he arranged all the items he'd taken from Harry and Merlin carefully on his workbench by the six partly made wands. He frowned in concentration. "Yes. Hmm. Yes, yes. Ah," he muttered.

"Ah' what? Harry asked, watching Ollivander's face closely. "What do you see?"

"I see potential, Mr. Potter, tremendous potential!" he replied, smiling broadly up at Harry. "These are very powerful magical items. If they work as I think they will, you will soon have a magnificently potent weapon indeed in your fight against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I'll be in touch."

"Thank you, Mr. Ollivander," Harry replied. "Bye."

"Goodbye, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley. You should be hearing from me by the end of the week, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said, glancing up from his work bench suddenly. "I should be finished with these by then. Goodbye, Merlin! I look forward to seeing you again soon!"

On Friday, Harry went to Ollivander's shop at lunch time, Ron close on his heels. The bell jangled as they entered the shop.

"Hello! Mr. Ollivander?" Harry called. "It's Harry Potter."

Ollivander emerged from the back of the shop. "Wonderful to see you, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley!"

"I just thought I'd stop to see if you were finished with. . ." Harry stopped, startled by Ollivander's hand on his arm. "What is it?"

"Don't speak of it here," Ollivander whispered, glancing nervously out of his window. "Don't turn around. There are dark forces at work everywhere."

"Who's outside?" Harry asked uneasily, surreptitiously pulling his wand out of his pocket.

Ollivander smiled at him broadly. "So nice of you boys to come visit me today. How are you enjoying your work in the joke shop?"

"Um. . .fine," Harry said, wishing he had a magical eye like Moody's. Then he kicked himself mentally and thought of his glasses. Once he'd invoked their powers, he could see a group of hooded men loitering across the street. "Who are they?" he whispered to Ollivander. "Are they after you or me?"

"Do come see me again, gentlemen! I always enjoy visiting with you," Ollivander said, reaching out and shaking Harry's hand, then Ron's.

Harry closed his hand quickly on the note Ollivander had pressed into his. He pushed his hand into his pocket, shoving the note deep inside. As he and Ron turned toward the door, Harry called back, "We're off to lunch, Mr. Ollivander. Can we bring you something?"

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"You know, I would quite fancy a lemon ice. Would you mind?" Ollivander said with a smile and a wink at Harry.

"We'll bring it by on our way back to work," Harry promised, then grabbed Ron's sleeve and hustled him out of the door. "C'mon, I'm starving!" he said with a grin. "Race you to the Leaky Cauldron!" The two boys pounded down the cobbled street, pulling up in front of the archway to the pub's back garden.

"What the hell was that all about?" Ron said, looking at Harry nervously.

"Dunno," Harry replied seriously. "Let's get some lunch and then maybe I can look at this note."

"What note?"

"The one Ollivander pressed in my hand when he shook it."

"Who was that outside the shop?" Ron asked as they sat down at a table in a deserted corner of the pub.

"Dunno. They were all hooded, but they just didn't feel right, y'know? And who wears a hood up like that in the middle of a sunny summer day?" Harry scratched his head in puzzlement. "They had a weird feeling about them. And I can't imagine Ollivander being scared of much, can you?"

"No. That's what made me so nervous when he acted like that," Ron replied. "What's the note say?"

"It says to meet him after work at the Shrieking Shack to try out the wands. He says someone saw me in the shop the other day and he's afraid Voldemort suspects something." He glanced up at Ron. "I suppose that's why he was so nervous. He must have thought those were Death Eaters out there."

"Or You-Know-Who himself," Ron said darkly.

"Well, let's eat," Harry said, pushing the note back in his pocket and signalling the waiter.

"You can eat after learning that?" Ron said in shock.

"Why not? I've nearly always got someone trying to kill me these days," Harry said philosophically. "No point in giving them an edge by starving myself, is there?"

Ron laughed. "Makes perfect sense to me," he said. "You've grown up, Harry."

Harry snorted. "Why do you say that?"

"Once upon a time, when a young lad named Harry Potter knew he had to face anything the least bit scary, he stopped eating. Quidditch games, the dragon in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, exams, asking a girl to the Yule Ball – if he knew it was coming soon, he wouldn't eat no

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matter how hard Hermione and I tried to talk him into it. But here you are, the grown up and mature Harry Potter, telling me it's time to eat. Well done!"

"I guess I got tired of being hungry all the time," Harry said with a shrug, but then his voice grew more serious. "But mostly, I'm tired of them ruining my life. I'm not going to let him have that power over me anymore."

"The power to keep you from eating?"

"The power of just the thought of him scaring me into not eating," Harry said with determination. However, when his sandwich and crisps were sitting in front of him, he barely touched them.

"Harry? What was that about eating?" Ron teased him gently.

"I guess there's a difference between saying something and doing it," he replied, manfully forcing himself to take a bite of his sandwich.

"There ya go," Ron encouraged him. "Now take another bite."

Harry just gave him a dirty look, then swallowed the small bite he'd been chewing for far too long. "Give me time."

Ron looked at his watch. "We don't have much left, y'know."

"Rats, I forgot," Harry said, taking a good-sized bite of his sandwich, then washing it down with his juice. "OK, let's go."

The boys remembered to get Mr. Ollivander his lemon ice and stopped at his shop to give it to him. They hadn't seen the hooded figures since they'd returned to Diagon Alley.

"Mr. Ollivander! We have your lemon ice," Harry called.

Ollivander came into the front of the shop and took his ice, smiling. "Thank you so much," he said, handing Harry a few knuts to cover the cost of the ice. "And thank you for understanding before. Is that location suitable for you?"

"Yes, it's fine. Why do we have to go there? You usually get people to try out wands here," Harry said in confusion.

"I don't want my shop blown up inadvertently," Ollivander said with a chuckle. "See you this afternoon then?"

"Yes," Harry agreed, waving to the man as he and Ron left the shop.

Late that afternoon, Ron Apparated and Harry and Merlin flashed to the hill overlooking the Shrieking Shack. Mr. Ollivander had not yet arrived.

"I wish Ginny was here and we were inside the Shack," Harry said wistfully.

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"I thought Hermione and I got the Shack next time, and you two got the tunnel," Ron teased.

"Yeah, you're right! Where are those girls when we need them," Harry said with a smile.

"Ginny's at The Burrow and Hermione's somewhere in Italy, I suppose," Ron said ruefully. "And here we are alone." He sighed.

"Still," Harry mused, "it's a beautiful day, and it's nice to be back. I've missed it here."

"Me too."

Just then Mr. Ollivander arrived. "My apologies for being late, gentlemen. I had some preparations to make, and a few late afternoon customers delayed me. Oh, and my password is your dad's wand was good for Transfiguration."

"No problem," Harry assured him. "Thanks for the password." He looked curiously at the stack of boxes Mr. Ollivander held carefully in both hands. "Is that them?"

"Oh, yes," Mr. Ollivander said, a very pleased smile creasing his ancient face. "I must say, I believe these are some of my very best work. I can't wait to see which one suits you best."

"Me neither!" Harry agreed.

Ollivander conjured a small table and spread the boxes out on it. "I'm going to make notes about how each one works for you. I need you to tell me what you feel, what you sense from the wand, and so on, before you try to use it, and after you've done a simple spell with it."

"You don't want me to just give it a wave the way I did for the first one?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Oh no, that could be dangerous with these! They are extremely powerful wands, and you don't know how they will work for you yet – nor do I, for that matter," he said with a delighted smile. "This is all quite experimental, you know! I haven't had this much fun in years."

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance and smiled at the wizened old man's obvious pleasure.

"Now then. Mr. Weasley and I will wait over there by the trees. I'll put a shield up to protect us. You aim the wand away from us and the Shrieking Shack, um. . .let's see," he said, looking around. "Yes, there's a nice meadow along there. Point it that direction, there's not much you can hurt there."

"OK. Which one do you want me to try first?" Harry asked, looking excitedly at the wands, his hands itching to try them.

"Wait until we're shielded, then use whichever one strikes your fancy," Ollivander said with an encouraging smile.

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Soon Ron and Ollivander were safe behind a shield and a good distance away from Harry. When he saw they were ready, he grinned and opened the first box in the row. He held it up so the wandmaker could see which one it was.

"Yes, yes, oak and mahogany, 15 inches – I won't tell you the core material of any of them until the test is over. I don't want to prejudice the results," the old man said as he made some notes on a piece of parchment.

"Right," Harry agreed. "Wait a sec. If the wand chooses the wizard, how can my knowing the core material prejudice the results?"

"You're such a powerful wizard now, from all Professor Dumbledore tells me, that they should all work well for you. But only one will feel absolutely right to you, I believe. You might, perhaps, think that a wand with Merlin's tail feather as the core would be more powerful than one with any of the core materials I got from you," Ollivander explained. "If you go into test thinking a wand with Merlin's tail feather will work better for you than another, it might truly work better for you than another for this initial test simply because of your initial prejudice in its favour. I believe nearly any of these wands will work well for you, but that only one of them – and I don't know which one – is the 'perfect' wand for you. You and that wand will know when you get together, or possibly after you've worked with it for a few minutes. You'll just have to judge them based on how they feel to you, how they work for you, and so on."

Ollivander rubbed his hands together excitedly, his huge eyes gleaming excitedly. "Now, then. On to the tests! Before you try a spell, tell me how the wand feels in your hand."

"OK." Harry thought a moment, weighing the wand in his hand. "It feels warm, tingly, um. . . I can feel a vibration from it when it's just lying in my hand, as if it has a life of its own." He looked questioningly at the wandmaker. "Is that the kind of thing you wanted to hear?"

"Yes. I need to know how it feels to you, how you react to it, all of that."

"OK. Well, um. . . it makes me a bit nervous, actually," he said with a laugh.

"Why?"

"I can feel its power. I never felt power like this with my old wand."

"Good. That's as it should be. All of those wands feel immensely powerful to me," Ollivander assured him.

"Have you tried any spells with them?" Harry asked.

"No. I'm not as powerful a wizard as you are. It could be harmful for someone else to use those wands."

"Wow," Harry said, impressed. "I didn't think there was a wand made you couldn't at least play with a little. I mean, you make them! How can you make them if they aren't safe for you to handle?"

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"Very carefully, Mr. Potter. Very carefully," Ollivander replied with a wry grin.

"I'm ready to try a spell now. . . I think," Harry said, gulping a bit to quell his nerves.

"A simple spell, remember," Ollivander warned.

Harry spotted a large boulder on the far side of the pasture. "How about levitating that rock?" he called to Mr. Ollivander. "Is that simple enough?"

"Yes, that should do just fine."

Harry set the wand back down, took a deep calming breath and shook out his hands. He picked up the wand, a look of concentration on his face, and did the simple "swish and flick" motion required for the Levitation Charm. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," he cried, and stood watching in shock as the boulder rocketed upward for perhaps two hundred feet before he thought to stop the spell. He watched in fascination as the boulder hurtled back toward earth, then held his bare hand out and said, "*Aresto Momentum*." He was pleased to see the boulder land softly, rocking a bit before settling back in the depression from which it had leaped mere moments before.

"Oh, well done, Mr. Potter!" Ollivander called. "Well done! May I ask why you slowed the motion of the rock with wandless magic rather than the wand?"

Harry laughed ruefully. "I knew I could control it wandlessly. This wand is awesome!"

"Good! Try the spell again, with minimal wand movement and a very quiet incantation."

"OK," Harry agreed. Following the wand maker's directions, the boulder lifted quickly but stopped when the young wizard told it to, and descended back to its resting place in good order. Harry used the wand for the entire procedure. He was grinning widely when the boulder settled back in place. "Wow! This is great!"

"That's just the first wand, Mr. Potter," Ollivander reminded him. "You have nine more to try."

Harry went through all the wands, trying the Levitation Charm with each. With some, he tried various other simple spells, getting the feel for the wands that felt best to him. Finally, he had three wands in his pile of favourites. "How do I choose which one?"

"Do a difficult spell with each one. Pay attention to how the wand makes you feel, and how easy or difficult the spell seems when you do it," Ollivander suggested.

Harry lifted the first of his three finalists and showed it to Ollivander.

"Holly, 15 inches, nice and supple," Ollivander commented, making notes on his parchment.

Harry forced himself to relax and then concentrate. A difficult spell. Which one? His decision made, he held out the wand toward the now much abused meadow and whispered, "*Expecto Patronum*." A monstrous stag flew out of the end of the wand and reached the far end of the distant meadow in three huge bounds. "Whoa," Harry murmured. The stag turned and looked

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at him, then came cantering back. As tall as he was, Harry didn't reach the knees of the massive beast. It lowered its silvery head to him and he reached up to pat it. "I can feel it! I can feel something there!" he cried, turning to his observers. "I've never felt more than mist when I've touched my Patronus before!" The stag dissolved when Harry turned his attention away from it.

"What did you feel?" the old wand maker asked, his face creased in a wide grin.

"I felt. . .I felt. . . ." Harry tried to recapture that feeling. "I felt joy. I felt happiness. I felt power. I felt. . .something not quite solid, but not mushy-feeling, either. It was THERE! It was solid, it was real! Wow!"

"Wicked," Ron murmured, a huge smile on his face. "Nothing can stop Harry's Patronus as it is – and now this? Wicked!"

"It almost felt. . .um. . . ." Harry was struggling, trying to explain something he'd never felt before. "I could feel a. . .a sizzle inside it, sort of. It was amazing!"

"Well done! Try another spell with that wand, a difficult spell," Ollivander directed.

Harry turned back toward the meadow, trying to decide which spell to use. "Um, Mr. Ollivander?"

"Yes?"

"The trickiest spell I know is a defensive shield, but I've only done it wandless. I use both hands for it. I don't know how to do it with a wand."

"Show me what you mean, then," Ollivander said calmly.

Harry put the wand back on the table and stepped a good distance away from it. Then he spread his hands wide and concentrated, creating the golden protective sphere that took so much of his energy, but was the best shield he'd found in all his research. He was careful that the sphere didn't reach the table with the wands on it. He wasn't sure what the wands might do in reaction to the sphere touching them. When he saw Ollivander's nod, he dissolved the sphere and stood, sweaty and panting, waiting for the man's verdict.

"That's a wonderfully difficult spell, isn't it?" Ollivander said, scratching his head. "I can see why you do it wandless. However, I believe you can do it with one of these wands. Pick up the one you were using and hold it so it points toward your other hand, then spread that hand as you were doing to create the sphere. I think that will work."

"You *think* it will work? What if it doesn't?" Harry said in concern.

"We're well shielded, and the shield charm shouldn't hurt you. You can dissolve it at any time, correct?"

"Yes, I just have to drop my concentration and it disappears. It's very fiddly that way."

"Then have a go at it," Ollivander encouraged.

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Harry moved farther away from the two men and the table full of wands, then pointed the wand toward his left hand, which was spread in the position he used to create the sphere. "Whoa!" he cried as he felt power surge through him. A shimmer of gold appeared high above him, but disappeared at his exclamation.

"What happened?" Ollivander asked in concern.

Harry was gasping for breath. "I . . . it. . ."

"Deep breaths, Mr. Potter, deep breaths."

Harry grinned. "Talk about power! I just had this huge surge of power flow through me – I thought I was going to be lifted right off the ground by it!"

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah! I'm going to try again." Concentrating and trying to regulate the power he was sending into the wand more subtly, Harry cast his spell again. A tremendous golden sphere appeared around him, so large it almost reached the Shrieking Shack many yards away, and went high into the sky.

"Try to concentrate the power more," Ollivander suggested.

"More power? That will make it bigger, won't it?" Harry asked, astonished that he'd suggest such a thing.

"Concentrate it to make the walls more dense," the man amended. "Perhaps it will be easier to maintain that way, once you work out how to do it."

"Oh." Harry tried to refine his concentration of power, working to make the sphere smaller and with thicker walls.

"Harry! Harry, where'd you go?" Ron cried in sudden fear.

The sphere was vibrating, collapsing in on itself with golden waves shimmering across its surface. Harry had disappeared from within the sphere, and had not reappeared anywhere outside it that Ron or Ollivander could see.

"Mr. Potter, where are you?" Ollivander called, concerned.

"Harry! Harry, where are you? Are you all right?" Ron cried frantically, pounding on the shield in front of him. "Let me out of here, Mr. Ollivander, I have to find him!"

"Wait," Ollivander said, putting a calming hand on Ron's arm. "There he is."

The sphere was more translucent now, the shimmering golden waves thinning, and they could see Harry inside, his face stony with concentration. He disappeared again for a moment, and then returned.

"What's happening?" Ron said nervously.

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"I'm not sure," Ollivander replied. "I don't know this spell. But I think perhaps he's experimenting with making the walls thicker or thinner. When they're thick, they may become opaque, which is why we can't see him. But that's just a guess on my part."

"It looked as if the sphere was going to collapse on him," Ron said, still panting from the panic that had coursed through his body just moments before.

"I think he's all right," the old man said. "He's working very hard. I can feel the magic even through this shield."

"Is that the tingly vibration I'm feeling?"

"Yes, that's it exactly," Ollivander said, turning to smile at Ron approvingly.

The sphere suddenly went dark, a completely opaque dark gold. Ron put both hands on the shield in front of him, murmuring, "C'mon, Harry, you can get out of this, come on, come ON!"

From dark gold, the sphere rapidly lightened until it was nearly crystal clear. They could see Harry inside it, sweating profusely, looking nearly exhausted, but with excited, determined eyes.

"Mr. Potter, you don't need to wear yourself out just testing these wands," Ollivander called, hoping to distract the young man.

"Harry, that's enough! Let it go now, OK?" Ron said, hoping Harry could hear them.

Finally, Harry looked through the sphere directly at Ron and gave him a cheeky grin, then dissolved the sphere. Harry was panting, sweat pouring off of him, but he looked triumphant somehow.

"What the bloody hell do you think you were doing?" Ron cried, his fear for Harry's safety turning quickly to anger. "You scared us to death out here!"

Harry sat down hard on the ground, wiping his sweaty forehead on his arm, then rested his forearms on his upturned knees. "Wow. What . . . wow!" was all he could manage to say. He massaged his head, easing the headache that using so much magic had brought on.

"You OK?" Ron said in concern.

"Yeah, fine. Bit of a headache, but it's almost gone already," Harry replied, rubbing away the pain as he spoke. A moment later, he looked up and grinned.

"I take it you liked that wand, Mr. Potter?" Ollivander said with great amusement.

"Like it? I can't tell you what a world of difference there is between this wand and my old one. This one has so much power, it's frightening. It's going to take me a long time to get used to it, to control it properly, I imagine," Harry said, weary but beaming.

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"What were you doing with that spell? It changed colours several times, and you disappeared a few times," Ollivander said.

"That's a very tricky shield charm I found in an old book. Dumbledore says he's never done it, but I find it easy to conjure – it's just damned hard to hold. It takes a tremendous amount of power, yet very delicate control, to make it work properly. I can't hold it for very long, normally, but just now, I not only held it, I controlled it! I made it bigger and smaller, made the walls thicker and thinner, all kinds of things. I suppose when I disappeared, the walls must have looked opaque from outside, but I could see you both the entire time! Isn't that cool?" His excitement was palpable.

"Wicked!" Ron agreed. "What were you doing when it got all dark, and then almost perfectly clear, as if it wasn't there?"

"I'm not sure I can explain it. I was varying the power, the control, the intensity. . . I can't explain it. I'll have to think about it a while. But when it was clear, it was still a strong shield. When it was dark, it was darker inside as well, but not completely dark. I could still see outside. I'm not sure what the uses would be for having it the various colours and so on, but it was amazing to see what I could do with it!" He looked at the wand in his hands with something approaching reverence. "This is a fantastic wand, Mr. Ollivander, it really is!"

"And you have two more to try! Once you've rested, of course. I didn't expect you to go to such lengths testing one of them, but I think it was good that you worked with this one so long. You should have a good feel for how it works for you now. Are you comfortable with it?" Mr. Ollivander leaned forward in his eagerness to hear Harry's reply.

"Um. . . 'comfortable' isn't a word I'd use to describe that wand, no," he replied. "It's so powerful, it kind of . . . pulls at me somehow. I feel drained from using it, but filled up with power at the same time. Is that how it's supposed to be?"

"I honestly don't know. I've never made wands like these before," the old wandmaker admitted.

Harry stretched out on the ground, resting for a few minutes, then got up and placed the wand he'd been using to one side of the table, taking the second of the three that he'd chosen in his hand. Harry went through the same tests as before, but didn't spend as much time with the Sphere Shield Charm as he had before.

"How did this one feel?" Ollivander asked.

"It's OK. It doesn't feel as overwhelming as the first one, but it also doesn't feel quite as powerful. Of the two, I'd give this one second place," Harry said, laying it on the table and picking up the third one. A gust of wind blew his long hair away from his face. The same thing had happened when he'd picked this wand up when he was trying all ten of them for the first time. He held the wand in his hand loosely, feeling the weight of it, the balance, the magic. He closed his hand on it, letting the magic flow through him. A tremendous stag Patronus emerged without him even saying the incantation. The stag ran across the meadow and then returned to him. He reached up and patted it, feeling the magic, the joy, the happiness and the near-solidity he'd felt in the Patronus he'd cast with the first wand, but somehow, this Patronus felt more comfortable to him. He cast the Sphere Shield Charm and

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put it through its paces as he'd done before with the other wands. This time, there was no vibration in the sphere at all, and the colours flowed smoothly around the surface in shimmering ripples, not rough waves as before. Harry pointed the wand at the distant boulder and did a Levitation Charm with no verbal incantation, just thinking it. The boulder lifted smoothly, floating, hovering, moving wherever Harry pointed his wand with no stuttering, no hesitation, and landing gently back where it had come from with no problems at all. Harry tilted his head and stared at a small rock near his feet. He pointed the wand at it and whispered something, and the rock turned into a small black kitten with green eyes. He picked up the kitten and petted it, then turned set it down and returned it to its rock form. He pointed at another rock and turned it into a hedgehog, then back to a rock. A leaf flying through the air became a bird for a few moments. He pointed the wand up in the air and three bright blue butterflies emerged from the end of it, fluttering away on the breeze. Harry turned back to Mr. Ollivander and Ron, a huge, satisfied grin on his face. "This is the one."

"I thought as much. It seems to be working beautifully for you!" the old man said with pleasure, dropping the shield that had protected him and Ron while Harry was experimenting.

"That's awesome," Ron enthused. "You can do spells without even an incantation?"

"Some," Harry agreed. "I just thought it, instead of saying it, just experimenting."

"How did you know which ones you could do that way?" Ron asked

"I didn't. I was just messing around with it." He turned to Mr. Ollivander. "So tell me about this wand."

"Ah yes, mahogany and holly, fifteen inches, pliable and supple, an excellent wand for Transfiguration, as you've already discerned. Also very good at Charms, but its very best ability is defensive spells."

"Fantastic!" Harry said with a grin. "Defensive spells are what I need most! Which core is it?"

"I'm truly amazed, and yet not entirely surprised, Mr. Potter. The core of this wand is one of your own hairs. The wand that was your second choice was one of your phoenix feathers – yours, not Merlin's."

"What's in the one that vibrated so much that I tried earlier?"

"That one contains Merlin's tail feather. It's an extremely powerful wand, and I'm sure you could master it at some point, but at this point in your life, with the training and strength you have, this mahogany and holly wand is the perfect wand for you."

"Why two woods? Don't you usually make them out of a single wood?" Ron asked curiously.

"Most of the other wands are a single wood. I only used two woods in three wands – the three that Mr. Potter chose. I find that quite interesting."

"Why?" Harry asked. "Why would two woods work better for me?"

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"I honestly don't know. I work by instinct as well as education and experience, Mr. Potter, and my instinct told me to use certain woods with certain cores. The wands with the thestral hairs seemed to work nicely for you, but you didn't seem inspired by them. The ones with phoenix feather cores seemed to satisfy you quite nicely, whether it was your feather or Merlin's, but they just weren't exactly the right fit, and you knew it. The other wand with your hair in it was the one you nearly added to the three you chose as your finalists. Remember hesitating over one and finally putting it back in the other pile?"

"Do you think I should try that one again?" Harry asked.

"If you'd like, but I believe you've found your wand in this one. I find it interesting that the mahogany and holly wand is your choice. Your other wand is holly, and your father's wand was mahogany. It's interesting that the two woods combined are the perfect new wand for you." Mr. Ollivander began to gather the other wands together, putting them back in the boxes he'd brought them in.

"What are you going to do with them?" Harry asked.

"As I promised you, I will destroy them. You are welcome to watch. I'll also destroy my notes. I'll remember what I need to, in case I need to make you another wand in the future. I don't want any of this to fall into the wrong hands," Ollivander assured him. "Come back to my shop with me for a few minutes, and we'll take care of this matter."

"And I need to pay you for this wand, as well," Harry said, admiring his new wand.

"Oh no! You will not pay me for that wand, Mr. Potter. It is my way of contributing to the war effort," Ollivander said with great dignity. "Alas, I am too old to fight, as much as I'd like to. But my skills can help win this war by providing you with a weapon that should be a great help to you. I hope it will protect you and help you win your battles quickly and with as few casualties as possible."

Harry was touched by the man's generosity, as well as his statement. "Thank you, Mr. Ollivander. I'll do my best to live up to this wand's potential."

"It's the wand that must live up to yours, Mr. Potter," the old man assured him.

Harry gasped suddenly – the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. "Get in the woods, quick!" he urged, helping Mr. Ollivander to get into hiding as fast as possible.

"What is it?" Ron whispered.

"Death Eaters, I think," Harry replied quietly.

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Chapter 5 – More Guilt for Harry

"Death Eaters?" Ron said, aghast. "How do you know?"

Harry gave Ron a look and then touched his glasses casually. "We saw them in Diagon Alley, remember? I caught a glimpse of them before I warned you."

"Did they see us?" Ollivander asked.

"No, I don't think so," Harry replied.

"Let's just Apparate out of here," Ron urged. "There aren't enough of us to take them on."

"I can't Apparate right now. Remember my stupid head injury?" Harry grumbled. "I'm staying. I want to know what they're up to."

Ron sighed. "I'm with you, mate."

"Mr. Ollivander, if you want to leave, it will have to be soon or they'll hear you," Harry urged.

"I'll stay with you boys. I'm getting old and my Apparating is rather noisy these days." The old wizard held his wand in a steady hand, not looking at all frail at the moment.

"Shhh," Harry warned as the Death Eaters came into sight. They were pushing an elderly, hunchbacked man ahead of them.

"G'wan, you. I'm sure you know where they went!" one of the hooded men snarled.

"I don't, I tell you I haven't seen Harry Potter for almost a year now," said Mr. Verre, the opti-wizard who had made Harry's glasses the previous summer.

"What was he doing on Diagon Alley? Was he coming for a check-up?" the man drawled in an insulting way.

"I tell you, I don't know! I haven't seen Mr. Potter since last summer, when I made his glasses," Mr. Verre said, his voice shaking as he trembled before the six angry men.

Ron and Harry looked wide-eyed at each other over Mr. Ollivander's head. Why were these Death Eater's after Mr. Verre? Now that Harry was working at the twins' shop on Diagon Alley, he wasn't hard to find. The boys shrugged at each other and turned back to the scene playing out before them.

"Calm down," one of the Death Eaters told the others in an oily, familiar voice. "Potter isn't our mission today, although finding him is always of interest."

Harry and Ron both stifled shocked gasps. Snape!

Snape turned his hooded face to the elderly man cowering before him. "Our master needs new eyes since those phoenixes pecked his out. You will make them for him."

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"I don't make magical eyes, I've told you and told you. I don't know how. I only make glasses, that's all."

"You made glasses for Harry Potter. We've seen your ads all over Diagon Alley," another Death Eater snapped.

"And inside the Knight Bus, as well!" said a third.

"Rumour has it that you can give special powers to people's glasses. What special powers did you give Potter's?" the first man said.

"Special powers? All I did was put a prism in for his astigmatism, and the only other thing he needed was correction for nearsightedness," Verre replied, trying his best not to snivel in fear.

Harry gulped. The man was in danger of dying because he had Memory Charmed himself into forgetting that he'd put every magical power he could in Harry's glasses.

Snape shoved the man roughly to the ground. "You. Will. Remember." he said in a dangerous voice. "And you will make magical eyes for our master."

"I cannot make magical eyes for anyone! And even if I could, they only function properly if there's one normal eye that works. You can't replace two blind or missing eyes with magical ones, it just doesn't work, not as far as I know, anyway," Verre insisted. The old man's hands were shaking badly. It was obvious he knew what danger he was in, but he could only tell the truth as he knew it.

"Who can make these eyes, if you can't?" another man asked.

"I don't know! There used to be a man on Diagon Alley who did it, but he retired years ago. Moved to New Zealand, he did – said he wanted to be able to get a suntan on Christmas Day instead of freezing his arse off. He's been gone now for five years or more. He could be dead by now, I don't know." Verre held his shaking hands imploringly in front of his face as one of the men raised his wand at him.

"Temper, temper," Snape warned, sounding exactly as he did when he was warning Harry not to fly into a rage. "Don't damage him until we're sure we know everything he can tell us."

"There's no need to damage me at all!" Verre cried, cringing on the ground. "I've told you everything I know!"

"If that's true, then *Avada Kedavra*," said one of the hooded men. A bright green flash later, Mr. Verre fell to the ground, dead.

Harry and Ron covered their mouths to stifle their gasps of surprise. Mr. Ollivander dropped his eyes sadly, having just lost another old friend.

"You. Bloody. Fool!" Snape snarled at the man who'd killed the old opti-wizard. "I wasn't through with him!"

"You are now," the other man sniggered. "Been wantin' to try that spell ever since I learnt it."

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Snape slapped the man with his open hand. "You are a fool, Mitchell, a complete and utter fool." He glared around at the rest of the men. "You bunch of sodding idiots. We came up here to have privacy so I could interrogate this man while training you in interrogation methods as well. And now you've cost us a valuable source of information," he spat with disgust. "You new, so-called 'Death Eaters' leave a great deal to be desired. I shall be sure to so inform our master," he sneered. With that, Snape Disapparated, leaving five men standing around Verre's body.

"Well, now what do we do?" one of them asked uneasily.

"Dunno. There's nobody here to boss us, is there, lads? We could have some fun with this 'un," Mitchell said, nudging the still-warm body with his toe.

"Fun? With a corpse? And not even a woman's," one man said in revulsion. "You lot are barmy, you are," he said, then Disapparated.

The men who remained by Verre's body started poking and prodding the old man's corpse, then levitated it, spinning it around and aiming it toward a tree. The body never hit the tree, because Harry did a wandless *Aresto Momentum* on it, then gently lowered it to the ground.

The four Death Eaters immediately started firing spells in all directions. Harry still had his new wand in his hand. He pointed it at one of the men and poured his fury into the wand. The man vaporized, leaving nothing but an oily smear where he'd been standing. The other three screamed and started to run, but Ron and Ollivander Stunned them, and then Ron shot ropes out of his wand that tied them up.

Harry stood looking at his wand in horror, his face a ghastly white. "I didn't mean to do that," he gulped, after taking what felt like hours to start breathing again.

"It's all right, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said calmly. "It was self-defence, and you haven't learned how to control that wand very well yet. You just used too much force, that's all." He looked at the beautiful new wand in the boy's hand. "I knew it was going to be a powerful wand, but I had no idea exactly how powerful. You have a magnificent weapon there, Mr. Potter. Use it wisely."

Harry's mind was growing numb with reaction to what he'd done. He listened carefully to Ollivander's words, not understanding one of them. He nodded mutely when the man finished speaking, sensing he was waiting for a response of some kind. Harry's ears were filled with a shrieking wall of sound he couldn't seem to get beyond.

"What should we do with them?" Ron asked Harry. When his friend didn't respond, Ron touched him on the arm. "Harry? You all right?" Harry nodded. "What should we do with these blokes?" Ron repeated.

Harry fought against the shrieking sounds in his ears, the whirling blur of thoughts in his mind, and tried his best to come back to reality. "I don't know. I can't think." After taking several deep breaths to try to calm down, he could finally place one coherent thought after another. "We. . .we need to. . .um. . .talk to Dumbledore." *Work, brain, work, dammit!* he growled inwardly. "Um. . .he said he had meetings with the Ministry this week, so I can't send him an *Adfero*. . . ." Harry knew better than to chance revealing the Order's secret message

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system to strangers. "Merlin! Merlin, I need you!" The phoenix swooped down to Harry's shoulder from his perch high in the trees. "Could I use a bit of your parchment?" he asked Mr. Ollivander. He took the offered parchment, quill and ink from the old wizard and wrote a note, then handed it to the phoenix.

"Take this to Dumbledore. I have no idea where he is, but bring him back here right away, all right? And be careful if you see Snape – don't trust him." He didn't really think Snape would meet Dumbledore at the Ministry, but with Snape, it was hard to predict what he would do. If he was as trustworthy as Dumbledore always said he was, then he would report to the headmaster soon. But no matter what Dumbledore said, Harry simply didn't trust him.

Merlin crooned a soft note, then leaped into the air and disappeared in a flash of light.

Mr. Ollivander was kneeling by Mr. Verre's body, his shock giving way to grief. Harry went over and knelt beside him. Ron stayed by the prisoners, his wand steady and his eyes furious. If they moved, he'd nail them to the ground, quite literally.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, not knowing if he meant it for the living man beside him, the dead one in front of him, or both. Probably both, when he thought about it for a minute.

"He was a dear, dear friend, one of my oldest," Mr. Ollivander said sadly. "It's simply dreadful that he had to go this way."

Harry put his hand on the old man's shoulder, comforting him the only way he could think of. They sat quietly for a long time.

"Harry?" Ron said after a while.

"Yeah?"

"I should send a message to my parents. It's getting late, they'll be worried. D'you think there are any more Death Eaters around?"

"No, I don't think so," Harry said, after carefully invoking the power of his glasses so Mr. Ollivander wouldn't notice, and then searching the area as well as he could. "Yeah, go ahead and send the message. Send one to Remus for me, would you? I just can't do it right now." Harry's mind was back in a swirling fog. He blamed himself for the old man's death, although he knew it wasn't truly his fault. Still, his name had been brought up, and somehow, he was involved. One more death to add to the burden he bore.

After a while, Ollivander sighed, then glanced apologetically at Harry. "Would you mind helping me up? My knees aren't what they used to be." The young man stood and carefully helped the old wandmaker to his feet. Ollivander removed his outer robe and draped it over his friend's body, then turned to face the boys.

"I think we'll just destroy these extra wands now," he said, pulling the box out of his robes, along with his notes. "I don't want to leave you boys here alone with those prisoners, and I don't want anyone else to get their hands on these wands, so destroying them here is best."

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The boys watched Mr. Ollivander create a small fire pit in a cleared area of the path. He levitated large rocks to surround the area of bare dirt, then took the wands out of their boxes, spreading them in a single layer at the bottom of the fire pit. He tore the boxes into shreds, inserting the shreds among the wands, then did the same with his notes. He put a Screen Charm over the fire pit so not one particle of the wands would escape as flying ash, then pointed his wand at the pile of handsome, brand-new wands and sighed deeply before saying, "*Incendio!*" A nearly smokeless fire erupted around the wands, the parchment curling up rapidly, its edges blackening, the scrawled handwriting on it seeming to turn to flame itself before the parchment fell to ash. The gleaming wands took longer to burn, and sent out sparks of protest as they caught fire and went from beautifully polished wood to grey ash, and finally, to dust. When the fire burned down, he Vanished all the ashes, then Levitated the rocks back where he'd gotten them. Soon there was no sign there had ever been a fire.

"What a waste," Ron muttered.

"I'm sorry you had to go to so much trouble, Mr. Ollivander. Please let me pay you for this wand. I know you put a lot of work into them, and now they're all gone," Harry said, feeling miserable. Watching the old wizard's face as his handiwork had burned had been difficult for Harry to bear.

Ollivander took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "No, dear boy, I told you my reasons for making them at no charge. Don't go telling your friends, or everyone will want a free wand," he said with a bit of his customary twinkle in his eye.

With a flash, Dumbledore and Merlin arrived. "What's happened?" he asked Harry urgently. "Your note was very cryptic." Noting the boy's troubled eyes, he added, "Are you all right?"

Harry took his headmaster a good distance from Mr. Ollivander so they could talk privately. "Snape and some Death Eaters were here," the young wizard snarled quietly. "Snape said they were a new batch of Death Eaters. They were trying to get Mr. Verre to make magical eyes for Voldemort, and when he said he couldn't, one of them did the Killing Curse before I could stop him."

"*Professor* Snape, Harry," Dumbledore reminded him as he mulled over the boy's words. "Did they know you were here?"

"No, we were hiding in the trees. We were up here so I could try out the wands Mr. Ollivander made for me. I sensed someone was coming, and saw hooded figures in the distance. I thought hiding was better than confronting such a large group. There were six of them to start with."

Dumbledore looked at the three trussed up men on the ground. "Where are the others?"

"Snape. . .*Professor* Snape," Harry growled between gritted teeth, "and one other man Disapparated. Then I tried to stop one of them and. . .um. . .vaporized him somehow," he admitted, hanging his head. "I had my new wand in my hand. I'm not used to how powerful it is. I didn't mean to kill him. I was just trying to Stun him."

"I see. Don't worry, dear boy, you won't get in any trouble for it," Dumbledore assured him.

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"I won't?" the boy said, a small light of hope glimmering in his eyes.

"Most assuredly, you will not. I can promise you that."

"Thanks," Harry muttered after a moment. He dropped his eyes and added, "That doesn't mean I don't feel guilty about it."

"I know that," Dumbledore rumbled kindly, patting the boy on the shoulder. "Your heart is what makes you such a wonderful person, as well as a powerful wizard. I'm glad you set so much value on anyone's life, but you do not need to add this man's death to your list of things to blame yourself for. It was an accident. It could have happened to me if I'd had a powerful new wand I wasn't used to yet. Don't blame yourself, Harry. You don't need to bear that burden."

"It was the bloke who killed Mr. Verre anyway," Ron put in sagely. "Saved the Ministry the cost of prosecuting him." He was still guarding the prisoners, but had cocked an ear to listen to Dumbledore's and Harry's conversation.

"And that's a very practical way of looking at the matter," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Now then. I need to arrange transport for these men, and have them questioned." He stood thinking a moment, then held his wand up and drew a small circle in the air. An Adfero message flew from his wand tip toward the south, another to the southeast, a third toward Hogwarts, and a fourth to the north-northeast. "That should do it."

"Who did you contact?" Harry asked.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt and Miss Tonks and a few Order members. I believe we need to have Aurors involved to deal with the Ministry. They will come take these men into custody and question them, then lock them up." Dumbledore walked over to Mr. Ollivander, who was standing over his friend's body.

"Are you all right, old friend?" Dumbledore asked kindly. "I'm so sorry about Mr. Verre. He was a good man."

"Yes, he was." Ollivander sighed. "I'm fine, Albus, thank you for asking. If you don't need me any longer, I'll take him back to Diagon Alley so his family can arrange a funeral."

"Thank you, that would be very helpful," Dumbledore agreed. "Would you like some assistance getting him there, or can you manage?"

"I can manage, thank you." Ollivander stood looking down at the body for another moment, then glanced up at the headmaster. "By the way, your idea worked brilliantly."

Dumbledore's face creased in a smile. "Which idea? I have so many, I'd enjoy knowing which one actually worked!" he said with a chuckle.

"About young Potter's wand. I made ten wands – we've already destroyed the ones that didn't suit him, don't worry. The one he chose has his own hair as the core. It's rather amazing. I've never used a wizard's hair as magical core material. I honestly didn't think it would work, but this is an extremely powerful wand."

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"I can imagine, if a simple Stunning Spell accidentally vaporized the person it was aimed at," Dumbledore said with a droll smile.

"Exactly. He'll need to practice in remote areas with whoever is with him well-shielded for protection until he gets used to the power of this wand. Get him to tell you about his Sphere Shield Charm." Ollivander's eyes glowed at the memory.

"Oh, I've seen it. Quite remarkable, isn't it?"

"Ask him what he did with it today," Ollivander said with a wink. "You'll be amazed."

"Wonderful!" Dumbledore replied. "By the way, I will keep your name out of today's incident, for your safety as well as Harry's."

"Thank you."

With a soft *pop*, Remus appeared. He saw Dumbledore first. The headmaster excused himself from Ollivander and started walking toward Remus. "Where's Harry?" Remus asked anxiously. "Is he all right? I got a message from Ron. . . ."

Dumbledore held out a calming hand. "He's fine, Remus, if a bit upset," the headmaster assured him. "He's over there." He nodded to the edge of the woods, where Harry knelt behind Mr. Ollivander, next to a covered body. As they watched, Merlin flew from Harry's shoulder to the body on the ground, grasped it in his talons and flashed out of sight. Ollivander Disapparated with a loud POP soon thereafter.

"Harry?" Remus called. "Are you all right?"

Harry stayed kneeling with his head down, tension obvious in his body. "Yes, I'm fine," he replied quietly.

"What happened? Who did Merlin carry away?" Remus asked as he crossed the clearing toward his godson.

The boy looked up at Remus, his eyes sad and weary. "It was the opti-wizard who made my glasses, Mr. Verre. He died because he made my glasses, I think."

"What do you mean?" Remus asked in confusion. Just then, Aurors and Order members Apparated all around them.

"What happened here?" Kingsley Shacklebolt said sharply. "Your message was awfully cryptic, Albus."

"There's been a murder," Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry froze in shock. Dumbledore and Ollivander had both assured him he wouldn't be charged with that man's death.

Dumbledore sensed Harry's fear and looked at him gravely. "Mr. Verre, an opti-wizard from Diagon Alley, was brought here by several Death Eaters. They were trying to force him to

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make magical eyes for Lord Voldemort. When he said he couldn't, they murdered him. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley witnessed the events." He gazed steadily at both boys, and they understood – Mr. Ollivander's name was to be kept out of things, to protect the secrecy of Harry's new wand.

"What were you boys doing up here?" Shacklebolt asked Harry as the boy got to his feet.

"Um. . .we came up here to have some fun after work. You know, experiment with some spells where we couldn't do much damage," he said with a shrug. The best lies were based in truth, in Harry's experience, and this one was the best he could come up with on short notice.

"Is that true, Mr. Weasley?" Shacklebolt said, turning to Ron.

"Yes. We were messing around with spells. Then Harry noticed these Death Eaters approaching and we hid in the woods," Ron said.

"Why didn't you Apparate out of here?" one of the Order members asked.

"Harry's not allowed to Apparate yet, because of his head injury on the train home from school," Ron replied. "He flashed here holding his phoenix's tail."

"Even if I could have, they were close enough to hear us leave, so we thought it best to hide," Harry added. "And I wanted to see what they were up to. We'd seen them in Diagon Alley earlier today. It just seemed odd they'd be here too. I thought they might be following me, so I wanted to see who it was."

"And who was it?" Tonks asked kindly, seeing the tension in Harry's body.

"The only name I heard was Mitchell," Harry replied, knowing without being told that he had to keep Snape's name out of it.

"Is he one of these?" Kingsley asked, nodding toward the trussed up trio on the ground.

"No, he's dead," Harry replied in a dull voice.

"Harry killed him in self-defense," Dumbledore said promptly. "The man was attacking." He carefully left out that the man was attacking a dead body that Harry had decided to protect.

"Where's Mitchell's body?" one of the Order members Harry didn't know asked.

"It's, um, gone," Harry replied. "I vaporized him by accident."

"What?" the Order member said in shock.

Harry's temper flared. "I told you! That smear over there is all that's left of him. His name was Mitchell. He's the one who killed Mr. Verre. He did the Killing Curse and laughed about it, saying he'd wanted to try it ever since he learned it." He was panting now, rage pouring through his body. "He just killed Mr. Verre for no reason at all. Then he was going to slam the poor man's body into a tree. I stopped that spell, and tried to Stun Mitchell, but" He dropped his head, still angry with himself for what had happened.

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"Harry has a new wand he was trying out," Dumbledore put in suddenly.

Harry's eyes widened in shock. He'd thought they were trying to protect the secrecy of his new wand.

"His old wand is stuttering a bit," Dumbledore lied smoothly, "so he got a new wand today and was trying it out. He doesn't have a good feel for it yet, so he simply used too much power and . . . well, you can see the results."

"That much less work for the Ministry," Tonks said cheekily.

"But a lot more paperwork for us," Kingsley said darkly. "We'll do what we can to minimize Harry's involvement when we write our reports," he told Dumbledore.

"Thank you," the old headmaster said with a smile.

Kingsley looked at Harry seriously. "You can't use your old wand anymore?"

"I can still use it. The new one's going to take some getting used to, that's all," Harry replied honestly.

"I'd suggest you stick with the old one until you have total control of the new one," Kingsley said.

"I will," Harry promised, meaning it most sincerely.

"Right then," Kingsley said after a moment's thought. "Are these all of the others, or were there more? Do we need to search the area for them?"

"There were two other men, but they both Disapparated after Mitchell killed Mr. Verre. I heard one of them say the new lot of Death Eaters was worthless, or something like that," Harry replied. "He said he was going to tell that to Voldemort." He tried to ignore the shudder that went through the Order members and Aurors gathered around him when he said the name.

"Anything else you can add?" Kingsley asked, looking at each boy in turn. When they both shook their heads, he went on. "We have your statements. We'll take these prisoners with us. We may have more questions later."

"I quite understand," Dumbledore said amiably. "Thank you for your help."

Shacklebolt picked up a rock and made it a Portkey, then laid it on the three Stunned men lashed together on the ground. He counted down quietly, "Three, two, one," and the Portkey activated, taking the prisoners to Azkaban. "I guess we've finished; that's it, then. Nice to see you, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley. Take care." He smiled at the boys as they said goodbye, and then Disapparated.

Tonks moved to stand next to Remus, waiting until the other Aurors and Order members were gone before taking his hand, standing on tiptoe and kissing him. "How are you, sweetie?" she said with a warm smile.

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"I'm fine, but I suspect Harry isn't feeling too well right now," Remus said, watching his godson closely. The young wizard was standing quietly, his hands dangling loosely at his sides, looking a bit lost. Ron was talking to him, but Harry didn't appear to hear him.

Dumbledore bent down beside the smear on the ground and examined it. "Harry? Come here."

Harry squatted next to his headmaster. "What do you see?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"I see a smear on the ground," the boy said, revulsion in his face.

"I see the residue of an extremely powerful spell," Dumbledore said.

"I tried to Stun him. What did I do wrong?"

"You were angry, you said. I suspect that, in your heart, you were so angry with him that you wanted to, shall we say, 'vaporize' him, but your logical mind said to only Stun him. Your wand listened to your heart instead of your mind. That's an interesting thing to know about your new wand, Harry."

The boy looked at his headmaster in confusion. "I don't understand."

"May I see your new wand?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"Here," Harry said, handing him the wand.

"Ah. Mahogany and holly. A beautiful combination. And Mr. Ollivander went to the trouble of carving griffons and phoenixes around the handle. Really lovely work."

"Yeah. I hadn't really noticed the carving that much. All of them had some kind of carving on them, but I didn't pay that much attention to those," the boy replied.

"He's given this wand additional power by including these talismans that are important to you as a wizard. The griffon, since you are a Gryffindor, and the phoenix, because a phoenix came to you, and phoenixes have helped you when you needed it." Dumbledore examined the wand carefully, then pointed it down the long, empty meadow. "What spells did you try with this?"

"The Levitation Charm, Hover Charm, um, I can't think what else right now. I moved that boulder near the far woods a lot. The first wand I used felt shaky and overly powerful to me – turns out it had Merlin's tail feather in it. That boulder shot probably two hundred feet in the air when I tried to Levitate it with that one."

"Let me see," Dumbledore said, aiming carefully at the boulder Harry had used. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," he said in a firm voice, and the boulder shot up from the ground, heading for space. "Oh, dear!" the old wizard said, then said "*Aresto Momentum*," and got the boulder under better control.

"It works better if you speak softly, I found," Harry said, a smile tickling the corner of his mouth.

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"Ah. All right," Dumbledore replied, then whispered various other spells, making the boulder do aerobatics of various kinds before replacing it where it had come from with a resounding THUD. The old man chuckled. "I seem to have a problem controlling your wand, Harry. That's very rare – and quite a bit of fun, I might add!"

"It's fun as long as nobody gets hurt," Harry agreed, smiling at the apparent glee in his headmaster's eyes.

Dumbledore immediately sobered. "You're right, of course. This is an extremely powerful wand. If anyone else tries it, they could very well get hurt," he said with a warning glance at Ron, who'd been watching their activities avidly.

"I know better than to play with that wand," Ron asserted. "I saw what happened when Harry tried to use the ones that weren't right for him!"

"Lesson learned, Mr. Weasley?" Dumbledore acknowledged with a smile.

"Yes, Professor," Ron said in his best schoolboy voice, then cracked a grin. "I didn't think any wand would be difficult for you to use."

"This is a highly unusual wand, Mr. Weasley. I think Mr. Potter and I are in for some interesting training sessions as he learns to use this. Remus?"

"Yes, Albus?"

"I think Harry would benefit from your help with this wand until school begins. I will be tied up with Order work for quite a while, and will only be able to visit Grimmauld Place occasionally. It would be wonderful if Harry has some control of this wand before school begins again."

"I'll be happy to help him," Remus agreed.

"I believe a Possessio Charm is in order," Dumbledore said suddenly.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"The Possessio Charm will allow no one but the rightful owner to use it. No one – not me, not Remus, not Ron . . . not Lord Voldemort. If it falls into someone else's hands, it will not perform any magic at all," the headmaster explained.

"Why do you think that's necessary?" Harry said curiously. "In battle, sometimes we have to use someone else's wand when we lose our own, or it gets damaged or something."

"Precisely. And in anyone's hands but yours, this is a very dangerous wand, Harry. It's dangerous in your own hands right now, isn't it?" he said gently.

The boy nodded, his eyes grave.

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"Well, then. Imagine if some other student picked it up and tried to do something with it. Their magic isn't as powerful as yours, granted, but this wand simply won't perform properly for them. Someone could be hurt quite by accident."

Harry's eyes widened. "I wondered about that," he said quietly.

"And if Lord Voldemort tried to use it – well, let's just say that he's powerful enough." Dumbledore pulled out his own wand. "Hold your wand out as if you were going to cast a spell," the headmaster instructed. Harry did as he was told and Dumbledore passed his wand over and under the young wizard's, muttering a long, complex incantation. "There, how does that feel?"

"The wand's sort of. . .vibrating. It's making my hand tingle quite a bit," Harry replied. "The feeling runs on up my arm."

"Excellent. That means it worked. Right, then, let me try your wand again." Harry handed the wand over. "Now, everyone, stand well back," Dumbledore warned. "I haven't cast that spell in years and I want to be certain I didn't make any errors." With that, he brandished Harry's wand at that boulder again, muttering incantation after incantation, louder and louder. The boulder sat there complacently, basking in the sunlight, not budging one millimeter. "Good!" Dumbledore said, then handed the wand to Remus. "You try it." Remus tried a wide variety of spells, but the wand was about as useful as one of the Weasley twins' trick wands.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said as Remus gave up on the wand. "Your turn. I want to be certain it will still work for you."

Harry took the proffered wand from his godfather, then pointed it at the uncomplaining boulder and Levitated it, made it dance in mid-air a bit, then dropped it gently back in place. He smiled at his professor. "I seem to be getting better with it."

"Excellent, Harry, excellent!" He patted the young man on the shoulder. "I'm looking forward to our lessons with this wand. I hope you and Remus make good progress with it until I'm able to join you in exploring its powers."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said with a smile.

"Well then," Dumbledore said, "I must depart this most agreeable company and get back to a very boring committee meeting. I'm sorry you had trouble today, boys, but I must say, Harry, I appreciate your allowing me to try your wand. I haven't been that entertained in quite a long time!"

Harry just smiled at him and pocketed the new wand. "Thanks for coming to help us, Professor. I'm sorry to have disturbed your meeting."

Dumbledore leaned toward Harry and winked. "It needed to be disturbed. That bunch of boring bureaucrats can't see their navels for their noses being stuck so high in the air. Pathetic, really. I'd much prefer to be here watching you try out your new wand!"

Harry grinned at his headmaster's playfulness. "I thought the Ministry was doing better under Madam Bones?" he said quizzically.

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"It is. I was meeting with a Muggle government committee. Most of them seem to think I'm an 'aging hippie,' whatever that is," the old man said with a smile. "The rest think I'm senile. I may need to ask you to accompany me to a meeting to help prove my points. They seem to think the films on the Omnioculars are simply Muggle entertainment films. I'm having a great deal of trouble convincing them otherwise."

Harry gulped. He didn't really want to meet with any politicians, but if his headmaster needed him. . . . "Whatever I can do to help," he offered bravely.

"Spoken like a true Gryffindor!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "I must be off. Goodbye!"

As soon as Dumbledore left, depression settled back over Harry like a dark cloak. Ron and Remus looked at each other, then back at Harry, not certain what to do to help him through this hard time. Merlin returned in a flash and settled on Harry's shoulder, crooning comfortingly to him.

"It's nearly dinnertime," Ron offered. "Why don't you two come home with me? Mum always makes far too much food for us."

Harry snorted. "That's because she's seen you eat, Ron," he teased his best mate, then quieted again, his eyes unfocused as he withdrew into his misery.

The quiet moment went on for a long time before Remus broke it. "I think Ron had a good idea. Would you like to go?" he asked Harry.

Harry looked up at him, his eyes still unfocused, as if he was looking at something far beyond Remus's face. Finally, his eyes snapped back to his godfather. "What?"

"Do you want to go visit the Weasleys for dinner?" Remus repeated patiently. "Or we can go home. Whichever you want."

"Ginny will want to see how you are," Ron prompted. He knew that, if Harry went home, he'd sit quietly in his room and be miserable. If he went home with Ron, he'd at least be distracted for a while, and they might be able to cheer him up a bit. Harry still hadn't responded to their questions. Ron poked him gently in the shoulder. "Harry?"

"What?"

"What do you want to do? Do you want to see Ginny? I know she must be worried about you," Ron said quietly, his brow furrowed in concern for his friend.

"How about a Cheering Charm?" Remus offered.

"No, thanks. I'm fine," Harry said quietly.

"You're nowhere near fine," Ron said. "C'mon, let's go to my house."

"OK," Harry agreed finally.

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Ron and Remus Disapparated, reappearing in front of The Burrow. Harry, gripping Merlin's tail, appeared in a flash of light soon thereafter. Ron ran in ahead of his friends. "Mum! I've brought Harry and Remus for dinner!" he called as he entered the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" Molly asked in concern. "How's Harry?"

"He's a bit down," Ron said quietly as Harry and Remus came into the kitchen. "I'm fine."

Molly opened her arms to Harry and pulled him into a hug. "I'm so glad you and Remus came to see us," she said, holding him close. She pulled back and cupped his cheeks in her hands, rubbing her thumbs over his skin tenderly as she studied his face. "You look a bit peaky. I've got just the thing, one of your favourites! Shepherd's pie!"

"Sounds good. Thanks for having us," Harry replied, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. He looked up at the sound of small feet pounding down the stairs.

"Harry? Harry!" Ginny called, racing across the room and throwing her arms around him. "I've been so worried!"

"I'm fine," he said, enveloping her in a warm embrace and bending his head to rest his cheek on her hair. He breathed deeply, drinking in her scent. "I missed you."

"Me too." She nestled her head in the crook of his shoulder, relaxing against his body. They held each other quietly for a few moments, then finally broke apart. She studied his sad eyes for a long moment. "When are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

"Later," he said with a heavy sigh.

"OK," she agreed. She took his hand and led him into the kitchen, where they joined the bustle of a large family sitting down to dinner.

By the end of dinner, Harry was feeling more cheerful. Being around the Weasleys had that effect on him, and having Ginny next to him, squeezing his knee or poking him in the ribs or their hands brushing together as they passed food around the table, helped him regain some semblance of normalcy. He knew he'd have to deal with his feelings about accidentally killing that man at some point, but it would be much easier to face with the healing he'd gotten from being surrounded by so much love. He felt a small foot pressing on top of his own and looked down at Ginny with his first genuine smile of the evening.

"Are your feet feeling crowded?" he said playfully.

Ginny smiled mischievously at him, pressing her foot harder on his, then rubbing it gently over his foot. "It just needed to be done," she whispered, then burst into giggles at his bemused expression.

"Oh, I see. And is turn and turnabout fair play?" he asked quietly, pulling his foot out from under hers and trying to capture her foot with his, while doing his best to maintain good table manners for the benefit of the rest of the family.

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Ginny just grinned at him, then pushed her shoe off and slid her toes up his leg, teasing him mercilessly.

Harry snorted with laughter, slid his shoe off and captured her foot with his. They sat there with their toes tickling each others' feet for the rest of the meal.

"Harry!" a voice called, startling Harry and Ron as they sat finishing their lunch at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour the next Monday. "How are you?"

"Healer Pomfrey!" Harry replied, smiling at the healer. "It's nice to see you! I'm fine. How are you? Have a seat."

"Hello, Ron," Marcus Pomfrey said as he joined the boys at the table. "I'm sorry to disturb your lunch. I just wanted to say hello and see how you were doing."

"Hi," Ron said, smiling broadly at the man. "How are things at St. Mungo's?"

"Same as always, too much work for too few hands!" Marcus said with a snort of laughter. "How's your sister?"

"She's fine, thanks," Ron said with a grin.

"That's what I like to hear," the healer said with a smile. He turned to Harry, a questioning look on his face. "Harry, I've been meaning to get in touch with you."

"Yeah, me too. I still owe you a Quidditch game. How'd Saturday suit you?" the boy said with a grin.

"Actually, this Saturday will work very well for me! Thanks! But that's not why I wanted to talk to you." He glanced around to see if anyone was listening to them, then leaned in to say, "How are you really?"

Harry's face sobered and he sat up straighter. "Um. . .OK, I guess."

"Any stiffness? Any problems with the range of motion of your arm, perhaps?"

"Yeah, actually. And my back is still stiff as well. I thought it was just because it hasn't been that long since I was hurt. I've been doing the stretching exercises you gave me."

"Good." Pomfrey glanced around again, then leaned closer, whispering this time. "Have you tried. . .flying?"

Harry glanced around as well. "Flying?"

"Yes," Marcus said with a slow nod.

Harry understood. The healer was asking if he'd tried flying as an Animagus yet. "No, not since that, erm, incident on the Astronomy Tower that resulted in Hermione and Professor

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Sinistra being in St. Mungo's. You told me not to do those, um, things for a while, remember?"

"And I've heard you're rather famous for not following the rules, so I thought I'd check," the man said, leaning back and smiling. "I'd like to do a follow-up examination if you don't mind."

"I feel fine," Harry assured him.

"But you have a limited range of motion, you said. And how are your scars? Any pain? Has the swelling gone down now?"

"Um. . .they, um. . ." Harry didn't know how to explain it. "Yeah, there's pain when my clothes rub across them, or when I move, um, well, when I do a big move, like reaching out suddenly, you know? Or when I bend over quickly to tie my shoes, things like that. I have to move slowly, and I didn't before. Otherwise, they're down to a dull ache."

"What's the pain like?"

"It's a sharp, pulling kind of feeling, and I'm stiff. I can't move like I used to. I'm afraid it's going to damage my Quidditch game," Harry said anxiously.

"You never told me that," Ron said, his eyes wide with surprise. "You still fly brilliantly!"

"Thanks, but flying isn't *easy* the way it was before. I was hoping nobody would ever find out. I was hoping I'd get past this. But I'm not," Harry said with a resigned shrug.

"Can you come to St. Mungo's in the morning – say eight o'clock? There's a specialist I'd like to have examine you, and I want to check your progress myself as well."

"I have to be at work. . ." Harry began.

"The twins won't mind, Harry," Ron assured him. "They want you to be on top of your game as much as anyone else. Gryffindor has to keep the Cup, and we can't do it without you! And as for work – you and I have got those plans to the point where I can work on details without you if I need to. No problem."

Harry looked at his friend and sighed. The Cup was important to him, right enough, but he and Ron both had dreamed of being chosen by professional Quidditch teams after school. Harry thought his prospects of being picked by a Quidditch scout were dimming rapidly, his movements were so stilted and constrained now. And Ron was the strategist. The plans for the assembly line in the shop really were up to him now that Harry had laid the groundwork. He turned to Pomfrey. "All right. I'll be there. How long will it take?"

"I'd say an hour or so," Marcus replied. "Will that fit in for you?"

"Yeah, that'll be fine," Harry said. "I'll see you in the morning. Thanks!"

"My pleasure," the healer said as he started to get up from his seat.

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"Oh, wait!" Harry said before Marcus could leave. "Saturday. What time can you be there?"

"Where?"

"Ron's house. The Burrow? Near Ottery St. Catchpole."

"I can be there after lunch sometimes, say one or two o'clock?" the healer said with a smile.

"Brilliant!" Harry said, grinning up at him.

Harry was sitting in an examination room at St. Mungo's, waiting for Healer Pomfrey to come in. He shivered in the hospital gown, which was open at the back. The nurse had told him to remove all his clothes and put on the hospital gown, and the healer would be with him in a moment.

"Hello, Harry!" Pomfrey said cheerfully as he entered the room. "Thanks for coming. Let's see how you are." He had the young man go through various motions, and then do them again more quickly, to check the flexibility of his muscles.

"You may as well take the gown off, Harry. A lot of these scars start at the front, and then there's your arm, your back, your bum," he muttered as he walked around the now nude boy who was nervously holding his hospital robe against his privates. "I'd hoped the swelling would be down more than this by now." He examined the scars with his wand, his quartz crystal, and occasionally touched them with his fingers, as well.

"Me too," Harry replied, shivering a bit, as much with nerves as with the coolness of the room. He was blushing in spite of his best efforts not to.

"Oh, you're cold. I'm sorry. Here, I'll do a Warming Charm on you," Marcus said with a wave of his wand. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks," the boy said with a nervous grin.

As Marcus touched various scars, he watched Harry's reaction. "These shouldn't still be so tender, not after all this time," the healer commented. "Hmmm."

"That doesn't sound very good, that 'hmmm' of yours," the boy observed uneasily.

"I'm thinking, that's all the 'hmmm' is about," Marcus assured him as he held his crystal over some of the injuries again. He pocketed it and straightened, then smiled at the boy. "All right, put the gown back on and relax. The specialist I told you about should be here by now. She was delayed earlier. I'll bring her in. I'll be right back."

"All right," Harry said, gratefully wrapping himself in the hospital gown and sitting down on the table. Several minutes passed, in which the young man grew more and more anxious. The healer had looked quite serious when he was examining the wounds. He'd frowned rather fiercely at a couple of points, especially when Harry reacted with a grunt of pain when the largest mass of scars was touched. In that spot, just below his shoulder blade, the scars overlapped each other horribly. Also, Harry's back had been laid open to the bone over a wide

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area on his back and side, and those scars were deep, thick and widely varied in elevation above the rest of his skin. There were pits where chunks of muscle had simply been cut out of his body, and gnarled places where tissues had healed bunched up rather than smooth. It wasn't a pretty picture, nor was it easy for Harry to live with. He hadn't expected the exam to be completely comfortable, but it had hurt more than he'd expected. He sat rubbing his temples with his thumbs, willing himself not to get a stress headache on top of everything else.

"All right, there, Harry?" Marcus asked as he came in, seeing the boy's face grimaced in pain.

"Trying to avoid a headache," Harry responded with a shrug, then sat up straighter as an attractive woman Marcus's age strode forward to shake Harry's hand.

"Oh, Mr. Potter! What an honour to meet you!" she said, pumping his hand vigorously.

"Uh. . .hi," the young man said nervously. "Um, Healer Pomfrey?"

"Yes?" Marcus replied, then understood. "Oh! She gave me a password. She's who she's supposed to be."

"K."

"Oh, Mr. Potter, I can't tell you how excited I am. I've read all about you, of course, and. . ."

"Polly?" Marcus said quietly.

"Yes?" The woman seemed startled that her gushing torrent of admiration for Harry had been interrupted.

"Harry really doesn't like a lot of fuss made over him," Marcus told her gently.

The woman's cheeks flared red. "Oh, I'm sorry! It's just that, when Marcus told me who he wanted me to examine, I was so thrilled. . . ." She saw the creeping red on the boy's face and ears, and finally managed to squash her enthusiasm a bit. "My apologies, Mr. Potter. I've never acted like a 'fan' or 'groupie' of any kind. I'm surprised at myself, and ashamed. How unprofessional of me. Please forgive me."

Harry just nodded, realizing his blush had now covered pretty much his entire body. First she embarrassed him by gushing over him, and now a fan-type person was going to see him *naked*? He shuddered, unnerved by it all.

"Are you still cold? I can do another Warming Charm," Marcus offered.

"No, that's fine. Let's just get this over with, shall we?" he replied stoically.

"Right! Harry, this is Polly Greener. She specializes in treating scars, blemishes, disfigurements, and so on. She's very good at what she does."

"Nice to meet you," he said politely.

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"And you, as well," the woman said, beaming. She was a pretty young woman, with huge blue eyes and bright blond hair that fell in loose curls around her face and down to her shoulders. When she smiled, deep dimples showed, as well as a large quantity of big, white teeth. *She looks like a model for a toothpaste ad*, Harry thought absently.

Healer Grener put on her professional attitude. "Right. Healer Pomfrey told me what happened, and of course, I read all about it in the paper," she added, blushing a bit as she glanced up at Harry. "You've had several weeks to heal. Let's see how you're doing. Open your gown for me, please?"

"He'll have to take it off," Marcus said quietly. "The wounds go from his chest, around his side and over most of his back, as well as on his left arm. There are some injuries on his legs and the front of his hip, as well."

"All right," she said briskly, waiting for the young man to disrobe.

Harry looked pleadingly at Healer Pomfrey for a moment, hoping he'd be allowed to show only a bit at a time, then simply sighed and took off the hospital robe, holding it nervously in front of him.

"Oh my," Grener said, her eyes wide when she saw the extent of the scarring. "Can you stand up for me?" Harry complied. She walked around him, bending close to the disfigurements on his body here and there, touching some with her hand, some with her wand, and using a crystal ball as well as a quartz crystal point to examine all of them. "Hmmm. What's this one?" she said, looking at the old scar on his bum.

"I've had that since I was three or four," Harry said. "It doesn't bother me."

"All right," she murmured, continuing her inspection of his skin. "And this one?" she asked when she came to the one on his elbow. "What happened here?"

"That one's two years old," he replied.

"What caused it?"

"A knife."

"It looks deliberate," she said, her brow furrowed, "a clean cut, and somehow not like a defensive wound. There's something different about it."

Harry sighed, looking at Pomfrey anxiously.

"Go ahead and tell her whatever you can about your injuries, Harry," Marcus said calmly. "It will help her know how to treat them."

"I don't care about that one," he said stubbornly.

"I do," she said, equally stubborn. "It's small, as is the one on your buttocks. Some of the potions I want to try on your large scars can have bad side effects. I'd like to test them on

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these little scars first, to see how you react to them. But I need to know what caused each one so I know what to expect when I use the various treatments on them."

"Oh," the young man said in a small voice. He sighed heavily. "The one on my bum is from a fall I had when I was three or four. My cousin had some toy trucks and bulldozers and he pushed me down onto one of the bulldozers. It cut me there."

"That shouldn't have left such a scar if it was treated promptly," she said, her face puzzled.

"I grew up with Muggles. They don't have our kind of medicine," he explained.

She smiled at him, her eyes twinkling. "So did I, young man. I'm Muggle-born. I hope you won't hold that against me."

"I don't. My mum was Muggle-born as well, as is one of my best friends," he replied with half a smile as Hermione's face flitted through his mind.

"Since I grew up in the Muggle world, I know about their medicine. My brother was always getting hurt somehow or other. He had stitches for his big wounds like that. Didn't you have stitches? They would've helped that heal more cleanly."

"No. My aunt handed me a bandage and yelled at me for dripping blood on the kitchen floor," the boy said grimly. "No stitches. No doctor, either."

Polly's eyes grew sad. "Oh. I'm sorry."

He just shrugged.

"All right. What happened here?" she asked, pointing to the scar on his elbow. "Something equally unfair to you?"

Harry snorted with laughter. "Actually, you're right. You probably heard that Voldemort reappeared two years ago?"

She shuddered at the name, but nodded.

"The way he got his body back was to have one of his followers brew a potion, then put him in it. One of the requirements for the potion was 'blood of the enemy, forcibly taken.' So they captured me and tied me up, and then his man took a knife and cut my arm, collecting the blood that ran out to add to the potion."

Polly had blanched at his story. "You saw. . .him. . .come back?"

"Yes. I've seen him loads of times now. We're old pals," he replied sarcastically.

"How awful for you," she said sympathetically.

"Yeah," he said with a resigned shrug.

Polly noticed the scar on his forehead and pushed back his hair to look at it. "And this one?"

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Harry flinched away, hoping she wouldn't touch it. "Don't bother that one. It's a curse scar," he said flatly.

"A curse scar?" she said, a confused expression on her face.

"You've heard the stories about how Harry defeated You-Know-Who when he was a baby, haven't you?" Pomfrey asked her in surprise.

"Yes, but. . ."

"That scar is from the Killing Curse he used on me," Harry explained. "It's not a normal scar. I don't want it messed with." He didn't want to have to explain about having pains in his scar when he had visions of Voldemort's acts of cruelty. He hoped she'd just accept what he said and move on.

"Harry took another Killing Curse during the battle when he got these big scars," Marcus added. "That's why he has the extra zigzag on the curse scar now. It bled for a while. I treated it with everything I could think of, but it didn't respond to anything but time and phoenix tears. The phoenixes could stop the bleeding when it bled, but they couldn't heal it."

"Phoenixes?"

"Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes, came and helped us until Merlin appeared," Marcus explained, leaving out the fact that Harry had first appeared in the hospital wing after the battle as a baby phoenix himself. "Once Merlin joined Harry, he never left his side until Harry was well on the road to recovery."

"Amazing," was all Polly could think to say. Her eyes dropped from the ugly scar on the young man's forehead to his brilliant green eyes, which were searching her face anxiously. She kept her hand on his forehead, where she'd pushed his hair away from the scar, then ran her other hand over his face, neck, behind his ears, in his scalp. "Any other injuries on your face or neck?"

"A few, but they all healed well," Harry said, a bit uncomfortable as she dug her fingers through his beard searching for scars. He pulled back from her suddenly, having stood about all the examination he could manage for a while. "Honest, there's nothing else on my face that bothers me. If you can fix the ones on my body, that would be brilliant. My face is fine," he snapped.

Polly quickly removed her hands from his hair and beard and stepped back. "All right. If you're sure."

"I am," he insisted.

They were all still for a long moment, Marcus and Polly pondering the horrible things this young man had been through in his life, Harry simply wishing he was at the Shrieking Shack in Ginny's arms, or anywhere she was, rather than here. He finally sighed and said, "So what's next?"

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"Harry, my sister told me you could make your wings come out without doing a total transformation?" Marcus said.

"Healer Pomfrey!" the boy cried in shock. "What . . .?"

"Dumbledore approved telling Polly about you, so we can treat you," Marcus assured him. "I thought you might need proof, so here's his letter." He handed Harry a piece of parchment. Harry recognized the scrawling handwriting as his headmaster's.

"Dear Marcus," the letter began, "I agree with you completely. Harry is moving rather stiffly at times – I thought the range of motion in his arm, in particular, seemed a bit limited when I last visited with him. He flinched when he reached up to get a tea cup from the cupboard, but he tried to cover it up, bless him. I also believe his scars are still painful from various things I've noticed. Remus agrees with me on this. I've met Healer Grener and I agree that telling her everything should be safe. She has agreed, as you did, to a Memory Charm after treating Harry if we see a need for it. Please give Harry my assurances that we're looking out for him as well as we can, and give him my regards. I should be through with this round of meetings in two weeks or so, and will be more available for consultation – or visits – at that time.

Kindest regards,

Albus Dumbledore"

Harry handed the parchment back to Marcus with a sigh. "So what do you want me to do?"

"You have serious muscle damage near your scapula. Those are the muscles that control your wings, if Poppy has guessed correctly. Could you show us your wings and move them a bit so we can see how your muscles have been affected?"

"Which kind of wings?" Harry asked.

"What kind do you have?"

"Raven, phoenix, thestral,"

Polly's eyebrows flew up in surprise to hear the forms Harry mentioned, but she did her best to keep her professional face on. "Um. . . . Let's see each one, if you can manage it. I know the muscles used should be the same in each set of wings, but just to be safe before you try flying that way again, we should probably check them all."

"I've already flown that way since the battle, several times, actually," Harry said, confused.

"You have? Wonderful!" Marcus said happily. "How did you feel after those flights?"

"I was sore and achy, actually," the boy admitted. "My back was still tender when I did it. I wouldn't have flown if it weren't necessary, but I didn't have a choice at the time."

"You didn't have a choice?" Polly asked, her brow furrowed in puzzlement.

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"Nope, no choice at all. They were emergencies," Harry replied, hoping that would satisfy them.

"What kind of emergency could. . .?" Polly said, even more bewildered.

Harry sighed. It would just be simpler to tell them the truth, at least in part, and Dumbledore trusted both of these healers. "The first time, someone was falling off the Astronomy Tower and I jumped off and changed into a phoenix on the way down to catch him. Then I changed into a phoenix again to carry my friend and a professor to the hospital wing when they couldn't breathe from a spell that went badly wrong."

"Oh, yes," Marcus replied. "That wasn't very long ago, either."

"No, it wasn't. And then I turned into a phoenix to flash Ginny and myself to Dumbledore when we needed to tell him something urgent." Harry wasn't about to tell them he'd killed Lucius Malfoy when Malfoy blew open the wall of the Shrieking Shack, finding a nude Harry and nearly nude Ginny inside. *If the stupid git hadn't tried to send a Killing Curse at us, he'd be enjoying the luxurious accommodations at Azkaban these days, rather than being a single bone inside a sealed box*, Harry mused.

"How did you feel after that?" Polly asked.

"I didn't fly long, but I was quite sore after that," he replied. "My flying isn't as good as it was, either. That left wing just doesn't work as well, and I have to work hard to keep it going."

"And are you still sore in that area?" she asked, moving her wand over the scars around his scapula.

"Yeah. Sometimes it's pretty bad, but most of the time, I just ignore it," the boy said off-handedly.

"Are you in the habit of ignoring pain?" she said with an amused smile.

"Anything that will keep me out of the hospital wing – no offence," he said with a cheeky grin.

"I think we're ready to see your wings, then," said Marcus.

"All right," Harry agreed, then concentrated on making the raven's wings appear. "AHHH!" he cried, his body contorting with pain.

"What?" Marcus and Polly both said.

"Hurts!" Harry gasped. The wings, which hadn't been fully formed yet, drew back into his body instantly. He sat there covered in sweat, groaning, panting and bent double, fighting the sharply throbbing agony in his back.

"I thought that might happen," Marcus said. "Take this. It's a pain potion, but it won't mask all your symptoms. We need to know what's going on inside you, so we'll need you to feel at least some of what your body is going through so we can understand what's happening. Two sips, that's all."

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Harry rubbed his forearm across his sweaty brow and finally straightened up and looked grimly at the two healers, still gasping in pain. He took the potion and swallowed his dose, then glared resentfully at Marcus. "Why did it hurt so badly? I changed into both a thestral and a phoenix recently – I didn't fly, but I did the changes. The thestral always emerges with its wings stretched, and then I have to fold them. It hurt when I did the changes, and when I folded the wings, but not like this!"

"I think you flew when your muscles weren't healed enough for you to do it," the healer explained. "Adrenalin kicks in when we're in an emergency situation and we're often able to do things we normally cannot, without even noticing. I think, if you'd tried to change into a bird and fly without it being some kind of emergency at the time, you would have noticed the pain and stopped. Since you didn't stop, and not only flew but carried other people with you, you put a tremendous strain on your still-healing muscles. And when you changed recently, your probably compounded the damage, since they're still not healed properly. That's why they hurt you so badly this time, I suspect. They've healed wrong, and your wings are simply adding to the problem."

Harry digested this information and then nodded. "Now what?"

"We wait a few minutes to let the potion take effect, and then you'll bring out your wings again. We'll need you to move them around, stretch them, flap them, fold them, whatever you can think to do with them, so we can study which muscles are working properly and which are not," Polly said. "Are you still in pain now?"

"Just an ache now, not sharp pain like it was," the boy replied, his breathing slowing as his muscles finally relaxed.

"Good. You rest a few minutes, and we'll have another look, all right?" she said. He nodded. She draped a hospital gown over his back and he pulled it around himself, still clutching the other gown to cover his nakedness.

As the pain finally receded, the boy asked, "Can you contact my godfather? I'd like him to be here for this."

"Of course, Harry. If I had realized how painful the exam would be, I would have asked him to come with you in the first place. I'm sorry for that. I'll go and fetch an owl," Marcus offered.

"You can use Merlin," Harry offered, nodding toward the beautiful scarlet bird perched quietly atop the screen near the bed.

"Hi, Merlin! I didn't notice you there!" Marcus said pleasantly. "Thanks, Harry."

"Is that a phoenix?" Polly said in awe. "I've never seen one."

"Merlin, say hello," Harry said to the bird, who'd flown down and landed next to him. The phoenix lifted his beautiful head and crooned at the young woman, studying her seriously as his sweet, liquid voice continued to fill the room with lovely sound. "He likes you. He thinks you're. . .Merlin, stop that!" the boy said, snorting with sudden amusement.

"What did you say?" Polly asked, nonplussed.

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"I was telling you what he was saying, and then he started being rude. I'm sorry," he replied, trying to quiet his laughter. "At least he's always good for a giggle."

"You can talk to him?" she said, amazed.

"Sure. And he talks back," Harry said casually.

She gave the boy a shrewd look. "So what did he say you refused to translate?"

"Um. . . ." The boy blushed madly. "He thinks you're pretty."

"That's funny. A phoenix thinks I'm pretty. Why would that make you blush?" she said, chuckling.

"It's how he said it. It was a bit. . . rude."

Marcus was laughing out loud now, having finished writing his note to Remus. "Is it worse than when he thought Professor McGonagall was hot?" he asked with a laugh.

"Erm. . . yeah!" Harry said, his cheeks flaming red.

"And you can't, or won't tell us?" Marcus prompted.

"I'd rather not, thank you. I mean, you two are going to do some painful things to me, and I don't want to provoke her!" he said, nodding at Polly. All three of them laughed and Merlin looked quite pleased with himself and then chirruped something else to Harry.

"Now what's he saying?" Marcus prompted.

"He said, 'Made you laugh!'" Harry replied. "Apparently he thought I needed a giggle. Good one, Merlin!" he added, petting the magnificent bird, then handing Marcus's note to him. "Take this to Remus, OK? Bring him back here if he can come. Thanks." With that, the phoenix flew into the air, and was gone in a sudden flash of brilliant white light.

"I didn't know phoenixes could carry on conversations or make jokes," Polly said, bemused.

"He's quite a special bird, even among phoenixes," Harry agreed. "And he does try to make me laugh sometimes when he thinks I'm getting too serious."

"And he comforts Harry when he's in pain, as well as healing him," Marcus added. "That's an amazing bird you have there, young man."

"Yeah," the boy said with a smile. "Thanks."

"Shall we try the wings again, or do you want to wait for Remus?" Polly asked.

"We can do the wings again. I should be able to manage that – but I'd like him to be here for the treatment," Harry said, the cheerful light in his eyes fading. He took the gown off of his back and the raven's wings emerged. The boy was gripping the edge of the examination table tightly, his knuckles white, his body trembling with effort.

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"Is it hard to do the wings?" Polly asked. "I've never treated an Animagus before."

"Not normally, but this is quite painful even with the potion," the boy told her.

"All right, then, Harry, we'll be as quick as we can," Marcus assured him. They had Harry go through various movements with his wings, which he managed in a jerky, uncoordinated fashion. Then Polly gently held the tip of one wing and slowly tried to pull it open and fold it closed, holding her wand over the joints to examine them as she moved the wing. Then she gently twisted the wing a bit, as would happen in various stages of flight. She winced when Harry cried out in pain, but tried to hold the wing in place rather than allowing her hands to jerk it when she flinched at the sound of his pain-filled moans. She tugged on and moved various feathers to check for his reaction, then worked the joint where the wing emerged from Harry's body. She found the very worst pain there.

Harry bit his tongue and held his breath trying not to cry out, but when she moved it a certain way, a scream ripped out of his throat. His back was on fire, the pain like dozens of sharp knives shredding the muscles that supported the wing.

"I'll never be able to fly again if they stay like this," Harry groaned when he could speak again. Sweat was pouring off of him as he tried to comply with the healers' requests for certain movements and suffered through the rest of their examination.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I know this is painful for you," Polly said sadly. "I'm finished with that wing. Now I have to do the same things to the other. Hang on, I'll be as quick and gentle as possible."

Once again, Harry suffered through the excruciating feeling of someone forcing his wings to do things the muscles in his back just could not allow. He vowed to remain silent, to not cry, to not moan, but broke those vows over and over. When Polly finally released his wing, he lay there exhausted, drenched in sweat, and wishing he'd never learned to be an Animagus.

"One more movement, Harry," Marcus said. "Can you flap your wings as if you're taking off?"

He raised exhausted eyes to the man in disbelief. "You can't tell that there's no way I could fly like this?"

"That kind of wing movement is different from just stretching and contracting and folding your wings, as you've been doing. There's the force of the wind for you to deal with and I imagine you have to have some strength in your wings to make them work properly to actually fly. Some power behind the strokes, I mean."

"You mean you haven't a clue how it works, but you want to see to be sure, huh?" Harry replied wisely.

"Um. . .yeah," Marcus agreed with a sheepish grin. "Can you manage it?"

Harry's head dropped until his chin was on his chest. He rolled his shoulders, trying to get past the tension there, then blew out a deep, calming breath and shrugged, making his wings flutter briefly. "OK." He stretched out his wings and beat them hard, as if trying to lift off of

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the table, then suddenly screamed in agony and fell over on his side, curled up in misery. His wings disappeared instantly.

"Harry? Can you hear me?" Marcus said in concern.

"Here, take this," Polly said, holding some potion out to the stricken boy. Harry just ignored her, completely engulfed in trying to survive his pain.

Just then, Remus and Merlin arrived in a flash of light. Remus strode to his godson's side. "*What the hell are you doing to him?*" he demanded with a glare at the healers. He leaned down so he was face to face with the boy. "Harry? Harry, are you all right? What do you need, lad? I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

Harry was still gasping for breath. He opened his eyes and tried to smile at his godfather. "You . . . came."

"Of course I did! Why didn't you tell me you needed me sooner? I would have come with you this morning if you'd asked!" Remus chided him.

"Didn't . . . want to. . .be. . .more. . ." the boy said, then groaned.

"More what?" Remus asked in confusion.

"Burden," Harry breathed.

Remus sank down onto a stool beside the table, taking Harry's right hand in his and gently rubbing his arm. He knew there wasn't much of the boy's body he could touch without causing him some pain. "You are not now, nor have you ever been a burden to me, young man, and don't you forget it!" he said sternly, winning a brief smile from his godson in return. He looked up at the healers. "What's going on here? What have you done to him?" he demanded.

Marcus explained what they were doing while Polly finally managed to get the pain potion into Harry.

"That should make you feel better soon," she assured him quietly.

"I sure hope so," he said after he swallowed. He closed his eyes, willing himself to relax and let the potion take effect.

"So we needed to see how the wings worked to understand what needs to be done to heal him," Marcus said, ending his explanation. "We've only seen the raven wings. We still need to see at least the thestral's wings, since they're so big."

"They were damaged in a previous attack," Remus told him. "Madam Pomfrey and Hagrid healed him that time, but the skin of his wings was torn off the bone in shreds. He can still fly as a thestral, but I think that wing bothers him sometimes."

"Then we definitely need to see it," Polly said. "But we do have a problem, other than the pain we're causing this poor boy. With these last tests, I've already seen enough to know that many of his injuries are beyond my expertise. However, my mentor is here in St. Mungo's giving a

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seminar this morning. I would like him to examine Harry and help us with his treatment. He's old enough to have been through the last war and has seen much worse injuries than I have."

"You're not keeping me here," Harry said, a warning tone in his voice. His temper was rising. They were talking about him as if he weren't there, treating him like an object instead of a person, and causing him all kinds of pain. He'd had enough. "I want to leave," he snarled, sitting up abruptly and groaning with pain again from the sudden movement. The glass in the wall-mounted cabinet rattled ominously. Harry heard it and made an effort to control his temper before he broke something.

"What was that?" Polly said, looking at the cabinet uneasily.

"When Harry gets angry, things rattle," Remus said cautiously. "He's calming down now."

"Oh," she said in a small voice, looking at the boy a bit nervously.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you," Harry said defensively when he saw her look.

"I wish I could say the same," she said sympathetically.

"Harry, we can help you," Marcus assured him. "I'm sorry the testing is so painful but we have to know what we have to work with there. You're missing large portions of muscle here and there. In other places, the muscles have healed together wrong, and you have massive amounts of scar tissue. And that's just what I can tell from examining you, and I'm not a specialist like Polly and her mentor. Please don't rush off. Let us help you."

"I don't think we'll need to keep you here for any length of time, Mr. Potter," Polly said, doing her best to talk him into staying. "Once we have a good analysis of what's wrong, healing the muscles will take a few hours at most. Healing the scars will take longer, but it's something you can carry on at home. But we can't do anything until we have a complete picture of what's wrong with you so we can understand how to treat the injuries. Do you understand?"

"I'm not stupid," the young man snarled. "What you said makes sense. I understand it. I do want to be healed. But. . ."

"I know it's painful," Polly said as he wound down. "We did explain that we needed you to be aware of the pain so you could tell us what you're feeling. Now that we have an idea of what we're dealing with, we can give you different pain potions that will let you feel just a little bit of what's happening, so you'll be more comfortable and can help us better."

"Why didn't you use that to start with, then?" he snarled, his temper threatening to flare again.

"Because it's quite strong, and we didn't want to mask any symptoms. If we did, we might miss something," she said with a shrug. "I made a judgment call based on my experience, but you are going through things that are far different than anything I've dealt with. I'm out of my league here. That's why I want my mentor to see you. I can work on some of your injuries, but for others, you really need to see Healer Litteken. He'll be available this afternoon."

"I need to get to work," Harry said, straightening up, his expression stubborn. "You told me *ONE HOUR!*" he added, giving Marcus a filthy look. "It's already been more than that."

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"I'm sorry, Harry, I truly am. I didn't realize it would be so involved, or how painful it would be for you."

"Harry," Remus said quietly, smoothing the sweaty hair off his godson's forehead, "take the pain potion. You rest, and I'll go and talk with the healers and find out what else they have in mind, try to get an idea of how long it will take and all that, all right?"

"Why do you want to talk where I can't hear you? What do you think is wrong with me?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing, lad, nothing! I just thought you needed to rest a while. You know you can trust me," Remus assured him, "but if you want us to talk in here, that's fine with me."

Harry nodded, then took his dose of potion with no more fuss. He relaxed on the exam table, still lying on his right side, and struggled to arrange the robes over him decently.

"Hang on, I've got it," Remus said comfortingly, taking over the arrangement of the boy's covers. He glanced up at the healers, who were conferring in the corner of the room. "Do you have any blankets? I believe he's cold, and a blanket is more comforting than a Warming Charm."

"Yes, of course," Polly said, heading for a cabinet.

Before long, Harry was draped with a warm blanket and had a soft pillow as well. The exam table was padded but not as soft as a bed. He made himself as comfortable as he could and found himself drifting into an exhausted sleep despite his best efforts to listen to the adults talking.

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Chapter 6 – A Variety of Cures

A sudden gust of cool air from the door being thrown open awakened Harry. He glanced around blearily. Someone had removed his glasses. Even without them, he knew the tall, angry redhead storming into the room was Ron.

"What's going on? This was supposed to take an hour, that's all!" Ron demanded. With one glance at Harry, Ron whipped out his wand and pointed it steadily at Healer Pomfrey's heart. *"What have you done to him?"*

Remus raised his hands in a placating gesture. "The tests were more extensive and more painful than Healer Pomfrey expected them to be, Ron."

When he saw Remus, Ron lowered his wand. "Why didn't someone let me know? I've been worried sick since he's been so long, and Ginny has been calling us at the shop on the Floo Network so often we can't get anything done." He noticed Harry was awake and smiling at him. "Harry, mate, are you all right? Talk to me!"

"Came to rescue me, did you?" Harry said wearily, but with a chuckle in his voice. "Thanks!"

"After some of the stuff you've been through, when you didn't turn up after an hour, I started to wonder. When you didn't show up after two hours, I started to worry. And after three hours with no word from you, I came to look for you." He straightened up, squaring his shoulders proudly. "I think I gave that ruddy nurse out there a good scare!"

"Tell me everything," Harry said, absolutely delighted Ron had come to look for him.

"Oh, no. I'll get skinned alive if I don't report back to Mum straightaway! And you'd better call Ginny on that ring. She's about to lose her mind worrying that you've been kidnapped or something," Ron replied seriously. "She didn't want to call you in case you were in the middle of something. . .um. . .delicate." He glanced at his friend's bare shoulders. He knew Harry probably had to be nude for these exams due to the wide extent of his injuries, and he hated to think how he, himself, would feel about that. It must be a nightmare for his friend. His ears a bit pink at this thought, Ron turned to the healers. "I'm sorry for bursting in on you and all that. I didn't know Remus was here to look after Harry."

"I wasn't here until a little while ago," Remus said. "Harry was here alone. Your instincts were good, Ron. Thanks for looking after him so well."

Ron shrugged, his ears growing pinker under Remus's praise. "'S'OK. I knew he didn't want to bother you about it, since you've been spending so much time away from work to look after him. I thought I should . . .well. . .anyway, where's a fire so I can call my mum and my brothers?" They directed him to the nearest fire on the Floo Network while Harry called Ginny on his ring.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, smiling at her translucent face hovering above his ring.

"Are you all right? What's taking so long?" she cried, just as worried as Ron had said she was.

"I'm fine," Harry assured her.

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"No, you're not. I can see you, remember? You look awful. And you're lying down, aren't you?"

"How could you tell that?" he said, astonished.

"The way your hair is lying, silly," she said fondly. "What's wrong, Harry? Don't lie to me!"

He sighed. "The tests were a lot more painful than I expected, and it's taken them a lot longer to do the examination than I thought it would. Now we're waiting for the specialist's mentor to come here after a meeting he's in or something. He knows more about wounds like mine than the specialist who examined me this morning, so they tell me."

"So are they going to hurt you again?" she said, aghast.

"I expect so. It seems to be the only way for them to work out how bad my injuries are," he said with half a shrug.

Ginny's face leaned toward him seriously. "You're scared, aren't you?" she asked in a whisper.

He swallowed hard, determined to be brave for her. "It'll be over soon. I'll call you then, all right?"

"Answer me, Harry. You're scared, aren't you?" she insisted.

He hesitated a long time before muttering, "I'm all right."

"I'll be right there," she said and turned off her ring before he could protest. A few minutes later, Ron came back to the room with Ginny behind him. "I was talking to Mum and Ginny just pushed her aside and came through the fire," he said in response to Harry's look of surprise. "She's determined to stay here and look after you."

"Ginny, you didn't have to come," Harry protested, trying hard to hide his gratitude for her being there.

"Yes, I did," she said authoritatively. She bent down and kissed him, then ran her hands through his hair. "You look more than a bit peaky, sweetie. Mum wants you and Remus to come out for dinner so she can feed you up. She thinks you're still not getting enough to eat at your aunt's house."

"She doesn't have to. . ." he began.

"She knows that. Now behave yourself and let me find out what's going on, all right?" she said determinedly.

"I just love it when you take over my life," he said with a tender smile and a chuckle in his voice.

"I know you do," she murmured, leaning down to kiss him again before she turned and strode over to where the healers were conferring in the corner. "What's going on here? What else do you plan to do to him?"

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"Hello, Miss Weasley," Marcus said fondly. He introduced her to the other healer and told her what they'd done so far, and what they expected to do once Healer Litteken arrived. "He'll need a considerable amount of home care, so it's good you showed up."

"Considerable amount of home care?" Harry called from across the room. "What do you mean, 'considerable amount of home care'?" He sounded very annoyed. "You never said anything. . . ."

"I did tell you that there would be a long-term treatment to reduce the scarring, Harry. That's what I'm talking about," Marcus explained.

"Oh," Harry said in a small voice, looking somewhat vexed. "But I don't have to stay in bed, do I?"

"Absolutely not," Marcus assured him. "Once the specialist has finished today, you'll be free to do whatever you can *comfortably* do. So that means you'll need to wait a little while before you try flying again, but other things should be fine."

A nurse opened the door and called Healer Grener outside. She was gone for several minutes, during which time Marcus enjoyed visiting with the Weasleys and Remus. Harry was in much better spirits with his friends around him.

Polly came back into the room, followed by a wizened old wizard. Through the open door, they could see at least fifteen others of various ages pushing each other to look inside the room. "Um. . . Mr. Potter?" Healer Grener said hesitantly.

"Who are all those people?" Ginny said fiercely. "What's going on? Did somebody tell the media that Harry's here?"

Polly hastened to make introductions. "This is Healer Litteken, my mentor, and those people are the healers from the seminar he gave today. Since Mr. Potter's injuries are so severe and so rare, Healer Litteken thought this would be an excellent learning opportunity for the staff here at St. Mungo's." She looked hopefully at Harry. "Is that all right with you?"

Harry was blushing madly. It was bad enough to have two healers examining him. Having to put up with the whole agonizing process for another one was nearly more than he could bear, but to have the room full of people who were going to see him naked, talk about him as if he wasn't there, maybe touch his scars? He shuddered nervously. "No."

"But, Mr. Potter, we don't get to see this type of injury often. I've never seen anything so extensive, nor this particular type of injury, and I've been a specialist for years," Polly said, doing her best to persuade him. "If we get another such injury and Healer Litteken and I aren't here, no one will know how to treat it."

"Harry, I'm so sorry about all of this," Marcus interjected. "I had no idea the wounds would heal as badly as they did and need such specialized treatment. I did the best I could to put you together properly when you were injured, but I didn't have proper training in such things either. I was just trying to keep you alive."

"I know that," Harry replied cautiously. "I appreciate what you did for me."

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"Healer Grener is right, though. If neither she nor Healer Litteken, or possibly me, since as your primary healer I'm observing closely today, are around if you get hurt this way again, no one will know how to treat your wounds," Marcus said, hoping he was explaining things in a way that the young man would understand. "This is a priceless learning opportunity. It's a quiet day in the hospital, as well, so we have a lot of healers who are free and interested in learning this healing technique. That's why they're all standing out there in the hall – they're hoping to have the chance to learn something to improve their healing skills. What they learn here today will be added to the teaching criteria in our healer schools, as well. Your case could be very important to improving the care of future patients."

Harry's face grew thoughtful. He looked around at his friends, then back at Marcus. "I'm not thrilled with this whole idea," he said cautiously.

"Mr. Potter," Healer Litteken began with a small, gracious inclination of his head, "it is a tremendous honour to meet you. I read about your battles and heard about your wounds. I'm very sorry you were so grievously injured. Healer Grener has told me the results of her examination and the questions she has which she believes I may be able to answer. There aren't many healers left working today who were active during our last troubles, so there are few who can pass along the knowledge of dealing with such extreme and unusual injuries. You have presented us with a wonderful opportunity to broaden the education of the staff here at St. Mungo's, if you will just permit these others, all of whom are fully qualified healers, to observe what we do here." He gestured toward the closed door, beyond which the group of healers awaited Harry's decision. "They are here to learn. Will you please allow them this opportunity? It may well benefit others who are wounded in the conflicts facing our people these days."

Remus stepped forward, standing protectively between Harry and the healers. "I'm Harry's godfather, Remus Lupin. He doesn't seem to be comfortable with this idea. I would prefer there to be as few healers in here as possible – just you and these two. However, he's nearly an adult, and it's up to him to decide what he wants to do." He glanced at Harry and saw the boy's anxious eyes flitting from one stranger to another. "If he does agree – and I'm not saying he will – they will need to treat him with respect. Too often, people treat Harry as... an object or something, just because he's famous. He doesn't need that. And Dumbledore didn't approve all of these others being here. Harry's safety is our primary concern."

"Oh, Mr. Lupin, of course!" Healer Litteken assured him. "We are all professionals here. They will observe, and at times may come forward to see something I wish to point out to them, but that's all. They'll remain quiet and none of us will bother him any more than necessary."

Remus turned to his godson, raising an eyebrow to him. "Harry?"

"Ginny, you want to be a healer," Harry said suddenly, gazing deeply into his girlfriend's eyes. "What do you think?"

She thought for a few moments before answering. "Since it's you, I'd rather you didn't have to do it. But if I were a healer and such an unusual case came to the hospital, I'd want to see how it was treated so I'd learn how to treat it myself if I ever had such a case to deal with," she said carefully. "But you have to do what feels right to you, sweetheart."

Harry looked at Marcus. "Are you sure all of them are all right?"

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Marcus stepped into the hall and looked at the group waiting there, studying each face in turn. He returned to the room and said, "I've known all of them for at least three or four years. They should be fine."

Harry sighed deeply, steeling himself, then nodded. "Let them in."

Marcus went to the door and spoke to the group of healers gathered in the hall, telling them the behaviour that would be expected of them while observing the treatment. A few moments later, they filed in and grouped themselves along the walls of the room.

As they settled in place and Healer Grener began explaining Harry's injuries to them, Harry looked from one healer to the next, studying their faces, wondering uneasily if he should really trust them, or if he was putting himself in danger somehow. His eyes shot back abruptly toward someone he'd studied a moment before. He swiftly grabbed his wand from the bedside table and pointed it toward that person. "Push up your sleeve," he ordered, suddenly deadly serious.

"What?" the man said, his face stunned.

"Do it," Harry replied sternly as he sat up, his wand not wavering a bit despite his exhaustion.

The man in question looked around and saw Remus, Ron and Ginny all had their wands pointed at his heart.

"What's the matter?" Healer Litteken said uneasily, astonished at the behaviour of Harry and his friends.

"He has a Dark Mark. I saw the edge of it when he scratched his arm a minute ago," Harry growled. "I said push up that sleeve! Do it, or I'll do it for you!"

The man complied with shaking hands. "I renounced the Dark Lord years ago," he said in a quavering voice as the Dark Mark emerged from under his sleeve.

"That doesn't seem to matter to most Death Eaters," Harry snarled. "All of you. Push up your sleeves." Most of the healers complied immediately, but three hesitated. They were instantly faced with either a stern-faced Weasley or Remus, after which they pushed their sleeves up obediently.

"Four," Harry growled. He turned enraged eyes on Healer Litteken. "Did you know you were bringing four Death Eaters in to see me?" he demanded, his wand now on the elderly healer's heart.

"No, I did not," Healer Litteken said, looking sadly at the four men who were now being tied up with Incarcerous Charms. "These men have been on staff here for years. I trained many of them myself."

"That doesn't matter. They could still be active Death Eaters. They seem to come from all walks of life," Remus said sternly. "I'll go and call the Aurors. They can get to the bottom of this." He and Ron pushed the four men, none too gently, outside the room. "We'll be back as soon as we can, Harry," Remus called over his shoulder.

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"If they've been cleared of all charges, they'll be back here soon," Harry assured the now much less confident healers gathered in his room. "But as you can imagine, it's not safe for me to just allow Death Eaters to be part of a group such as this."

"We completely understand, Harry," Marcus said, very upset by the turn of events. "I didn't know those men had the Dark Mark. I would never have allowed them in here—"

"I know," Harry replied quietly. "You, I trust. These others are all strangers to me. You know I have to be careful."

"Yes, I know," Marcus agreed, mentally kicking himself for not warning Polly more seriously about bringing strangers near Harry.

"If you can vouch for these others," Harry said, looking from Marcus to Healer Litteken to the group hovering nervously around the edges of his room, "they can stay and watch."

"Harry," Marcus replied, "I know all of these people, and I think they're fine. But I will help Ginny stand guard if that will help." He lifted his wand and aimed it at the other healers, then glanced at Ginny, whose wand was still pointed at the group, her eyes scanning cautiously from person to person, watching for any sudden moves from any of them.

"Thanks," Harry replied. He looked at the gathered healers. "I should warn you. She's a bit quick with her hexes, and she knows some stonkers. Don't make any sudden moves she might misunderstand, OK? We don't want anyone to get hurt here." He slid his legs over the side of exam table so he could sit up more comfortably, his wand still in his hand. He opened his hand and allowed the wand to remain on the table, his hand resting quietly over it. "Can we get on with this, please? I'd like to leave soon."

"Of course, Mr. Potter, of course," Healer Litteken said effusively. "I'm sorry for the problem. Thank you for allowing the others to stay. I'm sure this treatment will be an excellent learning experience for them."

"OK," Harry said, relaxing a bit as he felt a small hand slide under his and squeeze it. Ginny had been on the far side of the exam table when the group came in, and hadn't moved from her spot. She was keeping her eyes on all the strangers, and her wand, as well, but she wanted Harry to know she was there to comfort him too. He smiled and squeezed her hand in return before she pulled it away from him so she could concentrate on guarding him.

Healer Litteken took out his wand and a crystal ball, then started examining Harry's scars as soon as the boy took off the hospital gown. Once again, Harry was clutching the gown in front of him, trying to conserve a bit of his modesty. He turned around obediently, answered questions asked by any of the healers and cooperated in every way he could. He was not going to bring out his wings for these people, and was relieved when the subject never even came up. After a while, the elderly healer had the others come forward one at a time to look through his crystal ball, which he was holding on top of certain spots in the massive scarring on the boy's back, to see the damage inside Harry's body. Ginny leaned around and glanced at it too, earning a smile from the old healer.

"I understand you want to be a healer, young lady," Litteken said kindly. "Would you like to look closer?"

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"I have to watch them," she said regretfully.

"I can do that," Harry said, picking up his wand as he stood up and stepped a bit away from the table so the healer and Ginny could stand behind him. "I'll watch them and you can see my insides, how's that?"

Ginny smiled at his flippancy, but gratefully stepped in behind him to see what the healer had been showing his students.

"You see, Miss Weasley, how the striations of the muscles line up beside each other, so neatly, yes?" She nodded. "This is good muscle tissue – and I must say, he has very well toned muscles," the old man chuckled, "as I'm sure you've noticed!"

Ginny blushed and smiled back at him. "Yes, I've noticed."

He moved the crystals over the worst of Harry's injuries. "Here we see where the tissues have not knit together properly. You see how the little lines in the muscles look almost knotted?" She nodded. "This is what we'll be working on today." He turned to his students and began an explanation. Ginny ducked out from behind Harry and took up her guardian stance once more, just as Ron and Remus re-entered the room.

"Harry? Is everything OK here?" Remus asked cautiously.

"Yes, it's fine," Harry assured him as he put down his wand and sat on the edge of the exam table. "What happened?"

"The Aurors took them to the Ministry for questioning," Remus replied, choosing a place along the wall to stand and turning his wand on the remaining healers, just as Ron was doing. "Ginny, we'll stand guard so you can watch what they're doing."

"Thanks," she said, not lowering her wand.

Healer Litteken looked from Remus to the two Weasleys a bit uneasily, then cleared his throat and got back to work. "I've just completed the examination, and am about to begin healing the damage to Mr. Potter's muscle tissues," he explained. "Mr. Potter has been kind enough to allow my students to observe the examination closely. Now I will begin the repair work. Mr. Potter, if you would lie down, please?"

"Which way?"

"On your stomach to start with. I will heal the worst injuries first, working my way down to the least serious ones, in order to get as much healing accomplished as possible while your stamina lasts. This will not, I regret to say, be a comfortable process for you. We will give you another potion to ease the discomfort when the one you received recently wears off. We do not want you to be completely unconscious, as we'll need you to move various ways, stretch and contract different muscles, from time to time. I'm afraid you will feel some pain at times. I do apologize for that, young man. The worst will be when I'm creating new tissue to fill in the gaps where you've had large sections of muscle tissues cut out of you. I will be, in essence, stretching the existing muscles to fill the gap, and then will magically enhance them so they will replace the tissues that were lost. The stretching of those tissues will be most

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uncomfortable, I'm afraid, and there's nothing we can do about it. The next most painful will be the untangling of those 'knotted' places such as I showed Miss Weasley. The least painful will be where the tissues are already trying to close gaps where they've been cut straight across the tissues, so closing those gaps won't be complicated. Do you understand the process I've described?" he asked.

Harry nodded, a look of resignation on his face as he took his glasses off and put them carefully on the shelf by the exam table. He turned and lay down on his stomach, his face buried in his good right arm, his left arm lying stiff at his side. He could use it, but pulling it up to help support his head was too painful, with the limited range of motion he had developed since overtaxing his muscles by flying like a bird too soon after being injured.

"How long will this take?" Ginny asked quietly.

"At least two hours, possibly more, depending on how things go and how often we need to let him rest," the old wizard replied. "Try to relax, Mr. Potter. We'll take the best possible care of you."

The healing process went on for nearly four hours. Ginny stood at Harry's head, free now to comfort him since Ron and Remus were keeping an eye on the strangers in the room. She ran her fingers through his silky hair over and over, leaning down to murmur things in his ear from time to time. Every so often, Harry cried out in pain, but most of the time he managed to keep his reactions to grunts. The other healers were allowed to come, one at a time, and observe the method the old wizard was using to knit Harry's muscles together, one small section at a time to minimize scarring and give him as much freedom of motion as possible.

"You're doing beautifully, sweetheart," Ginny murmured at one point. He just grumbled something in response. "What was that, sweetie?" she asked, leaning down closer to him.

"I said, if I live through this," he groaned suddenly, then continued when he caught his breath again painfully, "if I live through this, I'll . . . oh bloody hell, I've forgotten." He sounded quite disgusted about it.

The strain of the long healing session was showing quite clearly on Ginny's face, but Harry couldn't see that. When he made his comment, she forced herself to snort with laughter, knowing he'd tried to come up with something funny to say to try to comfort her. "That's my sweet baby, always finding ways to make me laugh," she murmured tenderly, kissing the back of his head and continuing to soothe him with her gentle caresses.

Finally, the old healer was finished with the young man's back, and had done as much as he could with Harry's side as well. "I need to turn you on your back now, Mr. Potter. You relax. I'll do it with a Levitation Charm, and I'll be as careful as possible." He raised his wand, did the "swish and flick" movement while muttering the incantation, and lifted Harry's body gently off of the examination table, rotating the young man's body slowly in mid-air until he was face up, then every so lightly settled his body back on the table. "All right, Mr. Potter?" the healer asked kindly.

"Yeah," Harry grunted, then shifted around a bit uncomfortably. When he'd been lifted, his hospital gown had been left behind, and now he was bare to the world. He felt a blush suffusing his whole body.

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The healer saw Harry's flushed skin and noticed the gown still bunched up uncomfortably under the young man's back. He smiled and Levitated his patient off the table just enough to pull the gown out from under him, then spread it across Harry's lap with no comment, earning a relieved half-smile from his patient. "Better?" Healer Litteken said with a smile.

"Much," Harry replied, his blush beginning to recede. "Thanks."

"My apologies," the old man muttered. "I should have brought that along with you in the Levitation Spell."

Ginny leaned over Harry's face and caught his eye, giving him a lascivious wink and stifling a giggle.

"Oh, you are a bad girl," Harry teased her quietly, making her laugh out loud. She leaned down and gave him an upside-down kiss. "Mmm, that was fun. We'll have to try that when I'm not in agonizing pain sometime," he said with a silly grin.

"I'll make a note of that, sir," she replied saucily. She smoothed his hair back from his face, her gentle touch more comforting than anything Harry could have imagined.

"I'm so glad you came," he murmured. "I don't know how I'd get through this without you."

"Always happy to be of service," she said cheekily, then rubbed noses with him.

Harry couldn't believe Ginny was being so openly affectionate in front of so many strangers, but she was doing an excellent job of keeping his mind off of his pain. He'd have to find some wonderful way to repay her for this immense kindness she was doing for him.

After what seemed like a lifetime of painstaking and very painful, to poor Harry, work, the old wizard finally straightened up and said, "It's done. That's the very best I can do, and my best is rather something, if I do say so myself." He turned to the watching healers, who had remained silent throughout the entire procedure. "You are dismissed. I hope that you will never need to use what you learned here today, but if you do, now you're prepared." As the group left, a charming, impish smile creased the old wizard's weary face. "I haven't worked that hard in a long time. I could use some chocolate." He fumbled through his pockets as he spoke. "I believe this young man would benefit from some as well."

Remus was already holding out a bar of Honeyduke's Best, while Ron stood there with a handful of chocolate frogs as his offering. Healer Litteken gratefully took a frog from Ron's hands, exclaiming delightedly when he opened it and found a Harry Potter Famous Wizard Card in the package.

"Oh, this is a good omen!" the old man said cheerily. "I've collected these cards since my youth. I heard about the Harry Potter ones but this is the first one I've found! How lovely!"

Harry had rolled onto his right side, his face weary and pale. He was chewing on a huge chunk of Honeyduke's Best from Remus's bar.

"How long before he's back to full strength?" Ginny asked, taking one of Ron's frogs and quickly biting its head off before it could jump away.

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"His muscles are well on their way to a good recovery now," the old wizard said. "You'll need to take it easy for a week, Mr. Potter. No heavy lifting, nothing that will strain those muscles."

"No Quidditch?" Harry asked suddenly. "I have a game this Saturday."

"But school's out, isn't it?" Healer Litteken said, perplexed.

"I promised Healer Pomfrey a game, and Saturday is the first time he's been available," Harry replied with a shrug.

"I'm free on Saturday two weeks from now, as well," Marcus told Harry. "Let's make it then and not take any chances, all right?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Harry agreed.

"As for the scars themselves," Litteken said, "I believe Healer Grener has the proper potions for you." He glanced at her and she nodded. "Yes? Good! It will take about a month for those to do their job completely."

"So no flying for a month?" Harry said, aghast.

"You can certainly fly, Mr. Potter," Litteken replied. "We're talking about superficial injuries here – all the deep tissues have been reassembled and will heal quickly now, as you'll find when you touch the places where the scars are thickest. They have already become smaller, simply by the underlying tissues being put in their place correctly. Follow your healer's orders and you'll be your old self again very soon, young man!"

"Herr Litteken," Marcus said suddenly. "There's something we couldn't tell you with everyone here. Something you should be aware of." He looked at Remus and Harry to see if they agreed.

"What are you talking about?" Remus said suspiciously.

"Harry's flying," Marcus said, giving Remus a significant look.

"Oh," Remus said, cottoning on. "Yes. Harry? What do you think?"

Harry sighed. "May as well," he muttered resignedly.

"What are you talking about?" Herr Littekin said.

Polly locked the door. "Harry has something to show you. We never did get that other set examined, either, Mr. Potter."

Harry sat on the edge of the exam table again, not looking forward to this at all. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, Harry, it's important," Marcus replied.

"All right." He watched Herr Litteken's face as he made the raven's wings emerge. "Hey, that doesn't hurt as much!" he said in relief.

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"What is this?" Litteken said, looking at the wings.

"Harry is a multiple Animagus. If you can't keep his secret, we'll have to Memory Charm you," Remus said quite seriously.

"You need to examine him with his wings out to make certain everything is working properly," Polly explained.

"I see," Litteken said, already examining the muscles where the wings attached, and then the wings themselves. "Very interesting. Yes, I see a small problem here," he said, touching a wing. "It seems this wing has been damaged."

"It was the thestral's wing that was damaged," Harry said, pulling in the raven's wings and looking around to see if there was room for the thestral's.

"Thestral?" Litteken said, his eyes wide.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Ron, can you shove that cart against the wall? My wings are going to be cramped in here as it is."

"No problem, mate," Ron said, pushing the cart out of the way.

"Stand back," Harry warned. A tremendous pair of black bat-like wings emerged from his back, their span compressed by the confines of the room.

"Hang on," Remus said, then did an Enlarging Charm on the room. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said, spreading his wings wider now that the room had tripled in size.

"Harry had a serious injury to that wing," Remus explained, pointing to the scars there, "and it never healed quite right. He hasn't flown much as a thestral since it healed because of that."

"It doesn't feel as strong as it was," Harry said, "and I don't want to damage it further."

"I see," Litteken replied, examining the wing closely. "Yes, I can repair these. You had serious damage here, young man."

A snort of laughter escaped Harry. "Yeah, I know."

A short time later, Litteken was finished. "I think you'll do now, Mr. Potter. Thank you for showing me your wings. They were quite interesting to work on."

Harry flexed his wings, then beat them a bit. "That feels a lot better," he said with a smile. He retracted his wings and stretched his arms above his head and in various directions. "My back feels loads better, but my left arm is still stiff," he said, looking at the old healer curiously.

"It will always be a bit stiff, Mr. Potter," Litteken said sadly. "You lost too much tissue there for me to restore it perfectly."

"Would exercise improve it?" Harry asked.

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"Certainly exercise will help with your range of motion as well as your strength, but that arm will always be a bit stiff. I'm sorry I can't heal it completely," Litteken said apologetically.

"That's OK," Harry said with a shrug. "At least I still have an arm there and it works pretty well. And I'm right-handed anyway. Thanks for what you did for me."

"I'm glad I could help," the old wizard said.

Harry studied the scars on his chest and arm and asked the question he'd been dreading.

"Erm. . . what will my scars look like when they're healed?" he asked cautiously, wondering if they'd be like his curse scar, or the ragged one on his bum, or if they'd actually disappear the way the ones on his face had.

"They will be faint, flat, thin lines on your body, I expect," the old man assured him. "I don't see any reason for them to heal with any more visible presence than that. The small ones should disappear completely, but the large ones will leave a faint mark."

"Wow! Thanks!" Harry said with a relieved grin. "That's a lot better than I'd hoped for. When can I go back to work?"

"You should rest tonight and tomorrow, then you can return to work – as long as there is no strenuous activity and you feel up to it – the next day," Litteken replied.

Harry looked at Ron. "You get all the strenuous activity, then," he said with a cheeky grin. Ron just made a face at him in response. Harry held his hand out to the old man. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate what you've done for me."

"And I am honoured to have been of service to you, young man," the healer said warmly, clasping Harry's hand in both of his. "Take care of yourself. It was a pleasure to meet you."

"And you, as well," Harry said with a smile.

Goodbyes and thanks were said and the old healer left. Healer Grener showed Remus and Ginny how to apply the ointments to Harry's scars and gave them directions on the potions he was to take, then she and Marcus left, as well.

"Well, that was a day!" Ron said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Can you hand me my clothes? I can't wait to get out of here!" Ginny turned her back as Ron helped Harry, who was still stiff, sore and not feeling his best, get dressed.

"Mum's making dinner for all of us," Ginny called over her shoulder. "I hope you're hungry!"

"I could eat a horse," Harry said wearily, "but I think I'm not going to be very good company. I need a nap pretty badly."

"Your bed's probably in my room already," Ron said. "Mum told me that she'd set it up in there when I talked to her earlier."

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Harry smiled at his friend. "You Weasleys think of everything, don't you?"

"We try!" Ginny said with a grin.

"Harry can't stay there long," Remus reminded them. "He has to go back to Privet Drive for a bit longer."

"Just for tonight, then, OK?" Ginny pleaded.

"Yeah, Remus, just for tonight?" Harry agreed.

"All right. Just for tonight, then," Remus conceded with a laugh.

Marcus came back into the room, looking upset. The others were instantly on guard.

"What's wrong?" Remus said, worry in his eyes.

"Somebody called the press and told them Harry was here. They've been out there for hours. I've tried to get them to leave, but they demand to see you, Harry, to see if you're all right. They want to know what happened. I've never dealt with something like this. I don't know what to do. I've called Security, but the reporters are all behaving themselves, just waiting out there."

"Like vultures," Harry said grimly.

"Yes, I think you're right," Marcus agreed. "I don't know who told them, but once we find out, that person will be fired. I did promise you anonymity when you agreed to come here and I was serious about that. There will be severe consequences once we get to the bottom of this. I am so very sorry, Harry."

"It wasn't your fault, Healer Pomfrey. You, I trust. One of those others must have blabbed," Harry said wearily. He looked at his godfather and his friends. "What do we do? We can't Apparate from inside here. I could get out with Merlin, but they'd make up some awful story about me being dead or something." He thought a moment, watching his friends nod in agreement with what he'd said. He sighed. "Where's Hermione when I need her?"

"Italy," Ron replied sourly.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"If she were here, she'd probably say we need to face this head-on," Ginny said after a moment's thought. "Get Healer Litteken to say what he did for you, and then you just make a brief statement that you were here for a check-up on your battle wounds, and Healer Litteken just happened to be here and decided to see if he could minimize your scarring. It's all the truth, and there's nothing there that's too private to release, is there?"

Harry considered what she'd said. "Remus? What do you think?"

"I think she's right," he replied.

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Harry took a deep, calming breath and released it slowly. "All right. How do I look?"

"You should get rid of the beard," Ginny advised, "so you look the way they expect you to. And you're pale and weak looking, but I think I can fix that," she added with an impish smile.

"Get rid of the beard?" Harry said, looking around at the others. Seeing their nods, he complied with her wishes.

"Oh, I've missed your dimple!" she said, standing on tiptoe and trying to reach his chin. "Bend down here!"

"Ginny," Harry began, blushing fiercely as she got more and more aggressive in trying to reach his chin.

"There! Your colour's better already!" she said in satisfaction.

"Huh?" he said, confused.

"Before we see them, I'll give you a big kiss and you'll be so flushed, you'll look completely healthy!" she said, pleased with her plan.

And so it went, exactly as Ginny had said. Marcus led them toward the lobby, where a huge crowd of reporters and photographers waited. He had sent a message to Healer Litteken explaining the situation, so now the old wizard was waiting for them in the corridor with a serious-looking hospital official. After a brief conference with Marcus and Healer Litteken, the official strode to the front of the waiting crowd of journalists.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please, may I have your attention? Thank you. I'm Colin Sheffield, the Administrator of St. Mungo's. The person who told you that Harry Potter was a patient here is going to lose his job for breaking patient confidentiality. Mr. Potter was assured that he could come here quietly for a check-up, and yet, here you are. He deserves better than this, don't you think? Don't you want privacy when you go to see your healer?" He could see that his attempt at shaming them into treating Harry decently wasn't having much effect. "Mr. Potter and a visiting professor of healing have agreed to speak to you briefly, in order to quell any rumours that may have started today. First to speak to you will be Healer Adelfried Litteken, visiting professor from St. Rita's Hospital in Holland. He is an internationally renowned specialist in the treatment of deep tissue injuries and scars."

Healer Litteken gave a brief description of what he'd done and thanked Harry profusely for allowing other healers to learn by observing his treatment. He reminded the reporters that those healers who had observed were bound by their Healers' Oath to protect Harry's privacy, and that they would lose their jobs if they spoke to the press. When he was done, Marcus stepped into the corridor where Harry and his friends were waiting and waved them toward the lobby full of reporters.

"I'm so sorry," Marcus repeated.

"It's not your fault," Harry told him resignedly as he passed by on his way to meet the gathered reporters.

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Harry's friends weren't going to allow him to face a room full of strangers alone. As they moved into the lobby, a grim-faced Ron went first, then Remus, Harry and Ginny. Just before Harry turned the corner into the lobby, Ginny touched his arm.

"What?" he said nervously.

"Come here, baby," she said, pulling on his sleeve. He bent down and she gave him a kiss deep and long enough to make him fairly dizzy.

"Wow," he breathed.

"Your colour's better now. Go get 'em!" she said with a smirk, quite satisfied with the results of her ministrations.

When Harry turned the corner and followed Remus and Ron to the open area in front of the massed reporters, his stomach did flip-flops. There were probably twenty or more people jostling each other for the best view. Flashes of light went off as photographers did their jobs, leaving white spots in Harry's vision. He blinked, unnerved at being nearly blinded temporarily, and determinedly looked away from the photographers and their still-flashing cameras. The hubbub died down when Harry and his friends stopped moving and stood facing the crowd with serious faces. Ron, Remus and Ginny had their wands out, but by their sides, by previous agreement. Harry had his hand on his wand, which was still in his pocket. Who knew what enemies might be hiding in plain sight by being part of this crowd? In addition to the reporters, a throng of hospital workers and ambulatory patients had gathered in the room, making the area stifling hot and claustrophobic. After a brief moment's silence, the reporters started screaming out questions. Harry looked nervously at his godfather. He didn't know how to deal with this stuff. What was he supposed to do?

Ron looked around the room uneasily. There were so many potential threats here, with such a crowd facing Harry. How was he going to protect him? The reporters' shrieking voices grated on his nerves, and suddenly, Ron's temper snapped. "Knock it off!" he snarled. In the startled silence, he added, "How do you expect him to talk to you when you lot won't shut up?"

"Who are you?" one reporter called out.

"Ron Weasley. If you want to talk to Harry, you'll have to do it in an organized way or it just won't happen." The horrors his best friend had been through that day were bad enough, but now this? He would do whatever he had to in order to protect Harry, and if it meant hexing these reporters, or yelling at them at the very least, well, so be it.

Harry looked at his friend, a slow smile spreading across his face. The months of giving the D.A. orders had turned shy, bumbling Ron into an authoritative person who was taking charge of the situation, capable of bossing even adult strangers around – and without blushing. Amazing.

"Um," Remus said quietly, "perhaps it would be good to introduce all of us, so you know who we are. You've met Ron. I'm Remus Lupin, Harry's godfather. The young lady is Ginny Weasley. And of course, this is Harry Potter. Harry has been kind enough to agree to speak to you for a few minutes. He's going to make a full recovery very quickly, but he's tired now and needs to go home, so we won't stay here long. If you have a question, please don't shout, just

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raise your hand and wait for Harry to ask you to speak, all right? That way, we can all get home more quickly, without tiring him any more than necessary."

"Hold it right there," Ginny snapped suddenly. She glared from one reporter to the next, paying close attention to those who were taking notes. "If I see another Quick Quotes Quill in use," she said, setting fire to two she'd seen in the crowd, "I'll do more than set fire to them. They don't write the truth; they embellish on what's said in all kinds of ways. That's not honest reporting." She stared at the reporters who still had their Quick Quotes Quills poised above the parchment. "Get out regular quills or I'll burn those too," she warned. Once they complied, she relaxed and said, "Carry on."

There was a long moment of silence after Ginny's outburst, but then someone called out, "Harry, do you have a statement you want to make first?"

"Um. . .yeah, I guess so," he said quietly. He stood there looking at the crowd, wondering what he should say. Finally, it came to him. "You were told I was just here to get a check-up, and that's true. Healer Litteken happened to be here today, so they went ahead with the treatment they thought I needed as well. He has already explained to you what they did, so I don't need to talk about that. I appreciate their help. And I appreciate that they were trying to maintain my privacy. It's not their fault you're here." His anger growing, he glared at them, stony-faced, his eyes flashing emerald fire. "You lot have not treated me kindly in the past, nor have you reported anything accurately. If you want the truth about why I needed to come here in the first place, read Hermione Granger's article about the Battle of Little Hangleton. That's the only factual reporting that's been done about that battle. I'll be checking to see how badly you've mangled what's being said here today. If you ever want any cooperation from me again, you'll report the truth and not make things up. I'm fine. I'm healthy. I had some injuries that scarred and needed to be treated. They were treated today, and I'm fine."

Some questions were shouted, and Remus raised a quelling hand. "If you don't raise your hands, you won't be called on to speak," he said in his best professorial voice.

The crowd quieted when they saw they weren't going to have their way, and then a sea of upraised hands was waving in Harry's face. He was trying to hold his temper, but he was tired, in some pain, and just wanted to be left alone. A small hand crept into his and squeezed it gently, Ginny letting him know she was still there for him and understood his dilemma. He took a deep breath and then pointed at a little old man nearly buried by the tall, aggressive younger reporters around him. "You, sir. No, not you," he said, waving away the more insistent reporters around the old man. "You. In the dark blue robes. Yes, you, sir. What's your question?"

"Thank you, Mr. Potter!" the old man said in delight. "I'm Alfred Snowden, of the *Wizards News Weekly*. I would like to know your take on the war so far. I'd also like to hear Mr. Weasley's opinion on it."

"Fine," Harry said, relieved the question wasn't too personal. "We are at war, but a lot of the wizarding world seems to want to keep their eyes closed about it, as if they're hoping it will all go away. It won't. Everyone needs to be prepared to defend what they believe in, to protect their loved ones and their property from the Death Eaters, and to support those who are fighting on their behalf. Voldemort is alive, he's real, he's powerful, but he can be defeated. Giving in to him isn't the way to go forward – that just makes him more arrogant. People need

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to learn defensive skills and do whatever they can to fight back when they're attacked." He turned to his best friend. "Ron?"

"Um, well, yeah," Ron began, his ears red as fire. He was fine when he had to protect Harry, but giving his opinion to a crowd of reporters? How was he going to manage that? He glanced at Harry, who smiled encouragingly.

"Ron's the general of Dumbledore's Army," Harry said helpfully, "and his brilliant strategies saved a lot of lives, as well as helping ensure a victory for our side."

At that, Ron's ears turned even pinker, but he straightened his broad shoulders, took a deep breath and finally began to speak. Once he started speaking, his passion for the subject took over and he was eloquent.

"You wanted to know my views on the war? I think it's a shame that kids are the ones having to fight it. Where are the adults, other than Aurors and our professors, of course, who should be out there fighting? You have teenagers out there putting their lives on the line while adults sit in their comfortable chairs and moan over the state of things. Get off your arses and help us!" His voice had an authoritative snap to it that had the reporters staring at the tall redhead in surprise. "We are doing everything we can, but we could use your help. Stop reporting things hysterically. Be more objective and calm in your reporting so you don't scare people to death and keep them from being any use to the war effort. Stop undermining the authority of those who are fighting. You reporters are causing a lot of the problems we're having. We will be watching how you report on this meeting today. We do have our own ways of releasing news, and we'll use them if you print lies about what was said here." He turned back to Harry. "That's all I had to say."

"Well done, Ron," Harry said with a proud grin at his friend. "Next question." Harry chose another quiet reporter rather than the pushy ones. The questions went on for fifteen minutes before he called a halt. He looked at his watch and said, "It's late. I've had a long day, so I'm going home. Your families might appreciate it if you went home and had dinner with them, as well. Goodbye."

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Remus arrived just as Molly was telling the twins to set the table. "You're finally here! I was so worried!" she cried to the new arrivals, obviously thrilled to see all of them. "Harry, dear, come sit down! You do look a bit peaky, Ginny was right. How are you?"

"I'm fine," he began, and then was shouted down by both Ginny and Ron.

"You're never fine when you say you are!" they teased, which resulted in a burst of laughter all around.

"OK! OK! I'm not fine!" he said, laughing with everyone else. "I'm sore, I'm tired, I'm a bit grouchy. How's that?" he added with a cheeky grin.

"That sounds like the truth to me!" Ginny said, ruffling his hair fondly as she sat on the arm of the chair where her mother had seated Harry.

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"Tell me everything," Molly urged as she carried one heavily laden dish after another from the kitchen to the table. Arthur, Remus and Ron moved to help her, while the twins were making a royal muddle of setting the table because they kept trying to do it with magic and were playing more than working, as usual.

Harry started to get up to help, but Ginny locked her fingers gently but firmly in his hair and said, "Stay put, Potter! You're supposed to be resting!"

"Ouch! You're supposed to be coddling me, not abusing me!" he protested mildly, then gently tugged on her hair in retaliation.

"Coddle, coddle," she said, kissing him on the temple, then getting up and grabbing the cutlery that Fred was levitating to the table. "You'll make a mess that way, Fred!" she fussed, sounding a great deal like her mother. She set the table quickly, shooing her brothers off to get the rest of the food and dishes while she straightened up what they'd already laid out.

Dinner was a fun affair, as was usual in the Weasley household. Harry let the others tell all about the exhausting day he'd had, including the impromptu press conference at the end of his visit to St. Mungo's, just responding when asked a direct question. He really was tired, and would like nothing better than to rest somewhere with Ginny in his arms. A nap sounded quite appealing, actually. The cheerful voices around him became a quiet buzz in the back of his mind as his eyes closed and his head drooped.

"Oh, look," Arthur said quietly. "The poor lad's so knackered, he's drifting off." He looked at Ron. "Help him up to bed, why don't you?" he suggested.

"K," he replied. "C'mon, mate! Beddy-bye for peaky boys!"

"Huh?" Harry said, snapping awake from his doze. "What?"

"You need to lie down, dear. You're exhausted," Molly said kindly.

Harry's cheeks flamed scarlet. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. . ."

"Hush. You've had a hard day. Go and get some rest now, all right?" Molly urged him.

"I honestly don't want to go to bed right now," he protested. "I'm fine." He glared defiantly at all the smiling faces surrounding him.

"If he's so fine," George teased, "let him do the dishes."

"And scrub the floors," Fred added.

"And feed the chickens" George said.

"And milk the cow," Fred said.

"We don't have a cow," George corrected.

"And catch a cow and then milk it," Fred amended.

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"Boys!" Molly chided them. "Leave Harry alone!"

Harry snorted into his glass of pumpkin juice. The twins were always good for a laugh, or a distraction, at the very least.

"Come on, sweetie, let's go and sit in the living room," Ginny said, standing up and tugging on his arm.

"Um. . .OK," he agreed after looking to see if her parents would object. He stood and picked up his dishes, trying to clean up after himself.

"No, no, leave those, Harry," Molly said. "You go with Ginny. We'll take care of your dishes."

"Thanks," he said sincerely, then followed Ginny into the living room and settled himself in the big easy chair that was normally Arthur's domain.

"You sure your dad won't mind?" he said as Ginny burrowed in next to him. The chair was wide enough that they could cuddle in together comfortably. Harry stretched out his long legs and put his feet on the cushy pouf in front of the chair. Ginny tucked her legs underneath herself.

"No, he won't mind," she said, wriggling under his arm and putting her head on his shoulder. "Relax, sweetheart. Mum was right. You're still peaky."

"Uh-huh," he said, "I feel peaky, as well." He tightened his arm around her and rested his cheek on her hair, and was soon asleep. His dreams were pleasant ones, of a happy family milling around cheerfully, low voices rumbling quietly in the distance, and a lovely warm presence snuggled up beside him. He sighed contentedly, thoroughly enjoying this blissful moment in his life.

A stifled snort of laughter brought him close to wakefulness some time later. His eyes still closed, he became aware of a happy purring-type sound by his shoulder, and a lovely soft weight in his hand. Struggling up from the depths of his dreams, he remembered his arm was around Ginny. *Ginny's purring?* He wondered absently, nestling his cheek more firmly in her hair, drinking in the scent of her as he did so and trying to get back to sleep. His hand moved a bit and he realised it was cupping Ginny's breast. Seemingly with a mind of its own, his hand was stroking her breast, kneading it gently, then moving forward to envelope its sweet mass in his palm. That snort of laughter came again, quickly stifled, but enough to wake Harry up and make him withdraw his hand. He opened his eyes and saw the twins sitting across from him and Ginny, elbowing each other and enjoying the show. Ginny had dozed off as well, but his movement woke her.

"Mmm, I was having the nicest dream," she purred, stretching like a cat.

"Me too," he murmured, blushing madly as the twins finally broke in to full-bodied laughter.

"What's so funny?" Ginny asked muzzily, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

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"Oh, nothing. Just the thought of what would happen if it had been someone other than us who caught you two," Fred offered.

"Caught us?" Ginny asked, truly perplexed.

Harry was beet red. "Erm. . .my hand . . .um. . .," he stammered. "I'm didn't mean to – I was asleep, after all – but my hand wasn't. . .erm. . .on its best behaviour."

"Didn't mean to. . .wasn't. . .huh?" She sat back and looked up at him, completely baffled. He threw her a hint by rubbing the side of her breast with his thumb for the briefest possible moment. She blushed madly as well. "Oh! Erm. . .well. . .you were asleep. It's OK," she assured him.

"What are you two grinning about?" Molly asked the twins as she came into the living room.

"Oh, nothing," they said together, the picture of innocence.

Harry and Ginny did their best to stop blushing, but it was very difficult with the twins' twinkling eyes locked on them.

"Did you wake Harry up?" Molly chided the twins.

"Um . . .no?" Fred said hopefully.

"Not us!" George assured her.

"You lot clear off and leave them alone," their mother ordered.

Grinning like madmen, the two left the room, but not without giving Harry huge winks behind their mother's back.

Ron came in and sat in a chair opposite his best friend and sister. "What are they on about?" he asked, nodding his head toward the departing twins.

"The usual," Ginny said with a sigh, straightening up to sit a bit more separately from Harry. "How are you feeling, sweetie?" she asked, turning her warm brown eyes up to study her boyfriend's face.

"Better. The nap helped," he said. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Sorry about that," he murmured against her hair. She giggled in reply.

"What did the twins say about me needing so much time off work?" Harry asked Ron.

"They don't have a problem with it. It's just a shame we're so close on the assembly line. . . ." Ron said with a shrug. "Another day or two and we should have all the bugs worked out of it."

"Can you bring those plans we were working on here tomorrow?" Harry asked. "I can probably work on them with no problem."

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"Sure!" Ron replied. "That would be great." He glanced back toward the kitchen, where the rumble of the adults' voices could be heard. "You've been asleep a while. It's late. D'you want me to help you up to bed, or can you make it by yourself?"

"I'll be right there, mate," Harry said, dropping his feet off the pouf and tightening his arm around Ginny. As Ron moved off, Harry pulled Ginny close and rubbed noses with her. "I love you, sweetheart," he whispered before kissing her goodnight.

"I love you, too," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him as closely as she could without hurting him. "I'm so glad you're OK."

"Me, too." He pulled her into one last kiss, his tongue tracing the line of her lower lip, then slipping inside the delicious warmth of her mouth, breathing in her breath as if it were a life-giving potion. A sound from the kitchen broke them apart. "I'd better go before we get in trouble," he said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I suppose," she said, releasing him reluctantly. "See you in the morning."

By midmorning of the next day, Harry and Ron had Molly's kitchen table completely covered in parchments filled with drawings, notes, calculations and other things understandable only to the two of them. They were working hard on completing the design of the assembly line for the twins' shop. Ginny and Molly watched with interest, doing their best not to distract the boys.

"What about. . .?" Ron asked, sliding a drawing over to Harry and pointing to some obscure part of the sketch.

"Hmm? Oh. Um. . .yeah, right there. No, wait. That process should be moved to. . ." Harry paused as he dug madly through another stack of parchment. "Wait. Yeah. Here," he said, pointing to something on the drawing he'd dug out.

Molly stood up and leaned over their shoulders, trying to make sense of what they were doing. She shook her head, completely baffled, then picked up a basket and went out to the garden.

Ginny took her place, standing back far enough that she hoped she wouldn't disturb Harry. She found out she hadn't stood back far enough when he reached back and squeezed her knee, without taking his eyes off his work or breaking his momentum. She giggled and moved away, leaving the boys to their work.

"Hey, I thought I'd at least get a kiss out of that," Harry grumbled when he felt her move away.

"I didn't want to bother you," she said, walking up behind him and kissing the top of his head. "There. Is that better?"

"Not much, but I suppose it will have to do for now," he teased.

"Oy, get a room," Ron mumbled, doing his best to keep concentrating on his work.

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"Yeah, right," Harry said, taking one of Ginny's hands from its spot on his shoulder and kissing her palm. "Mmm, you taste good. What are you two up to?" he asked, glancing up at her.

"More jams and fruit pies, eventually," Ginny replied. "Just picking and cleaning fruit this morning."

"Heaven must be filled with the smells of a kitchen in the middle of jam season," Harry mused. "And bread baking. And cakes. And treacle tarts. . ."

"Harry!" Ron protested. "You're making me hungry!"

"You're always hungry," Harry replied with a laugh. "OK, I'm sorry. I'll be good now." He turned his face up to look at Ginny, who was still behind him. "That means, you, m'lady, will have to go out and torment garden gnomes or something so you're not so close to me! You're a distraction!" He smiled and pulled her down into an upside down kiss.

"Mmmm, that's lovely," Ginny murmured, rubbing his nose with hers.

"Yeah. Lovely indeed," he replied, a besotted look on his face.

"Hey! D'you mind? My girlfriend is *still* in Italy, and will be for several more weeks!" interjected a rather irritated Ron. "It's not fair, you two having so much fun with me so frustrated."

Harry leaned his head on Ron's shoulder and batted his eyelashes at his friend. "We're so terribly sorry, Ronnikins," he teased, then burst into laughter at the look on Ron's face. Ron just made a disgusted noise in response.

"OK, I'm going to help Mum so you two can finish your work," Ginny said, waving as she went outside with a basket over her arm.

Harry waved at her and then turned to Ron, a goofy grin on his face.

"You've got it badly," Ron teased. "She has you wrapped around her little finger."

"Yeah. And I like it!" Harry agreed cheerily. He felt so much better today. A good night's rest was a huge help, but he could already tell a difference in his range of motion. There was a lot less pain than he'd had before, as well. Ginny had applied the ointments to his scars that morning and Harry was in less pain than he'd been in quite a while, which put him in quite a good mood.

The boys worked diligently for several hours, only taking a short break for lunch. By mid-afternoon, they were finished. Ron took the completed plans to the twins, and Harry took a well-deserved rest by going for a walk with Ginny.

"I wish life was always this nice," Harry said, smiling down at his sweetheart as they walked hand-in-hand in the woods just over the hill from the house.

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"Me, too," she agreed. "It will be someday. In the meantime, we've got a little time to ourselves, and I intend to enjoy it!"

He wrapped his arms around her and she leaned back against them, smiling up at him tenderly. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" Ginny said.

"Nope. No idea at all," he teased.

"Come here, then, and I'll show you," she purred, grabbing the front of his shirt and tugging.

Harry leaned down and rubbed noses with her, then kissed her forehead, each eye, the tip of her nose. Ever so tenderly, his lips brushed hers, teasing, tickling with gentle caresses. His tongue traced the sweet outline of her lips and then explored the warm depths of her mouth. Their tongues dancing around each other's, they breathed each other's breath and sighed with pure pleasure. The kiss went on until they were both dizzy with it, and then Harry pulled Ginny to the ground, his blood pounding in his veins, he was so filled with desire for her. His hands were exploring the lush contours of her breasts when they heard Molly calling them. They broke apart, gasping, then laughing, both of them blushing brightly.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted," Ginny said philosophically as she straightened her clothing.

"Yeah. We have to get some time to ourselves. I miss you," he said, kissing her quickly before helping her to her feet and brushing the leaves off of her clothes.

"I'm right here, Harry," she teased, brushing off his clothes in turn.

"You know what I mean," he said with his crooked grin. She laughed, knowing exactly what he meant.

"HARRY! GINNY!" Molly called, her voice getting nearer.

"Here we are, Mum!" Ginny cried, trying to get the last of the leaves out of her hair. "What's up?"

"Oh, there you are! Harry, Remus wants a word with you," Molly said, panting a bit as she climbed the hill toward them. "He's waiting in the fire."

"What's up?" Harry asked as they followed her down the hill. He was glad Molly was in front of them. Ginny still had some twigs and leaves in her long silky hair. He picked at them until he finally had her presentable again.

She grinned up at him mischievously and whispered, "Thanks!"

"He wants to see how you're feeling, I think," Molly said with a fond smile. "He's certainly become a good father-figure to you, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has," Harry agreed with a grin. Remus filled a gaping hole in Harry's heart that had been there as long as he could remember. He was amazed and joyful every time he thought about the fact that he was finally part of a loving family, even if that family consisted of only his godfather.

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"Hi, Remus!" Harry said as he sat in front of the fire. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. I was in meetings all day or I would've called earlier. I wanted to see how you're feeling today. You look wonderful! The Weasleys must be taking excellent care of you," Remus said with a grin and a twinkling glance at Ginny.

"They tend to do that," Harry agreed cheerily.

"How are you feeling? Any pain, any problems?" Remus asked.

"I'm feeling so much better than I did yesterday," the boy replied with a happy smile. "The treatment really helped, and my scars are visibly smaller and lighter in colour! I was a bit tired last evening, but I'm fine today."

"You're always fine!" Ginny scoffed, ruffling his hair playfully. Harry just grinned at her.

"You do remember you need to come home tonight, don't you?" Remus reminded him. "You only have a few days left to stay here, but. . ."

"I'll be back before tea," Harry replied.

"Oh, no, Harry, I've already started dinner with you in mind!" Molly called from the kitchen. "I'm making steak and kidney pie for you, and cherry tart, and. . ."

Harry laughed at Molly's wheedling tone. "OK, then, I'll be back *after* tea!" he told Remus. "Is that all right?"

"Certainly. See you later, then," Remus said with a smile.

"Remus, you're welcome to join us," Molly said fondly. "We always enjoy your company."

"Thanks, Molly, but I've got some work to finish. I'd better stay here and get it done," he replied.

Harry leaned closer to the fire, a cheeky grin on his face. "This gives you another free evening with Tonks! Take her somewhere special for dinner!" he said, teasing his godfather. "Don't spend all your time working!"

"I just might do that, lad!" Remus said, chuckling. "See you soon. Goodbye, Molly, Ginny. Thanks for taking such good care of him!"

"Always our pleasure," Molly called. "You come to tea when you can, Remus!"

"I will, thanks! Goodbye!" With that, his head disappeared from the fire.

"So, Harry," Molly asked with a curious glint in her eye, "are Remus and Tonks becoming an item?"

"An 'item?'" he asked innocently, winking at Ginny when her mum looked away.

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"You know. Sweethearts," Molly clarified.

"Um, well. . .yeah, I think so," Harry replied casually, sharing an expectant smirk with Ginny.

As if on cue, Molly straightened up from her cooking. "Really? Tell me everything!" she said with a delighted smile. "I thought they seemed very chummy. Oooo, do tell me all! I just adore a good love story!"

"Um. . .I'm not sure how to tell a love story," he said, snorting with laughter.

"Just tell me what's been going on. She's staying there at Privet Drive, right? Has there been any . . .um. . .hanky-panky going on?" she said, blushing as she asked, but gazing at him eagerly just the same.

"Mum! Harry's not one of those tabloid reporters!" Ginny chided her with a laugh. "Are you, baby?"

"No, not me!" he said, blushing as he thought about the kinds of things he could tell if he wanted to. But he shouldn't. But this was Mrs. Weasley, his dear friend. But he really, truly shouldn't. She looked so disappointed, though. "Well. . .they spend a lot of time talking," he said, wondering how much he could get away with telling. It would have to be just enough to keep Mrs. Weasley happy, but not so much that he was giving away secrets he shouldn't.

"Just talking?" Molly asked, looking a bit disappointed.

"Talking and laughing," Harry admitted. "They tease each other a lot. They seem to enjoy each other's company."

"They seemed to enjoy each other's company a lot when they were snogging during that film!" Ginny said with a laugh.

"Ginny!" Harry cried, looking at her nervously, a blush creeping up his face. "Some things should be private!"

"They were in a cinema! That's not private!" she chortled.

Harry gave his girlfriend a look and willed her to read his mind. *Why haven't I started teaching her Legilemency?* he thought, kicking himself. *If she keeps this up, her mum will realize we were snogging in the cinema too!*

"They're adults, Ginny. They can get away with things like that," Molly said serenely. She looked from Ginny to Harry and saw the blushes on both of their faces, and gave a knowing nod. She wasn't stupid, and she remembered snogging with her boyfriends when she was her daughter's age. She smiled at the two of them and went back to preparing the evening meal. "Well, I'm happy for them. Tonks seems to be good for Remus. I've never seen him as happy as he's been the last few months."

"Yeah, she does make him happy. And she seems happy with him, too," Harry agreed, glad Molly hadn't pushed any further in the snogging discussion. He caught Ginny's eye and they

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both had to stifle their laughter. Molly saw them and turned away, smiling to herself. She really did adore a good love story, and there seemed to be one blossoming under her own roof.

Dinner that evening was delicious and fun, as usual at a Weasley meal. Molly continuously offered Harry extra helpings of everything, saying he needed "building up" after the hard day he'd had. He accepted her pampering with good grace and ate until he thought he would burst.

"That was delicious, Mrs. Weasley," the boy said with a grin, finishing off the last of his piece of cherry tart and sitting patiently still while Ginny playfully brushed crumbs out of his beard. "Thank you."

"I do so love to feed growing boys," she said with delight. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I'd better get my things together. I have to go back to Privet Drive tonight," he said with a sigh, gently squeezing Ginny's shoulder as he got up from the table.

"I wish you didn't have to go," she said.

"Me, too. But it's only for a few more days, and then I can move to Grimmauld Place and *never, ever* have to go to Privet Drive again!" he said in excitement, his eyes dancing. "I can't wait!"

A short time later, Harry stood in the Weasleys' garden, having said goodbye to the family. He held Ginny close for a moment, then bent to kiss her goodbye. When they broke the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers. "I miss you already."

"Me, too."

"See you soon. Thanks again for looking after me so well."

"Take care of yourself! Call me if you need anything," she prompted.

"I will. See you," he said, kissing her once more, then stepping away from her and holding his hand out for Merlin. The phoenix flew from the fence rail where he'd been waiting and hovered over Harry just long enough for the young man to grab his tail. In a flash of light, Harry and Merlin disappeared from the Burrow, reappearing a moment later at Number Four Privet Drive. Harry entered the house and went quietly up to his room with Merlin on his shoulder, startling Remus and Tonks who were engaged in serious snogging on Remus's bed. All three of them blushed madly.

"Erm. . .sorry!" Harry said, his ears feeling as if they were on fire.

Remus was blushing as badly as Harry, but Tonks was laughing merrily. "If you two could see yourselves!" she said, looking from one mortified man to the other. "You're both too cute, you are!" She gave Remus a resoundingly loud smack of a kiss, then crossed the room to where Harry stood uncertainly by his door. "You are so adorable," she said, standing on tiptoes to give Harry a kiss on the cheek. "Sorry about snogging in your room, but this is where I found him and I couldn't keep my hands off him!"

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"Tonks!" Remus cried, blushing even more, then laughing when she bounded over to him and shoved his shoulders hard, flattening him on the bed.

"Now I've got you where I want you," she teased as she leaned over him, her shoulder-length purple hair swinging forward to tickle his nose.

"Um. . .I'll come back later," Harry said quietly, turning to go.

"Oy, Harry, I'm just playing around," Tonks said, immediately changing her behaviour from flirtatious to friendly. "I'm sorry. It's my fault. He had work to do and I got tired of waiting for him to finish. You just arrived when I was, um, shall we say, 'encouraging' him to think about enjoying life a little."

Harry snorted. "You and Ginny have a lot in common," he said, chuckling as he remembered her interrupting his and Ron's work earlier that day.

"Let's go to that little café," Remus began, looking fondly at Tonks.

"Where we had our first dinner out together? Brilliant! They have excellent pie!" she replied eagerly.

"Harry, do you want to come?" Remus invited.

"No, thanks. Mrs. Weasley seems to think the best way to make someone feel better is to feed them until they're ready to explode," he replied with a grin. "You two kids go on and have a good time. Don't forget your curfew!" he teased.

The adults were both laughing as they left the room. "See you later," Remus said.

"Good night, sweetie!" Tonks called just before she danced lightly down the stairs.

"Good night," Harry replied, grinning as he closed his door. He wondered how Remus could keep up with Tonks's boundless energy. She never slowed down! He was glad to see Remus so happy. Tonks was really good for him.

Harry put on his pyjamas and pulled out his summer homework, determined to get it done as soon as possible so he could enjoy his summer with nothing hanging over his head. One of his essays for Remus was about the types of spells that would combat some of the Dark spells in those reference books Ben Dervish had given him. Harry spent a long time researching the spells he'd chosen to write about, and the proper defence to use against each one, making notes as he went. Tiring of this, he dug out some of the jinx and hex books from the Room of Requirement and made notes on the Knee-Reversing Hex, the Babbling Curse and others that he found interesting. "Knee-Reversing, huh?" he mumbled through a huge yawn. "Sounds like a good one." He stretched and put his books, parchment, ink and quill away, then stretched out to sleep.

Remus came in a short time later, closing the door quietly when he saw the darkened room. He gazed fondly at his godson, who was sprawled haphazardly on his narrow bed, long arms and legs hanging out in various directions. He moved silently to the boy's bedside and gently tucked him in, warmed by the tender feelings such a simple act evoked in him. A fleeting

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smile crossed Harry's face as he settled into his pillow more comfortably. Remus stood watching the peaceful expression on the boy's face, the soft rise and fall of his chest as he slept, and was once again thankful that he was so fortunate to have this young man in his life. Remus got ready for bed himself and lay down to sleep. The last thing he saw as his eyes closed was his godson's handsome face softly illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the windows. Remus had known very little love in his life. He would never have believed he'd be blessed with a love such as he felt for Harry, or the love he felt growing in his heart for Tonks. With a very contented sigh, Remus Lupin fell asleep.

"Today's the day! Today's the day! Today's the day!" Harry chortled, jumping on his bed over and over, eventually hitting his head on the ceiling. He was simply too tall to be jumping on his bed under the low ceiling of a Muggle bedroom. "Ouch!" he cried, clapping his hand on top of his head, and continuing to jump, if in a more crouched position, laughing all the while.

"Happy to be leaving, are you?" Remus said with an amused grin as he looked up from his packing.

"YES!" Harry cried, pumping his fists in the air as he bounced some more. "Blimey, I am such an idiot!" he muttered, then raised the ceiling magically so he could jump to his heart's content.

"Your aunt won't appreciate your doing that, you know," Remus chided him gently, watching the tall young man bouncing harder than ever.

"I know! I've never been allowed to do this! That's why I'm doing it, because it doesn't matter anymore!" the young man said with an expression of pure bliss, finally flopping on his back, his arms and legs spread-eagled, chuckling at his own silliness. He sat up and gave his godfather a cheeky grin. "Hurry up, Remus! I've been packed for ages!"

"You've been packed for approximately ten minutes," Remus corrected him. "That's not ages except to a house fly that only lives a grand total of three days, now, is it?"

"Ages, simply AGES! C'mon, hurry up, let's GO!" Harry urged him, bounding around the room, pulling out empty drawers, looking in his empty wardrobe, burrowing under his bed and in his secret hole under the floor, then scanning the bare walls to make sure he hadn't left anything behind. He pulled the chart on which he'd counted down the days until he could leave Privet Drive out of the bin and started tearing it into tiny little pieces, throwing the bits around the room like so much confetti.

"All right, then," Remus said, closing his trunk at last. "I'm ready." They put Shrinking Charms on their trunks and put them in their pockets. Harry did the same with Merlin's perch and they were done. With a quick wave of his hand, Harry had all the bits of confetti neatly stowed in the bin and stripped the bed, sending the bed linens sailing into the clothes hamper, which he Banished to the laundry room. He looked around in great satisfaction. His room was as neat as a pin, as if no one had ever lived there. They grinned at each other, preparing to Apparate to Grimmauld Place, when they heard a tentative knock on the wall.

"Oh, I forgot to take the hexes off the door and floor," Harry muttered as he went to answer the door. He waved his hand casually at the door and toward his bed, beneath which resided

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his much-appreciated loose floorboard, and said "*Finite incantatum*," just before opening the door. "Hello, Aunt Petunia," he said cheerfully. Even the sight of his aunt's uneasy, horsy face wasn't going to mar his joy in this day for which he'd waited all of his life.

"Um. . .hello, Harry," Petunia replied nervously. "Ready to go, then?"

"Yes, we were just leaving. I took the spell off the door. It won't hurt anyone now. Go on, try it," he urged her, pushing the door knob toward her.

She held her hand out hesitantly, glancing up at him timidly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," he replied in a kind voice.

She touched the door knob gingerly at first, and then held it in a firm grip, gasping in relief when she didn't turn into an iguana. "Thank you."

"No problem. What did you want?"

"I wanted. . .I wondered. . .well, I knew you'd be leaving soon," she said hesitantly. "I wondered if you'd go and see your uncle before you left."

"I hadn't planned on it. I thought seeing me would give him another heart attack or something," he said with a shrug.

"That's why you haven't visited him?"

Harry looked at her in disbelief. Why would she think he'd ever want to see his nasty uncle again? He decided to proceed carefully. "The sight of me makes him furious, and that can't be good for his heart. I never wanted to make him ill, and I certainly don't want to be the cause of a relapse now that he's getting better." He studied his aunt's tense face. "He is getting better, isn't he?"

"Yes, the doctors are amazed, actually. His arteries should have been clogged, from all they knew, but his heart's arteries were as clean as could be. They didn't understand it. They've talked of little else all this time. They can't imagine how those arteries could be so clean, when others they've checked through various tests did have blockages. They've done what they could to clear those." She looked up at him, almost shyly. "You fixed those blockages when you worked on him, didn't you?"

"Yes. I didn't know what else to do to get the blood flowing properly," he said with a shrug.

"Please, Harry, would you consider going to see him before you go?"

"Why?" He was shocked she'd even ask.

"I think he needs a chance to tell you goodbye."

"Does he want to?" His eyebrows were raised in surprise. He turned and looked over his shoulder at his godfather. "Remus, do you know anything about this?"

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"What do you mean?"

"Did you put a Memory Charm on Uncle Vernon too?"

"No, and I removed the one on your aunt this morning," Remus assured him. "I left her the memories of how things have been since she had the Charm, but she should remember everything now."

"Everything?" Harry asked uneasily, wondering how she was going to act around him, or around his uncle, when she remembered her crush on James Potter. He ran his fingers nervously through his long hair, glad that its length and his beard made him look so much less like his dad.

"Everything," Remus said seriously.

Petunia watched this exchange with sad eyes, then reached out and put her hand on Harry's arm pleadingly. "Please. I know you don't owe either of us anything. We've been so awful to you, and none of it was your fault. It was mine. I want to make things right. Would you please come to see him? Just for a few minutes?"

Harry studied her face, not sure how to respond. He glanced back at his godfather again.

Remus walked up behind him and put his hand on the young wizard's shoulder. "I'll go with you, if you like."

Harry looked at Remus quizzically. "You think I should go?"

"I think everyone deserves a second chance," Remus said with a shrug. "Even your uncle."

Harry sighed. He didn't want to go. He was afraid the sight of him would throw his uncle into a rage and cause another heart attack. But in the back of his mind, he heard Casey talking about "closure." He could see her face in his mind's eye as she talked to him about facing things that hurt him and dealing with them. He could almost feel her presence, he felt he could almost reach out and touch her, but then his mental image of her dissolved into one of Ginny, smiling at him and telling him that deep down, possibly *really* deep, deep down, he really did love his uncle. Those feelings might be buried under years of anger and abuse, but they were there somewhere. He knew she would tell him he needed to face the man one last time in order to move on with his life. He sighed again. "All right. I'll do it."

"Thank you," Petunia said sincerely. "Visiting hours start at ten this morning. Can you be there then?"

"Yes, I'll be there," he agreed.

Remus and Harry had taken their things to Grimmauld Place and were now standing in the corridor outside Vernon's room, just after the start of visiting hours. Petunia and Dudley were already with Vernon. Petunia wanted to prepare her husband for Harry's visit before he came in.

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"I don't feel right about this," Harry said nervously. "What if I make him have another attack?"

"He's in a hospital. They'll take care of him," Remus assured him.

"Harry! There you are!" a familiar voice called, and two redheads jogged down the corridor to join them.

"Ron! Ginny! What are you doing here?" Harry said in delighted amazement.

"Remus told us what was going on, and Ginny insisted on being here," Ron explained. "Fred and George and our parents would have come too, but we thought that would be a bit much."

"Yeah," Harry said with a grin as he held Ginny in his arms. "That would push him over the edge for sure." He rested his cheek on her hair. "Thank you. I'm so glad you're here," he murmured in her ear as he kissed her neck. He looked up at Ron. "Thanks, mate. I mean it."

Ron just shrugged and grinned. "I wouldn't miss this for anything. Good luck in there. You deserve it."

"Thanks," Harry said, then turned his attention back to the lovely warm body currently wriggling in his arms. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too." She snuggled into his arms with delight for another moment, then pushed him away. "You need a bit of fixing up before you go in," she said in a businesslike voice. "I thought you would."

"Fixing up?" he said with a grin. "I did my best!"

"First off – it's a good job you got rid of the beard. He doesn't like it," she said, looking at him appraisingly. "And you shortened your hair, but it sticks up all over again. What can we do about that?" she mused, studying him seriously. "Oh, I know! Grow it again, a good bit longer than before, and don't trim the sides."

"Why not?" he said, glancing around to make certain they weren't being watched, then quickly lengthening his hair as directed. His hair soon flowed in a shiny black river waving down to his shoulder blades, all but his fringe, which he kept short to hide his scar. "Is this long enough?"

"Perfect! Bend down," she said, pulling something out of her pocket. "I came prepared for this." She parted his hair on the right and smoothed it back into a low-set pony tail, then wrapped a band around it to secure it. "There."

"You think he's going to like me with a pony tail?" Harry said in surprise.

"I didn't say I was done yet!" she said with a cheeky grin. "Lean down again. Sometimes it's a bother that you're so tall!"

"Sometimes you sound just like your mother," Harry said with a chuckle, "not that I mind, of course." He bent down again so she could reach him.

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Ginny tucked the pony tail securely under his collar, made certain it was lying as flat on his back as possible, then glanced around to see if anyone was watching. "Cover me, Ron, Remus," she whispered, then pulled out her wand.

"What are you going to. . .?" Harry began before she shushed him.

"There! Perfect!" Ginny said with a grin, stepping back from him and admiring her handiwork.

"What did you do?" he asked, lifting his hand to touch the back of his hair.

"Don't touch it or you'll mess it up! Don't move around too much either. I'm not certain how well it will hold up," she told him. "I've tucked your hair into your collar and secured it there magically. Then I Disillusioned just the pony tail part of it, so it looks as if you have normal, short hair in back. Pulling your hair back like that made all of it lie down properly. I think this may be what your uncle wishes you looked like. No reason not to do it just this once, right?"

"Right," he agreed, bending down to kiss her. "Thanks."

Just then, Petunia opened the door and called, "Harry?" She looked at his friends uncertainly.

"They can wait out here," Harry assured her, then followed her into the room.

"What have you done to your hair?" his aunt asked nervously.

"Ginny did it with magic. She thought he'd like to see my hair lying down for once," Harry explained patiently.

A small smile crossed his aunt's face. "That was very thoughtful of you." She glanced uneasily at Ginny. "Thank you."

"I hope he likes it," Ginny said graciously.

With another small, nervous smile, Petunia turned and entered the room, holding the door open behind her for her nephew to follow her. "Harry's here, Vernon," she said quietly.

Harry was shocked by the change in his uncle. His normally florid complexion was pale and pasty. He'd lost weight in the last two and a half weeks and his skin hung on him in great folds. Vernon looked a great deal like Aunt Marge's bulldogs with the sagging flaps of skin now hanging from his jowls.

"Hello, Uncle Vernon. I'm glad you're feeling better," Harry said politely.

"What have you done to yourself? You look different," Vernon snapped.

"Different?" Harry asked nervously.

"Your hair."

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Harry smiled. "Oh. My girlfriend . . ." He didn't know what to say. He was afraid to mention Ginny because the thought of her might send Vernon into a rage. He also couldn't say she'd fixed his hair with magic for the same reason.

"That redhead?" Vernon asked suddenly.

"Yes. Ginny. That's the one," Harry replied.

"Well," Vernon said gruffly, "whatever she told you to do, it looks. . .better."

"Um. . .thanks." A compliment from Uncle Vernon? Was the earth still spinning on its axis? Had the sun fallen out of the sky? A compliment from Vernon Dursley to Harry Potter had to be an earth-shattering event. Harry didn't know what to say next. Apparently, neither did Vernon. Petunia filled the gap.

"The doctors have been quite complimentary on how you managed when Vernon took ill," she said carefully. "Haven't they been saying that, Vernon, dear? That your heart was so damaged, they couldn't imagine how Harry kept you alive until they got to you? And some things they found were unexpected, such as your arteries being as clear as they were?"

"Yes, they've been saying that," the man allowed brusquely.

"I'm glad I could help," Harry said quietly.

Vernon studied the tall young man before him. Petunia had told him many bizarre stories once he'd grown strong enough to converse for very long. All of these stories involved young Potter, here. "Your aunt says. . ." he began, then stopped. He didn't want to believe his wife's mad tales, but even his own son agreed with her. The proof was standing in front of him. He'd get to the bottom of this right now. He sat up straighter and said with more determination, "Your aunt says you've been fighting that Voldy-person."

"Voldemort. Yes." Harry looked at him in confusion. What was he after?

"She says she's seen films of you fighting him. She says you're a decorated hero."

"Yes."

"I don't believe her, you know," Vernon said, squinting his piggy eyes at Harry wisely. "I think you've fooled her and Dudley both with some kind of. . .magic."

"I wish," Harry replied in a snide voice, trying to quell his rising temper. He sighed. "Believe whatever you want, Uncle Vernon. I just came to say goodbye. I won't be living with you anymore. I'm moving to London today."

"Why London?"

"I inherited my godfather Sirius's house. I'll be living there," he said simply. He watched Vernon's face as the man digested this information. "Goodbye then," he said, turning to leave.

"Wait!" Vernon cried unexpectedly.

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"What?"

"Will we be in danger now that you're gone? Will that madman come after us?" he asked nervously.

"I don't know. He's after me, not you, but he does assault people for no good reason, as well. I can't say if you'll be attacked or not. If you are, it won't be because you're related to me. It will just be random, just as when the Ashers were killed last summer." Harry's face was stony. The only thing his uncle had wanted from a visit with him was to know if his home would be attacked. OK, Harry had answered the question. He turned and grabbed the door handle, preparing to leave.

"How can I believe there's such a madman around?" Vernon said uncertainly. "I only have your word for it."

"Aunt Petunia and Dudley both saw him in that recording, saw me fighting with him," Harry growled. "You don't believe them?"

"I find it hard to believe, yes," Vernon allowed, looking at his nephew uneasily.

"If you don't believe them, you certainly won't believe me," Harry said, starting to pull the door open.

"Wait!" Vernon cried. "Wait," he said more calmly. "P-please," he added with great effort.

Harry turned around but held on to the door, keeping it open a crack. He knew Remus, Ron and Ginny were just outside the door. Having that crack in the door, so they were just that much closer, was a comfort to him somehow. "What?"

"Your aunt. . .she told me. . .you have scars."

"Oh, yeah. *Loads* of them," Harry said bitterly.

Vernon looked Harry in the eye, for once not belligerently. "May. . .may I see?"

"No!" Harry snapped. "I'm not a sideshow freak for you to goggle over." He felt air move behind him as the door opened and Remus came in.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley. I'm so glad you're feeling better," Remus said sincerely. "I heard part of what you and Harry just said. He's telling the truth. He has fought Voldemort, he is a hero and he is scarred. He's nearly died several times from these battles. If he weren't such a powerful wizard, he would not have survived. We're lucky to have him on our side."

Vernon stared at Remus, his face darkening as his temper rose, but then he sighed and forced himself to relax. "I've fought against this madness all the years he's been in our house. I understand there's proof that the stories are true. I'd like to see the films."

"We don't have them here," Remus told him. "And quite honestly, you may not be strong enough to watch them. They're terrible to see."

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"What do you want, Uncle Vernon?" Harry asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?" the man said, startled.

"What do you want from me? What will make you happy, so we can leave each other peacefully? I won't be back. This is goodbye." Harry stood totally still, resolute. If his uncle had some kind of reasonable request, he'd do what he could to fulfil it, but he was leaving as soon as possible, hopefully with Vernon still in decent health.

"What do I . . . well. . . ." The man's voice faded away. He stared at his nephew in bewilderment for a long moment, then turned suddenly when Petunia touched him on the arm.

"Go on, dear. Tell him," she urged.

"Tell me what?" Harry demanded, suddenly wary.

"Your aunt and I have, um, discussed this situation quite a bit since I've been well enough to visit with her," Vernon began.

"What situation?" Harry wanted to know.

"The fact that she is now convinced that everything you've said is true, and I'm still . . . shall we say. . . sceptical."

"Aunt Petunia has had some interesting experiences in the last few weeks," Harry replied, "experiences that would convince anyone that what I've been saying all these years is true."

"She told me you saved her from a demeny-whats-it," Vernon said hesitantly.

"A Dementor," Harry corrected patiently. "Yes, I did."

"And you saved me from the heart attack?"

"Yes." Harry couldn't fathom where Vernon was going with all this.

"So you are a . . . a hero, then, by any measure," the man concluded reluctantly.

Harry's eyes widened at this admission, but he didn't respond. He had no idea how to answer that kind of statement. Apparently, his uncle must have been thinking about this subject very seriously for quite a while, to come to such a conclusion about someone he'd hated for so long.

After a few moments, Vernon went on, "I'd like to understand about this Voldy-whosit."

"Voldemort. So would we all," the young wizard commented dryly.

"Why is he after you?"

Harry sighed. "There was a prophecy made before I was born saying I would be the only one who could kill him. He's been trying to kill me ever since."

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"A prophecy?" Vernon said, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"You asked a question and I answered it. I'm being as honest with you as humanly possible. A prophecy was made, and that's what started everything," Harry said, doing his best to maintain his calm demeanour.

Vernon considered this for a moment, then said, "How can you possibly fight a grown man?"

Harry stood quietly, not knowing how to answer. Remus came to his rescue.

"He fights quite well, actually," Remus said with a smile. "Harry is a very powerful wizard. He's actually injured Voldemort rather badly in their last two battles, and decimated his followers."

"What do you mean, 'decimated'?" Vernon asked carefully.

"They're either dead or in jail now, so they aren't a threat anymore," Harry snapped. Remus put a calming hand on the boy's arm.

"Dead? How did they die?" said Vernon.

"I. Killed. Them." the young man said distinctly. "It was a kill or be killed situation. Didn't Aunt Petunia tell you that?"

"Erm, yes. Yes, she did, actually. I just. . ."

"Didn't believe her?" Harry responded.

"Um, yes, that's it."

"Believe it. It's true." Harry forced himself to calm down, to slow his breathing and his racing heart, to soften his features so he looked as non-threatening as possible. "I don't want to upset you, Uncle Vernon. It's probably best if I just leave now."

"No, wait," Vernon said urgently. "Please. I'm trying to understand."

"Understand what?"

"If I'm to believe what Petunia says she saw on that film, you have killed people. And you just admitted it yourself, as well."

"Yes, it's all true. I have killed people in battle."

"I know you hate me, yet you . . . saved my life. You saved Petunia's, as well. Why?" the man looked genuinely puzzled.

"Because I could," Harry said simply. "It was the right thing to do."

The older man was quiet a few moments. "I . . . I don't know what to say," he said, looking stunned.

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"'Thank you' might be a good start," Remus said quietly.

"'Goodbye' would be a good finish," Harry added shortly.

Vernon sat looking from one wizard to the other. Finally, he held out his hand. It was a great effort for Vernon to do what he was about to do, but it needed to be done. "Th-th-thank you. Thank you, Harry."

Harry stepped forward and shook hands with his uncle. "No problem."

"I hope. . .I hope you win your war," Vernon said, his eyes wide, his voice tremulous. "You really are at war?"

Harry held on to his uncle's hand for a moment longer, then sighed and released it. He stepped back and pulled his shirt out of his waistband and lifted it enough to expose his torso, hoping it wouldn't mess up the pony tail Ginny had so carefully arranged. He turned his left side, and then his back, to his uncle, standing close enough that Vernon could touch the scars on his body. They were much improved since his treatment, but were still livid and horrifying to anyone who hadn't seen them before. He heard his uncle's shocked gasp, his aunt's quiet moan, and Dudley's grunt of disgust as they looked at the ravaged mess that used to be a well-formed, beautiful body.

Vernon swallowed hard, forcing himself not to be sick, then finally reaching out a trembling hand and touching the thick ridges of scar tissue making diagonal tracks across the boy's side and back. Some of the scars stood alone, but most were tangled webs of multiple injuries. When Vernon finally found his voice, he croaked out, "What. . .what did this?"

"Voldemort made a whip with loads of lashes come out of the end of his wand," Harry replied in a tense voice, doing his best to explain patiently. "It was like a cat-o'-nine tails you read about in the pirate stories, with sharp things in the ends of the lashes. It laid my skin open to the bone in a lot of places."

"How long ago was this?" Vernon asked, his face ghostly white as Harry pulled his shirt back down and tucked it back in.

"Something over a month," the boy replied.

"How could. . .how. . ." Vernon finally gave up, his mouth working wordlessly as he tried to grasp what his nephew was saying.

Harry understood what was bewildering his uncle. "Wizard medicine works much faster than Muggle medicine. And wizards heal faster than Muggles anyway. If we have a twenty foot fall and don't stick out an arm or leg, we might bounce rather than breaking a bone. If we do break a bone and can get to a healer, the bone can be healed in seconds. I lost all the bones in my right arm my second year in school, due to a badly done spell someone put on me, and my bones were re-grown overnight. It was painful, but it was quick," he said with a shrug.

Vernon's expression changed, as if a light had gone on in his head. "I don't understand it. . .but I do believe you."

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Harry couldn't believe how those simple words filled his heart. He swallowed hard. "I'm glad."

The two of them gazed at each other across years of pain and torment, years of fear and sorrow, and something very fragile clicked into place at last. Vernon held his hand out again. "Take care of yourself, boy."

Harry shook his hand again. "I will. Get well soon." He looked up at his aunt. "Thank you, Aunt Petunia."

"For what?" she said in surprise.

"For this." He glanced at Remus, who nodded. "We'll be going now. Goodbye."

As they turned toward the door, Petunia's voice stopped them. "Harry?"

"Yes?" he said, turning back toward her.

"Let us know how you are from time to time, all right?"

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. "Um. . .OK." He turned back toward the door and opened it, finally leaving the Dursleys for the freedom of his own life, living where he chose and how he chose. His head was swimming with confusion over the experience he'd just gone through, and nearly dizzy with the lightness he felt knowing he'd never, ever have to live with the Dursleys again. As Remus closed the door behind them, Harry swept Ginny up into his arms and spun her around. "Free at last!" he murmured against her neck.

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Remus all greeted Dobby cheerfully as he let them into Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Harry walked into the living room and spun around slowly, taking it all in. Gone were the dark walls, the silver Slytherin door knobs and candlesticks, all replaced by gold-coloured Gryffindor lions. The old door knobs and other Slytherin décor were solid, Goblin-made silver and brought a good price when Dobby sold them for Harry. Dobby had also gotten a very good price on gold-plated, rather than solid gold, Gryffindor decorative items to replace the ones that had been removed. The heavy, dark furniture was now covered with colourful throws in bright, cheerful colours, with the orange of the Chudley Cannons one of the prominent colours.

"I see you've been helping Harry decorate," Ginny teased her brother.

"Well. . .we did do some shopping at lunch time one day. I had a few ideas for him," Ron allowed, shrugging his shoulders.

Harry looked at the cheerful, casual décor, the freshly painted walls, the bright new curtains and said, "I'm home," with tremendous satisfaction.

"I forgot to tell you, Harry," Remus said, enjoying his godson's obvious delight. "The Order members who've seen what you've done with the place like it very well."

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Harry's eyes sparkled. "Thanks! Well, it's really Mrs. Weasley and Ginny who picked out most of the stuff, and Dobby and Winky who did most of the work, but I couldn't be happier with it."

"I helped!" Ron protested mildly.

"Yes you did," Harry agreed. "Dobby, Winky – well done! Thanks!"

Dobby and Winky stood with wide, happy eyes, enjoying their master's pleasure in what they'd done. When Harry thanked them for their work, they both burst into tears.

"Oh, please don't cry!" Harry said, patting each of them on a small, thin shoulder. "I'm happy with what you've done here!"

"We is so honoured to have pleased you, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said, dabbing at his eyes with his shirt tail. As Harry had ordered, they were dressed in clothes of their choosing. Dobby was wearing a Hawaiian shirt in bright red with green, orange and yellow flowers all over it, along with a red sock and a yellow sock. Winky was wearing a pretty little pink dress with an ivory-coloured apron.

"Dobby has taken your things to your room, and Professor Lupin's to his, as well," the house-elf said when he got himself under control again.

"Thanks," Harry said, smiling at the elf.

"What are you going to do your first afternoon in your very own house?" Ginny asked teasingly.

Harry knew what he'd like to do, but Remus and Ron being there made it difficult to whisk Ginny up to his bedroom. "Dunno. D'you want to stay for tea?"

"We promised Mum we'd be home for tea," Ron said. "Charlie's coming in and she thinks she's got Percy talked into coming over as well. You're welcome to come, both of you," he added.

"Thanks!" Harry replied. "That would be great. But you know what? I'd honestly like to spend some time in my house. I'll only be here part of the summer and then off to school again. I've never had a home before," he said wistfully, toying with the flowers Winky had put in a vase on a side table.

"We'll see you later, then," Ron said, heading for the fireplace. "At least we can floo to you whenever we want now, without having to bother Mrs. Figg!"

"Yeah, it's great, isn't it?" Harry said, smiling at his friends. He kissed Ginny and sent her after her brother. "Tell your parents I said thanks for the invitation. I hope they'll understand."

"I'm sure they will," Ginny assured him, running back and kissing him once more before throwing Floo Powder in the fireplace and saying "The Burrow," then disappearing in a swirl of green flames.

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Harry and Remus had a quiet dinner with the house elves, despite the elves' protests that elves shouldn't eat with their masters, and then Harry explored his house, going room to room, finally ending up in the basement. There were his mosaic tools, carefully dusted and oiled by Dobby to maintain them. He poked through the boxes of marble and granite shards, pulling out various pieces and trying the colours next to each other. The thought of Casey was no longer a stabbing pain in his heart. She was a fond and cherished memory, as were her parents and sister. He found the broken mosaic he'd made for her and his heart ached, but then he set it resolutely aside. He got out his sketch pad and drew a design, working out the problems with it that were inherent in mosaic work, then colouring in the design with his coloured pencils. Satisfied with his work, he pulled out a piece of backing board and measured the size he wanted, then touched the power saw with his wand to start it so he could cut the board to size.

Remus, sitting in the living room reading, heard the saw start up and smiled. Harry was back at work on his mosaics. His heart must be healed from last summer's tragedies at last.

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Chapter 7 – Matters of the Heart

The assembly line was working very well, and the twins were delighted. Production time had been cut in half. There were still things that had to be done by hand, though, which was why Harry and Ron could be found at the cutting table most days. This particular hot afternoon, the boys were carefully cutting tansy roots into identical slices.

"Have you heard from Hermione?" Ron asked with unusual casualness.

"I've had a couple of cards from her, yeah. Sounds like she's having a good time in Italy, eh?" Harry replied nonchalantly.

"Um. . .I guess," Ron said uncomfortably.

Harry looked at his friend curiously. "What's up, Ron?"

The redhead looked at him with sad, serious eyes. "I haven't heard from her at all," he murmured in a choked voice.

"What? There's got to be a reason for that," Harry said, shocked at the news. "Are you using Pig or Hedwig to send your letters to her?"

"Pig."

"Well, maybe it's just too far for him, y'know? He's too dinky to make such a long journey. Use Hedwig next time. She can get there with no problem."

Ron's face brightened. "You won't mind?"

"Of course not! Ginny can use Pig, you use Hedwig. Perfect solution."

"Thanks, Harry," Ron replied sincerely.

Several days later, Harry and Ron were once again working at the cutting table, this time dicing caterpillars.

"I hate dicing caterpillars," Harry grumbled. "They're squishy."

"Yeah, and hard to hold, too," Ron agreed, equally grumpy. "But it will be amazing to see people turn into butterflies from the Butterfly BonBons these little chaps are going into!"

"Yeah. I think those are probably the prettiest hexes the twins have come up with," Harry agreed.

"You know where they got the idea, don't you?" Ron said slyly.

"No. Where?"

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"That new girl suggested them. The pretty girl with strawberry blond hair? What's her name, Clarice? I think that's it. George fancies her." Ron grinned, glancing toward the sweets wrapping station on the assembly line where a pretty young woman a few years older than them was working. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail that bobbed cutely as she worked.

"She is pretty," Harry agreed. "Have they been going out much?"

"Just started," Ron confided, and was about to say something else when Hedwig landed in the middle of their table.

"Careful, girl, we need those!" Harry cried as she bent to eat some of the caterpillars waiting to be diced. "Wait, I've got part of a biscuit in my pocket." He dug out the remains of his breakfast scone and gave it to her as Ron removed the letter attached to her leg.

"Hermione finally wrote to me!" Ron cried, his face wreathed in smiles. His smile quickly faded as his eyes raced down the page. His face went from his normal healthy colour to palest white, to beet red, and back to white again, this time with bright red blotches, as he read. He growled a curse and threw the parchment down, stamping away in an obvious rage.

Harry was dumbfounded. What could she have written to send Ron into such a state? He sent Hedwig up to Merlin's perch so she could get some water and rest, then picked up the parchment and followed Ron out of the shop's back door. "What's up, mate?"

"Did you read it?" Ron asked, his face so tight-lipped it was hard to understand his words.

"No."

"You read it. Maybe I misunderstood something," he said, his eyes tortured, no glimmer of hope in their bright blue depths.

Harry skimmed down the page and his jaw dropped in disbelief. He went back to the top and read it again, more slowly.

"Dear Ron," it began, "I'm sorry I haven't written. Pig brought me letters from you several times, but I didn't reply because I just didn't know what to say. Then Hedwig arrived and I realized you'd noticed I hadn't written, so I thought I'd better get this over with. I'm so sorry, Ron. I care about you, I really do, but I've met someone else. His name is Lorenzo. He lives here in Florence – they call it 'Firenze' in Italian. He's 23 and has a Master's degree in Art History. He's working in a museum now and hopes to be the museum director one day. He's taken my parents and me around the city, giving us tours of places tourists never get into, letting us see the artwork and artefacts in storage in his museum, and showing us the country around here, as well. We've been using Firenze as our home base on this holiday, and Lorenzo was our first tour guide here. He's become much more than a tour guide to me. . . ."

The letter went on and on, talking about places she'd visited and things she'd seen, but through it all, Lorenzo hovered in the background. Harry was as astonished as Ron.

"I'm sorry, mate," he gasped. "I had no idea. . . ."

"She didn't let on when she wrote to you?" Ron asked suspiciously.

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"No! Honest, I didn't know anything about this." Harry watched the emotions running across his friend's open face. Ron seemed to be collapsing in on himself, folding up into a miserable ball of grief. Harry put his arm across his friend's shoulders, giving him the only kind of support he could think of at the moment.

"D'you think she's going to . . . marry. . . him?" Ron said after a while. "I didn't read it all the way through."

Harry glanced down at the parchment again. "No, she doesn't say anything like that," he replied. "Nor does she say anywhere that she's in love with him," he added hopefully.

"She doesn't?" Ron asked, his eyes brightening a little. He took the parchment from Harry's hands and read it through all the way this time, then handed it back to Harry in disgust. "She didn't say it in so many words, but it's there just the same," he said miserably.

"What are you two doing?" George said as he came out of the back door, leading a giggling Clarice by the hand.

"Taking a break," Harry replied, hoping George would leave it at that. Ron just turned away, his misery obvious even if his face was hidden.

"Little bro, what's wrong?" George asked in concern.

"Nothing. I'm fine," Ron lied.

"That's Harry's line. You can't say you're fine, especially when you aren't," George chided him gently.

"Erm, George?" Harry said quietly. "The day's almost over. May we go a bit early? I'll clear up our station first."

George looked at his little brother's distraught face. "Sure, Harry. You two go on. You were nearly done with the caterpillars anyway, right?"

"Yeah. I can spell some knives to keep up the work if you want, but it's never as accurate that way," Harry offered.

"You're right, they never are cut as well that way. Just finish them tomorrow, then," George agreed.

"Thanks," Harry said, dragging Ron back into the building. When he glanced over his shoulder, he could see George and Clarice were already deeply engrossed in snogging. He shoved Ron into the tea room and told him to wait there, then raced to clean up their station.

"Hedwig, you go on back to The Burrow, OK? Merlin, you can go back to Grimmauld Place if you want. I'm going to stay with Ron a while." The two birds took off for their destinations, and Harry joined Ron in the tea room. Soon they were walking down Diagon Alley, both of them with their hands shoved deeply in their pockets, their heads bowed in thought, quite upset by what they'd read.

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"Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?" Harry asked after a while, giving up on trying to think of something that might cheer up his friend.

They were passing a pub when Harry spoke. "Let's go in here," Ron said gruffly as he looked through the doorway into the dimly lit interior.

"If you want a pub, The Leaky Cauldron isn't far. We've never been in this one before," Harry said quietly. It wasn't the most savoury-looking place he'd ever seen, more like the dark and dreary Hog's Head in Hogsmeade than the much more cheerful Three Broomsticks or Leaky Cauldron.

"This one suits my mood just fine," Ron said bitterly as he shoved through the doorway and slouched to a seat in the back of the dimly lit room. "Ogden's Old Firewhiskey," he told the bartender as he passed by.

"What?" Harry said in dismay. "You don't drink that stuff!"

"Then it's time I tried it, don't you think? Apparently, she wants a grown man, not a schoolboy. I'm on my way to being a grown man," he growled, slamming into a chair and sitting down with a thud. "I've heard whiskey makes you forget your troubles. That's what I'm looking for."

"If that's all you want, I could do a Memory Charm on you," Harry offered with a crooked grin, hoping to tease Ron out of his dark mood.

"What'll it be, sir?" the bartender asked Harry as he set the glass of whiskey in front of Ron.

"Nothing, thanks," Harry replied.

"You have to have something or you can't be in here, mate," the man said gruffly. "House rules."

"Butterbeer, then," Harry said, annoyed at the man, the place, the situation and his best friend. He had a date with Ginny tonight. She'd worry if he was very late or didn't contact her. He'd have to call and postpone it, or cancel it altogether if Ron kept on the way he was.

Ron picked up the glass and took a sip, then made a horrible face. "Ugh! How does anyone drink this stuff?"

"Have some butterbeer," Harry suggested. "How about some crisps, as well?" Ron just shrugged, too miserable to reply properly. Harry ordered the crisps when the man brought his butterbeer, but by that time, Ron had held his nose and downed the whiskey in one gulp, coughing and sputtering after he did so. Harry pounded on his back. "You OK?"

"Fine," Ron wheezed. He looked blearily up at the bartender. "More! Make it a double!"

"No, Ron, don't!" Harry said, putting a calming hand on his friend's arm. "That's not the way to solve your problem."

"And what IS the way to solve my problem? You're the great Harry Potter, hero of the wizarding world! If anyone can solve a problem, it should be you!" Ron snarled, jerking his

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arm away from Harry's grasp. He took the new drink from the bartender and downed it quickly. "Goes down smoother after the first one," he commented. "Another!"

"Ron, please. You've got to eat something or you're going to be sick. Or at least drunk," Harry warned him.

"I'm fine!" Ron declared. He drank whiskey and ate nothing until he passed out, his head hitting the table with a thud. Nothing Harry had said made even the slightest difference. Ron was determined to get drunk, and that was all there was to it.

"I hope you're happy now," Harry grumbled. He turned toward the dark corner beside him, so his back was to the rest of the bar. To anyone else, it appeared he was talking to Ron's inert form. He pressed the ruby on his ring and said, "Ginny Weasley" very quietly.

"Harry!" she said brightly. "You're late! Is everything OK?"

"Shush," he warned in a whisper. "No, everything isn't OK. Hermione wrote Ron and broke up with him and he went out and got drunk. I don't know what to do with him. Is your dad home?"

"Ron's WHAT?" she cried, then immediately quieted. "Sorry. I'll get him. He just got home." Her face remained above his ring, but he could see her looking around and heard her end of her conversation with her dad. "Dad? Harry's just called and he says Hermione broke up with Ron and now he's drunk. Harry doesn't know what to do with him." She nodded a few times, then turned back to Harry. "Dad wants to know where you are. He'll come to you and take care of Ron."

"We're in The Gargoyle and Banshee. It's a small pub on Diagon Alley, a few doors down from the Quidditch shop, on the same side."

"Do they have a fireplace? Can he floo there?"

"He might be better off Apparating to the twins' shop. It's not far from here," Harry replied.

Once arrangements had been made, Harry and Ginny ended their call so Harry could try to take care of Ron until Arthur arrived.

Ron sat up suddenly. "I'm not feeling too well," he said, then was sick on the floor.

"I'm not surprised," Harry said sardonically as he did a quick Cleaning Spell to clear up the mess. "You drank probably half a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey all by yourself."

"It's not as good as Seamus thought it would be. Good ol' Seamus. I miss him," Ron said, his speech slurred to the point of being nearly incomprehensible. "I love you, Harry, did you know that? You're the best mate a bloke could have." He wrapped his arm tightly around his friend's neck, leaning his forehead on his Harry's.

Harry choked on the foul breath coming out of his friend's mouth. "Eauw, Ron, that's dragon-breath, that is," he complained, trying to turn his face away.

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"I love ya, mate. D'you love me too?" Ron asked plaintively, his eyes unfocused and bleary, his head wobbling so that the tip of his long nose was smearing Harry's glasses.

"Yeah, when you're sober," Harry allowed as he pushed Ron away, vowing to never again follow his friend into a pub when he was in such a black mood.

Arthur came striding into the pub, the twins close behind him. "Harry! Thank you so much for letting me know," he said, sitting down on Ron's other side.

"Dad! How are you! Did you know firewhiskey isn't what it's cracked up to be?" Ron said with a silly giggle. "Bloody hell, I don't feel too well." His skin had a greenish tinge again. He swallowed hard, trying to control his unruly stomach.

"Do you have rooms upstairs?" Arthur called to the barman.

"Yup."

"Well? A key, man!" Arthur demanded, annoyed by the man's slow reactions. By the time the barman finally sauntered slowly over to their table with a room key, Arthur's temper was fully blown. "*HOW DARE YOU SERVE WHISKEY TO A MINOR!*" he snarled. "I'll have your publican's license for this!"

"He didn't tell me he was underage, and just look how big he is. He looks old enough to me," the barman said defensively.

"Good going, Ron," Fred said to his brother, who was swaying dangerously on his chair. "Even George and I haven't managed to get roaring drunk like that yet!"

"And now that I've seen it," George said, giving the matter serious thought, "I'm not sure that I want to experience it for myself."

"Too right," his twin agreed. "Let's go then," they said together, each sliding an arm under their younger brother's arms. Harry and Arthur led them upstairs to a dingy little room with a bed far too small for Ron's gangly frame. They got Ron settled in and stood around looking at each other helplessly.

"Now what?" Harry said uncertainly. "He's been sick once already. How long before he's sober? I've never been with anyone this drunk before."

"I brought a potion that will help him, but I want him to suffer a bit first," Arthur said seriously, "so he won't be eager to repeat the experience. We had this problem with Bill once." He looked at the twins. "You two might remember it. He got completely plastered with some friends just after they graduated from Hogwarts. It's a miracle nobody got hurt."

"Yeah, I remember that," George said solemnly. "I never saw Bill out of control like that. It was scary."

"Yes, that's why I let you boys see him like that. I was hoping to teach all of you a lesson. Getting drunk isn't the answer to problems, and it's not a good way to celebrate things either. It's just dangerous in far too many ways."

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"What happened to Bill?" Harry asked cautiously.

"He decided to Apparate home," Fred said with wide, serious eyes. "Splinched himself."

"He didn't!" Harry cried.

"He did," George agreed. "We found the top half of him in the orchard. The bottom half was still in the pub in Ottery St. Catchpole. Luckily, some other wizards found him and covered him up before any Muggles saw his legs kicking around under the table by themselves!"

"It was a right mess getting him put back together as I recall," Fred commented.

"If Ron saw all that, why would he think getting drunk was a good idea?" Harry asked in total confusion.

"Ron was still quite young when that happened. He may have just thought it was funny," Arthur replied seriously.

They stood watching Ron sleep. His long arms and legs were splayed out in all directions, hanging off the small bed. He slept with his mouth hanging open, a line of drool sliding down his cheek. He came partially awake every so often due to an unusually loud snore, and then he'd settle back down again.

"I expect he'll be sick at least once more, and then he'll have a ruddy great hangover in the morning," Arthur said sadly. "I'll give him a small dose of potion after he's sick again. He'll sleep the rest of the night fairly peacefully after that."

As if on cue, Ron rolled up out of bed and was sick all over the floor, moaning miserably the whole time.

"Better out than in," Arthur said philosophically. "Get as much out as you can, lad." With a wave of his wand, the sick vanished from the filthy floor.

"That's probably cleaner than it was before," Fred said ruefully.

"Too right," George agreed as he opened the window to air the room.

Once Ron settled back into bed, Arthur gave him the potion. The boy immediately fell asleep. Arthur glanced up at the young men standing around him. "George, Harry, you both have young ladies waiting for you. Why don't you go on? Fred, if you don't have other plans tonight, I might need a hand with him later."

"Yeah, I'll stay with you, Dad," Fred agreed.

"I'll stay too," Harry offered. "I feel sort of responsible. I tried to stop him, but I just didn't know how to do it without Stunning him, and once he'd had a drink, I was afraid he'd choke if I did Stun him – you know, if he got sick?" He looked rather ill himself.

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"You did very well, lad," Arthur assured him. "You called for help when you needed it. A lot of young people would try to handle such problems by themselves. I'm glad you let me know what was going on."

"I was scared. I've heard of Muggles drinking themselves to death at parties at universities," the young man admitted. "I didn't want that to happen to him. I tried to get him to eat something, but he wouldn't."

"Imagine that!" Fred said with a sudden grin. "Ron refusing to eat!"

"That's amazing, that is," George agreed. "Well, this has been fun and all, but Clarice awaits, so I'm off!" He smiled jauntily and Disapparated.

"Harry, I know you want to help, but you've done all you can here," Arthur told him. "I know you have plans for tonight with Ginny. If you wouldn't mind, when you go to The Burrow to get her, would you please tell Molly how Ron's doing before the two of you leave for your date? You can tell her a lot more than I can with an Adfero, and the fireplace downstairs looked a bit too dodgy for me to want to make a call in it."

Harry looked from Arthur's face down to Ron's. His friend was sleeping soundly now, his colour had improved and he seemed to be doing all right. "Is he going to be OK?"

"He'll have a horrible hangover, but he'll be fine. A good pounding hangover is excellent preventive medicine," Arthur said wisely. "I doubt he'll do this kind of thing again."

"I hope you're right," Harry said, looking rather tired.

"Are you all right?" Arthur said.

"Just. . . I don't know. I'm upset about Hermione too, and then there's Ron," he said, gesturing to his best mate, who chose that moment to snore resoundingly, making Harry grin. "Well, at least he does sound a bit healthier."

"Go on, then. Fred and I can deal with Ron. You go and reassure Molly and Ginny for me, all right?"

"OK," Harry said, then waved as he Disapparated. A moment later, he appeared in the Weasleys' front garden. He walked to the door and knocked on it. Ginny opened it instantly and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, I was so worried! Are you all right? How's Ron?" she asked as she led him into the house.

"Ron's sleeping it off, and I'm fine," he replied. He heard soft sobbing coming from the kitchen. "Is that. . .?"

"Mum's taken it pretty hard," Ginny said quietly. "She's very worried about him. Bill did this once —"

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"And splinched himself, yeah, I heard," Harry replied. "Erm. . .your dad wanted me to tell you two how Ron is."

"Come in, then," she said, leading the way.

"I don't want to embarrass your mum – she's crying," he said with the discomfort men usually feel around crying women.

"She'll feel better after you talk to her," Ginny assured him. "Come on."

Harry took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, then followed his girlfriend into the kitchen. Molly Weasley sat at the table with a dish towel held to her face, trying to cry quietly. She looked up suddenly when she heard them come in.

"Oh! You surprised me," she said, doing her best to smile. She swiped at the tear streaks on her face, trying to act as if nothing was wrong. "Hello, Harry, dear. You look tired. Are you hungry? Have you had tea?"

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley. Yes, I am tired, and no, I haven't had tea," he said, sitting in the chair next to hers. "Mr. Weasley asked me to come and tell you how Ron is."

Her eyes widened in fright. "Is he all right? What happened?"

"He's sleeping it off now. He was sick twice and then Mr. Weasley gave him some potion. After that, he looked better, and he was snoring rather normally when I left," he assured her. "Mr. Weasley said Ron would have a hangover and that he'd probably learn his lesson from this. He and Fred are staying with him."

"Fred's there, too?" Molly asked. "I'm glad Arthur doesn't have to deal with it alone."

"George was there too, but Mr. Weasley sent both of us off because we had plans for the evening. Fred was free and agreed to stay with him."

"Plans for the. . .oh! Yes! You and Ginny run along then. I'm sure you had something good planned," she said, trying to act normally.

Harry looked at Ginny and saw agreement in her eyes. "Actually, we didn't have anything special planned. We'd thought we might just hang around here, if you don't mind."

"Oh, no, you should go and have fun," Molly said, her voice determined, but her hands shaking as she spoke.

"Harry's hungry, Mum," Ginny said briskly. "What do we have to eat?" They both knew that Molly truly enjoyed cooking. If they could get her distracted by cooking for them, she might cheer up eventually.

Molly got up and wiped her hands on the towel. "Let's see what we have," she mused, poking around in her cupboards. She pulled her head back suddenly, stifling another sob.

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"Mum! What's wrong?" Ginny asked. Her mother was in tears again, waving her hands in front of her face as if that would make her sadness go away.

Ginny went and put her arm around her mum and looked into the cupboard. "Oh," she said, reaching out and pulling a lumpy little cup off the shelf. She held it out for Harry to see. "This was Ron's. He made it when he was little."

"I'm just having. . .you know," Molly said, looking at her daughter helplessly.

"A crying day. I know," Ginny said sympathetically, patting her mum gently on the shoulder.

"A crying day?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"Every so often, Mum or I will have a day when we just cry for no good reason at all, sometimes all day long," Ginny said with a shrug. "And if something bad happens, that crying day is even worse."

"I've never seen you. . ." Harry began, completely baffled.

"I hide it from you," she admitted. "I do it in my room. Most of the girls do the same thing. It's a girl thing, you wouldn't understand."

"Uh. . .OK," he replied, adding "crying days" to the mysteries of females he'd never truly comprehend.

"C'mon, Mum, we're going to make you something special!" Ginny said encouragingly.

"We are?" Harry said, cottoning on to this "we" business.

"Yeah! Didn't you tell me you liked cooking, but didn't know how to cook with magic? It's time you learned, Mr. Potter!" she teased.

Before Harry knew what was happening, he found himself wrapped in a frilly pink apron, much to Ginny and Molly's amusement, and standing in front of the stove, his wand in hand, watching Ginny as she started making a simple meal. "What do you want me to do?"

"What do you like to cook?" Ginny said as she got some potatoes out of the bin and waved her wand to set a scrub brush to work washing them.

"Sweet stuff, actually. Biscuits, tarts, something Americans make called 'brownies,'" he replied with a grin. "Aunt Petunia made me make meals rather often, but my favourite part was dessert." He reached over Ginny's head and lifted down a saucepan she was trying to reach. "Since I have my own house now and can cook what I like, I'd love to learn how to cook with magic," he said, smiling at Molly and winking at Ginny.

"Brownies? What are brownies?" Molly asked, her interest piqued. "How did you learn to make something American?"

"One of the vice-presidents of my uncle's drill company is married to an American. They've come to parties at my uncle's house before and she's brought brownies. She brought the recipe

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with her the first time, since it was an unusual dish. She thought Aunt Petunia would like to have it, but Aunt Petunia looks down on American things. She never made them, and threw the recipe away, but I rescued it from the bin because I liked them so much. I took the recipe to Mrs. Figg's and she and I made some a few times. They're delicious, especially if you like chocolate," he said with a grin, knowing all the Weasleys were as crazy about chocolate as he was.

"What are they like, brownies?" Molly asked, getting up and starting to help Ginny with the dinner preparations. Harry was mostly only being allowed to stir things so far.

"Like a rich chocolate cake, but more. . .um. . .moist, more dense? Sometimes they have walnuts in them," he answered.

"We have some lovely walnuts, as well as some chocolate," Molly said, her eyes lighting with interest. "What else do you need?"

As they assembled the ingredients for both dinner and the brownies, Harry and Ginny worked together to make Molly laugh as much as possible. Harry was deliberately clumsy with the cooking spells she and Ginny tried to teach him, having very comical results when the white sauce he was supposed to be pouring out of his wand neatly into a saucepan decided to spew and covered his face in a gloppy white mess.

Ginny wiped some of the sauce off of his cheek and licked her finger, pronouncing the sauce "delicious!" and adding, "Aim better next time!" The rest of his culinary experiences weren't much more successful, mostly on purpose.

"Now, Harry, it's just not that hard!" Molly chided him after they'd been working on a seasoning spell for a while, but then she noticed the twinkle in his eye. "Oh, you!" she said, smacking him playfully on the arm. "You are a charmer."

"I'm trying," he admitted with a crooked grin.

"Yes, you're very trying," Ginny teased, then stood on tiptoe to kiss his flour-spotted cheek.

An hour later, the three of them were relaxing after a very satisfying dinner of chicken, boiled potatoes and steamed vegetables, and were ready to sample Harry's brownies.

"They smell fantastic!" Ginny enthused. "Do they taste as good as they smell?"

"Better!" Harry promised. He cut the brownies into squares and served one to each of the ladies, then took one for himself. The brownies were still warm and their aroma was mouth-watering. "I hope they taste good, anyway," he said a bit nervously before taking his first bite.

"Oh, Harry, they're wonderful!" Molly enthused. "I'll have to write that recipe down. The boys will love them!" At the mention of her boys, Molly's face stilled, sadness filling her eyes again. "I wonder how Ron is?" She started to rise from her seat. "I'm going to check on him myself."

Harry put a hand on her arm. "I'll go, if you'd like. I don't think that pub is any place for ladies."

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"But it's safe for young boys?" she fussed.

"Not really, but I'll be all right. I'll Apparate over there and come right back."

"Thank you, dear," she said wearily.

"I'll take some of these to Mr. Weasley and Fred, shall I?" he offered.

"Oh yes, that would be lovely," Molly said eagerly, getting up to wrap some brownies for Harry to carry in his pocket.

"Be careful, sweetie," Ginny said, squeezing his hand as he stood up.

"I will." He waved as he stood a bit away from them and Disapparated. When he arrived at the pub, he knocked quietly on the door to Ron's room. Arthur answered it right away.

"How is he? Mrs. Weasley is worried," Harry said in response to Arthur's raised eyebrow.

"He's sleeping soundly. No change. I think she can go to bed without worrying about him anymore," Arthur assured him as he led him into the room.

"Hi, Fred," Harry said. "Fun night?"

"Oh yeah, loads of fun," Fred said with a sigh. "Remind me to knock the stuffing out of Ron for ruining a perfectly good evening."

"I will," Harry replied with a smile. "I've brought you both a treat."

"What is it?" Fred replied, instantly interested.

"Brownies. Made 'em myself, with a bit of help from your mum and Ginny," he said proudly as he opened the napkin and displayed the sweets.

"What are brownies?" Fred asked as he took one and bit into it. "Oy! Heaven!"

"They're a Muggle American treat," Harry replied. "I got the recipe from someone in my uncle's company. She gave it to my aunt, but she didn't want it, so I nicked it. They're good, aren't they?"

"Muggle American? Oh my, they do know how to make a lovely cake!" Arthur enthused. "Well done, Harry!"

"Glad you liked them. I'll go back to The Burrow now," he said, turning toward the door.

"I thought you and Ginny had a date tonight?" Fred said, licking brownie crumbs off of his fingers.

"We're staying in. Your mum was lonely," Harry said with a shrug. "We've had fun making dinner and the brownies."

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"You two have wild dates, you know that?" Fred teased. "Go and have some more of that bizarre fun!"

"Yeah, we'll do our best," Harry replied with a grin, then Disapparated, appearing soon thereafter just outside the kitchen door of The Burrow. He knocked lightly, then went in. "I'm back!"

"Hi, sweetie!" Ginny cried, greeting him as if he'd been gone for ages.

"Oh, Harry, dear, how is he?" Molly asked, worry creasing her face.

"He's fine. He's sleeping now. Mr. Weasley said it's safe for you to go to bed now. He and Fred will stay there with Ron, but he's sure he'll be fine once he survives his hangover."

"Thank you, dear," Molly said, heaving a sigh of relief. "I am rather tired. Thank you both for spending the evening with me. I know you would have had more fun doing something else, but I certainly appreciate your kindness."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look. "It was fun," Harry said with a warm smile. "You know how I love to eat."

"Yeah, Mum, we had a good time. And now we know how to make brownies!" Ginny agreed.

"You two are so sweet," Molly said fondly. "I'll say goodnight, then. Ginny, don't forget to lock up."

"I won't," she assured her mum. As Molly trudged slowly up the stairs, Ginny turned to Harry. "So what do you want to do?"

"I'm knackered. I'd be just as pleased to stay here and play chess with you," Harry said, stretching and yawning. "Oh, sorry!" he said when he finished his jaw-cracking yawn.

"Do you want to go home?" she asked softly. "You've had a hard day."

"No, baby, I'm spending the evening with you," he said, leaning over and resting his forehead against hers. He straightened up and glanced out of the window. "It looks like there's going to be a lovely sunset. Why don't we go for a walk and enjoy it?"

Before long, they were seated under a huge oak tree watching the sun go down in a glorious display of reds, golds and oranges against the wispy clouds near the horizon. Ginny was snug in Harry's arms, resting her head on his shoulder. He leaned his cheek against the top of her head and sighed contentedly.

"You make me so happy," he murmured, turning his head to softly brush his lips across her temple.

"Same here," she said, lifting her face to him. They kissed gently for a while, then turned back to watch the sunset at its most brilliant, the zenith of the sky already a deepening blue. "You take me to all the best places," she said, a smile in her voice.

The Time of Destiny

Harry chuckled. "Really?"

"Yeah. I love sitting here with you." She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck, reaching up to kiss him again. When they finally broke apart, they were breathless, and the sky was spangled with stars.

"I've missed you," he said, his thumb gently tracing the line of her jaw, then trailing down her neck to run softly along her collarbone.

"Mmmm, me too," she murmured, sliding her hand between the buttons of his shirt. "You feel so good." She began undoing his buttons slowly, one by one, kissing each part of his chest as she exposed it. "You taste good, too," she said with a soft chuckle.

"You're driving me mad, you do know that?" he said, watching her in amusement and trying to control his quickly rising passion.

"Um-hmm. That's the idea," she teased, finally pulling his shirt free of his jeans. She blew a raspberry on his tummybutton and glanced up at him teasingly, but was surprised to see his face looking much too serious. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. My mind just flashed onto Ron and Hermione for some stupid reason. What the bloody hell are we going to do about them?" His face was distraught.

"Nothing at the moment. This is our time, remember? She's made a mess of things, Ron's sleeping off his first, and hopefully only, session with the booze, and you and I have a free evening under the stars," Ginny said reasonably. "Do you really want to spend this time talking about them?"

"Well, if you put it that way," he said with a moan of pleasure as she ran her hands deliciously over his skin and then shoved his shirt off of his shoulders. He got into the spirit of things and performed a Cushioning Charm so they wouldn't have to lie on the ground, then began to slowly, tantalizingly slide Ginny's soft cotton t-shirt up over her shoulders, stopping when he had her arms pinned together just over her head.

"Now I've got you where I want you, my pretty," he teased, trying to sound like a villain in an old movie. He blew a raspberry on her tummybutton, then tried to cover every square inch of skin below her chin with kisses.

Ginny quickly went from giggles to gasps and moans of pleasure, finally wriggling out of her shirt herself so she could be more of a participant in their play. She had to stifle a shriek of laughter as Harry turned her over and attacked the heart-shaped birthmark on her bum, growling, nibbling and kissing it until Ginny couldn't stay quiet anymore, then stifling her laughter with a kiss that quickly became deep and passionate. Hands and mouths explored all the delicious territories available, delighting in a pleasure they'd missed for far too long. Finally, they rocked together toward a shattering climax, holding each other tightly as they became one.

Harry rolled onto his side, pulling Ginny with him. They lay together in a tight embrace, arms and legs entangled, breathing each other's breath. He kissed her softly on the nose and stared seriously into her eyes. "I'm never going to let you go," he murmured. "Never, ever."

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"I love you, Harry. I'll never let you go, either," she whispered. "I wish I could live inside your skin. I want to be part of you forever."

"You are a part of me," he replied softly, kissing her forehead gently. "Forever."

They relaxed under the stars, their bodies softly outlined in moonglow, cherishing this peaceful, blessed time together. Before long, they fell asleep.

Some time later, Harry sat up. A sound had startled him awake.

"What is it?" Ginny asked sleepily.

"Dunno. Get dressed," he whispered, grabbing his glasses and wand as he got to his feet. He put his glasses on and stared into the darkness, trying to discover what had awakened him. Ginny wordlessly handed him his clothes and he dressed as quickly as possible. He was just pulling on his trainers when he heard it again.

"There! What's that?" he hissed when he heard the cries of someone wailing in distress. "It's coming from your house!" He took a few uncertain steps down the hill toward The Burrow. The only lights he could see were coming through the kitchen window, lights he and Ginny had left on when they went outside.

"It sounds like Mum!" Ginny said in sudden fear.

"I'm going to Apparate down there," Harry said.

"Be careful," Ginny said as he disappeared from sight, and reappeared a moment later next to the kitchen door of her home. She raced down the hill, but they'd gone a long way from the house. Ginny cursed the laws that said she was too young to Apparate. What if Harry needed her? What if her mum needed her and she could only get there as fast as she could run? Why hadn't she thought to put a Shrinking Spell on her Firebolt and carry it in her pocket the way Harry did? That was a mistake she wouldn't make again! She ran as hard as she could down the rocky slope, watching Harry make a stealthy entrance to the house.

Harry had Apparated to the wall beside the kitchen door. He activated his glasses and used them to scan around the corner visible through the window in the door. Nobody there. As quietly as possible, he opened the door and slipped through, his wand at the ready. He crept through the downstairs and found nothing amiss, then heard Molly's voice again, a frightened, frightening sound from above. He went up the stairs as quickly and quietly as he could, checking each room he passed, but all were empty. Finally, he came to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's bedroom door. He turned the knob slowly and pushed the door open, leaping into the room and pressing himself to the wall as he'd seen police officers do on television shows. He scanned the room and found nothing amiss except Molly Weasley tangled in her covers, apparently in the midst of a horrible nightmare. He moved to her bed and untangled the covers, calling her name softly as he did so.

"Mrs. Weasley? Mrs. Weasley, wake up. You're having a bad dream," he said in a soothing voice.

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"No! NO! NO! Not my baby! Not Ginny! NO!" she cried, her arms flailing wildly.

Harry pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against his chest. "It's all right now, Mrs. Weasley. Calm down."

"NOOOoooooooo!" she cried, tears flooding down her face as she trembled in his arms.

"MRS. WEASLEY! Please wake up!" Harry said, wishing Ginny would hurry up and arrive.

"Wha. . .Harry?" Molly said, finally waking up a little. She pulled back from his arms and looked up at him. "Where's Ginny? What happened?"

"She's on her way. You were having a bad dream," he told her.

"Ginny! GINNY! Where is she? GINNY!" Molly cried, still in the throes of her dream.

"She'll be here in a minute. We were way up on the hill when we heard you. I Apparated down here to see what was wrong. Ginny's a good runner. She'll be here soon," he assured her, hoping he was right. Weepy females weren't something he was comfortable dealing with, and this was his girlfriend's mother, which somehow added another layer of awkwardness to the situation.

"She's all right? Are you sure?" Molly asked, her eyes still fearful.

"Yes, she's fine. Let me turn on a light so she'll know where to find us." He pointed his wand at the lamp and it flared into life, brightly illuminating the tracks of many tears on Molly's puffy, red-eyed face. "Can you tell me what happened? Are you all right?"

Molly stared at him wordlessly. She was trembling and still looked very frightened.

Harry sighed and pulled her close, rubbing her back comfortingly, as she'd done with him many times. "When you're ready, you can tell me what happened if you want to," he offered, "or you can tell Ginny when she gets here. There's no danger here – I checked the house, and nobody's here but the three of us. And the ghoul in the attic, of course," he added with a chuckle, hoping to make her smile.

Ginny came racing into the room. "Mum! What's wrong? Are you all right?" She sat on the edge of the bed opposite Harry and rubbed her mother's shoulder gently. "Mum?"

Finally, Molly pushed back from Harry and looked at each of them with pain-filled eyes. "I . . .I had a bad dream. I was worried about you for some reason," she said, gazing at her daughter. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mum. I was with Harry. We were just up on the hill there, under the big oak tree. We went out to watch the sunset," Ginny explained quietly. "Harry's had a hard day. We actually fell asleep. That's why we're out so late." She could see on Harry's watch that it was well after midnight.

"I'm sorry I kept her out so late, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said quietly. "I was tired when we went out there, and . . . well . . . we woke up when we heard you."

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"And raced to my rescue, you darling children," she said fondly, wiping the tears from her face with her fingers.

"It's late, I should be going home," Harry said, starting to rise from the bed. As he let go of Molly, he looked at her in concern. "Mrs. Weasley, you're still shivering. Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, dear," she said dismissively, doing her best to pull herself together.

Harry snorted with laughter. "When someone says 'I'm fine,' it often means they aren't fine at all. What's wrong?"

Molly shuddered. "I felt a cold chill run over my body while I was having that dream. I dreamed something happened to Ginny, and then Arthur and the twins and Ron. And I woke up and none of them were in the house, and I panicked."

"The twins don't live here anymore, Mum," Ginny reminded her.

"I know, but they were in my dream," Molly insisted. "Something bad happened, and all of you were involved in one way or another." She glanced up at Harry. "Not you, dear, you were fine in my dream. But the others. . . ."

"Would you like me to stay and guard the house tonight?" Harry offered.

"Oh, I hate to trouble you," she protested.

"It's no trouble. I'll just send Remus a message that I'm staying here. He won't mind."

She looked up at the tall young man standing in front of her. His arms around her had felt so comforting. He was a warm, lively presence filled with love and concern for her whole family, not just Ginny and Ron. She couldn't love him more if he were her own child. But in truth, he was no longer a child, and hadn't been one for quite some time. After a few moments' thought, she smiled. "It would be nice to have a man in the house, Harry. This house has been full of men for so many years, it just doesn't feel right to not have at least one man there."

"Well, if I qualify, I'm happy to help out," he said with a grin.

"You qualify," Molly replied, chuckling. "Thank you, dear."

"My pleasure," he replied.

"Why don't you use Ron's bed, dear? We don't have yours set up in there right now," Molly offered.

"It would be hard to guard the house from the room at the very top. I'll sleep on the couch downstairs," he replied.

"You don't have to do that," Molly protested.

"If I'm to be the man of the house for tonight, that couch is the best place for me to be," Harry said in as mature and manly a voice as he could manage.

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"All right, then. I'll take down some blankets and pillows," she said as she started to get up.

"Mum, you go back to sleep. I'll get them for him," Ginny said, tucking her mother in carefully.

A short time later, the couch had been lengthened and broadened magically into a suitable bed for Harry. As he lay back on the pillows and pulled the blanket up over his shoulder, he grinned at Ginny, who was busy tucking him in.

"Having fun?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

"It would be more fun to get in there with you," she whispered, then giggled and leaned down to kiss him. "I love you, baby."

"I love you, too. Good night," he said pulling her into a serious kiss before sending her off to her room.

Harry lay awake for a long time, watching the gentle movement of the stars through the window and remembering the wonderful time he'd spent with Ginny that evening. In her room high above him, Ginny was doing the same thing. Finally, they slept.

After he got over his initial reaction to Hermione's letter, Ron became the biggest flirt on Diagon Alley, but anyone with half a brain could see his heart wasn't in it. The day after he recovered from his hangover, he swore off both firewhiskey and girls forever. A few days later, he changed his mind about girls, at least, going far to the other extreme. Any half-way pretty girl he saw, he flirted with, asking out as many as would speak to him for even a short while. None of the girls lasted more than one date, since Ron went rapidly from outgoing and friendly to withdrawn and morose with no warning, often spending his time with the girl telling her all about Hermione, which didn't go down well at all.

Harry, Ginny and the twins tried to be supportive, but he was resisting all their efforts to cheer him up. Harry and Ginny went out with Ron and his "girl of the day" several times, and wound up feeling quite sympathetic to the girls. Ron was being truly pathetic when he wasn't in a towering rage.

"I don't know how to react to Hermione when we see her again," Harry confided to Ginny one evening. "I mean, she's my best friend, but what she's done to Ron. . . ."

"Yeah. She's my best friend, too, but he's my brother. I don't know what to do," Ginny agreed. "Ron's going through an awful time. I don't know how long it's going to take him to get over her."

"He's making a right mess of his life these days," Harry grumbled. "He has all the girls in the shop angry with him. I hope he sorts himself out soon."

"All we can do for now is be there for him as much as possible," Ginny sighed. "I wish I knew a magical cure for a broken heart."

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"I actually did some Cheering Charms on him without his knowledge, but they barely made a dent in his attitude," Harry replied. "I thought about the Draught of Peace, but that seemed a bit risky. I didn't do a very good job on that one in class."

Ginny sighed. "I thought of that, too. I may try making some. Or maybe Mum could do it. She's quite good with potions."

"Worth a try, anyway," he agreed.

A few days later, Ron came into the shop looking more cheerful than he had since that letter's arrival.

"Morning!" he said cheerily as he joined Harry at their workstation.

"Morning, yourself," Harry said with a grin. "What's up with you?"

"Mum fixed the best breakfast this morning," Ron said. "I've never had such good porridge."

"Porridge? Well, your mum is a good cook," Harry said agreeably. He glanced up as one of the twins walked by, mouthing "Draught of Peace" and pointing to Ron behind Ron's back. Harry chuckled, glad Molly had found a way to make her youngest son happy for a while. Unfortunately, the effects only lasted a few hours, and by mid-afternoon, Ron was back to being gloomy.

When Harry went to the supply room to get more frogs' spleens, Fred followed him in.

"Seems like the Draught of Peace Mum put in Ron's porridge worked for a while, anyway," Fred murmured as he searched for something on the shelves.

"Yeah. Too bad doubling the dosage puts a person in a coma," Harry commented.

"I think I'd like Ron better in a coma," Fred grumbled. "He's no fun at all anymore."

Harry turned and faced Fred. "Do you or George have any ideas? We've got to get him past this before school starts or he won't be able to study at all."

"He's pretty well useless here, as well," Fred said in disgust. "Next time I see Hermione. . . ."

"Yeah, well, I don't know what I'm going to do when I see her, either. She could have been kinder about it," Harry agreed. After a moment's silence, he added, "But they really seemed to love each other. I just don't understand it at all."

"Me neither," Fred said, lifting a jar of horned toad livers down from the shelf. "Ah well. George and I have never been 'in love' the way Ron was with Hermione. I guess we can't relate to his problems."

"Yeah," Harry said, thinking about how he'd dealt with his grief over Casey. "D'you suppose I should lend him my Pensieve?"

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"If he removed his memories of Hermione, he'd have a ruddy great blank for all his years at Hogwarts," Fred reminded him. "That would certainly have an impact on his N.E.W.T.s."

Harry nodded. "That's why I haven't offered it. What a mess."

"Too right."

They went their separate ways, Harry to slice frogs' spleens alongside Ron, Fred to do something unimaginable with horned toad livers that would eventually turn into something quite funny. Harry wished some of the ever-present humour in the shop would rub off on Ron, but it just wasn't happening. Harry sighed as he shoved the jar of spleens over to Ron and they started cutting in uncomfortable silence.

"Ginny! Ron! You have letters from Hogwarts!" Molly called one morning.

Ginny nearly danced down the stairs. "That should be my O.W.L. results!" she said excitedly as she ripped open the envelope. "I got eleven O.W.L.s!" she squealed in delight.

"Oh, congratulations, dear! I'm so proud of you!" Molly said in delight. "What's in your letter, Ron?"

"Nothing worth talking about," he grumbled, tossing the envelope on the table. A "Head Boy" badge slid out, lying there winking in the sunlight streaming through the window.

"Ron! That's not – you're Head Boy! That's wonderful! I'm so proud of you!" Molly cried, holding the badge in both hands. She looked up at him and her face fell. "What's wrong?"

"Guess who's Head Girl?" he snarled.

"Hermione?" Ginny said softly.

"Of course," he snapped. "I'm going to send that back."

"You are not!" Molly said in no uncertain terms. "You will wear this with pride and will fulfil your duties to the best of your abilities! If you don't like Hermione being Head Girl, well, then. . .," she paused, trying to find the perfect thing to say, then finally hit on it. "Just think of her as a Slytherin!"

Ron almost smiled for a second. "Yeah. A Slytherin. She's been acting like one, so why not think of her as one," he said snidely. He stamped off toward the stairs, but Molly noticed he did grab his Head Boy badge and take it with him as he went.

"So what are we doing for your birthday?" Ginny asked one night when she and Harry were talking via their rings.

"Since the house is looking so nice, I thought we'd have a party there," Harry said cheerfully. "Dobby and Winky have already started planning a menu."

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"Sounds good! Who's coming?"

"All the Weasleys, of course, and Remus and whichever Order members can make it," Harry replied. Since his home was also headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix, he couldn't invite just anyone to his party. All the guests would have to be people who already knew how to find the house to protect the secrecy of the location.

"All the Order members, eh? Even Snape?" Ginny teased.

"Well, maybe not ALL the Order members," Harry amended with a chuckle.

Several days later, Number 12 Grimmauld Place was rocking with loud music and laughter as Arthur, Molly, Bill, Fred, George, Ron and Ginny Weasley, Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, Mad-Eye Moody, Remus and Tonks all joined Harry in his birthday celebration. Dobby and Winky were in their element, serving mountains of delicious food quickly and unobtrusively. They and Harry were all blushing from the compliments they received on the redecoration that had transformed that dark, musty old pile into a bright, lively, warm home.

"It's all down to Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, Dobby and Winky," Harry said modestly to Professor McGonagall, who hadn't seen the house since the redecorating had begun. "I just wanted the place to be light and cheerful. They did the rest. We still have a bit to do in the rooms upstairs, but this floor is finished."

"Well, it's lovely," Professor McGonagall said warmly. "I would never have thought it could turn out so nicely. Well done!"

"Thanks," Harry replied, blushing.

She leaned in to whisper to him. "Tell me, Harry, have you added any more animals to your Animagus forms?"

"I haven't had time to work on them, honestly," he replied. "I've been so busy at the twins' shop, and working here, and getting my homework done. . . ."

"I quite understand. I was just curious," she said with a smile. "Do you plan to try any more forms? Or are you satisfied with what you've done?"

"I don't know. It might be fun to be a dragon, but it wouldn't be very practical," he said, grinning as he watched her expression go from startled to amused.

"No, not very practical at all, but fun? Quite possibly!" she allowed. She glanced around the room. "Where is Merlin? Didn't he want to come to the party?"

"He says this music sounds like banshees screaming, so he and Hedwig stayed upstairs," Harry replied. "They're in my room, on the right at the first landing, if you want to go and say hello."

"I believe I will," she said with a girlish blush, then headed up the stairs.

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Harry grinned as he watched her ascend the stairs, her eyes twinkling and a smile of anticipation on her face. Merlin had taught her the incantation to make it possible for him to speak to her, rather than him only being able to speak to Harry. McGonagall and Merlin were enjoying a rather odd relationship, almost a courtship of sorts, from what Harry could tell.

"Wonderful party, lad," Remus said, clapping his godson on the shoulder.

"Yeah, and great music, too!" Tonks added. She and Remus were holding hands and looking quite pleased with themselves.

"Thanks! Ginny picked the music. I think her taste is similar to yours, Tonks. Weird Sisters rule!" Harry replied cheerfully.

"Did I hear you mention my name?" Ginny said, sliding in under his arm.

Harry gave her a little squeeze and looked down at her fondly. "I was just giving you credit for the music. Tonks likes it."

"Cool!" Ginny said, grinning at Tonks. Her smile slipped a bit as she looked from Tonks to Remus and back again. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Tonks said, stifling a laugh.

"What are you two so smug about?" Ginny asked, squinting as she studied the two adults in front of her.

"Us? Smug?" Remus said, trying to look innocent.

"Yes. Smug. What's up?" Ginny pressed.

"We'd hoped to wait until later," Remus said cautiously.

Ginny glanced from Remus to Tonks again. The young Auror's sparkling eyes and Remus's blush gave it away. "You're engaged? What?"

Remus and Tonks looked at each other, guilt and then glee chasing across their faces. Finally, Tonks leaned in and whispered, "Engaged!"

Harry looked from Tonks to Ginny in surprise. "How'd you know that?"

Ginny responded by squealing and jumping up and down. "That's terrific!" then gave Harry an arch look that said quite clearly, "Girls just know these things."

"Shhh!" Remus cautioned. "We don't want to spoil Harry's party."

"How would such good news spoil my party?" Harry asked, a huge grin on his face. "Congratulations! I'm happy for both of you!"

"When are you planning to announce it?" Ginny asked quietly, doing her best to control her excitement.

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"We only just decided a little while ago," Tonks said. "He asked me after Harry cut the cake."

"My cutting the cake inspired a proposal?" Harry said in amused disbelief.

"Well, we were talking about cutting cakes and one thing led to another, and, well. . ." Remus replied, blushing madly.

"I think it's brilliant," Harry said. "If you want to announce it, most of our friends are here – they'd love to hear the news!"

Remus and Tonks looked at each other, and then smiled and nodded after some wordless communication.

"OK. We can announce it here," Remus agreed.

Harry took out his wand and silenced the music, then tapped on his goblet with his fork. When everyone quieted and was looking his way, he said, "A-HEM! I'd like to have your attention, please! It is my great pleasure to announce. . .that Remus has something to tell you!" He turned toward his godfather with a grand flourish and a huge grin.

Remus stepped forward, blushing madly but holding Tonks' hand tightly. He raised his eyes to the crowd of his and Harry's dearest friends and cleared his throat. "Um. . .yes. Well. . ."

Tonks laughed and playfully shoved his shoulder. "Want me to do it?" she teased.

"I'm perfectly capable," he said with a chuckle. He looked back at the waiting crowd. "I'm more pleased than I can say to announce that Tonks has agreed to be my wife."

The room erupted in cheers. Tonks and Remus were soon surrounded by well-wishers, Remus's hand being pumped or his back being pounded by friends who were delighted at the news, while Tonks was receiving hugs from everyone.

"Where and when is the wedding?" Molly asked. "We have plans to make!"

"You can have the wedding here if you want," Harry offered.

"Or at The Burrow!" Molly added.

"Thank you for the offers! We have a lot of things to sort out. We'll let you know where and when and all that. You're all invited!" Tonks said happily.

Harry noticed Ron slouching against the wall sadly. He left Ginny with Tonks and the happy crowd and went to stand by his best friend. "What's up, mate?"

"Nothing," Ron said quietly.

"OK," Harry said agreeably. "When you want to talk, you know where to find me."

"Yeah. Attached to Ginny," Ron grumbled.

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"Am I neglecting you?" Harry teased.

Ron was silent a minute, then said, "No," rather grudgingly.

"C'mon, Ron. You've hardly eaten today. You're losing weight, y'know. It's starting to show," Harry said. He'd avoided talking to Ron about his lack of appetite, but the redhead's face was gaunt and his cheeks were deeply hollowed. He'd probably lost fifteen pounds, and he'd never been overweight despite the huge amounts he normally ate.

"Not hungry," Ron grumbled.

Harry pulled Ron into the next room where it was quieter. "You have to snap out of this, Ron," he said urgently. "I've been trying to let you sort yourself out because it seemed to be what you wanted, but you're going to make yourself ill."

"You'd be ill if Ginny left you," Ron said defensively.

"Yeah, you're right, I would be. Hopefully you'd be around to knock some sense into me," Harry said stoutly.

"You were ill when Casey died," Ron added.

"I know. But Casey died a horrible death. Hermione didn't," Harry said reasonably, ignoring Ron's flinch at the sound of his former girlfriend's name. "She'll be at school with us again soon. You've got to pull yourself together so you can study properly. And there are loads of pretty girls you haven't gone out with at Hogwarts. Parvati. Lavender. Susan Bones. Loads of others. Why don't you give them a chance?"

"They won't want me," Ron said darkly.

"Why not?"

"There must be something wrong with me if Hermione could promise to love me forever and then leave me for some Italian guy," Ron sounded defeated.

"There's nothing wrong with you, mate," Harry assured him. "Hermione's the one who changed – you didn't. We don't know what happened to her while she was away. She didn't sound like herself in her letter. Maybe her parents put some kind of pressure on her or something. We just don't know. She's not answering my letters anymore either. We won't know what's going on until we see each other at school and can talk it out."

"You honestly think her parents did or said something to her to change her mind about me?" Ron asked, suddenly much more interested in what Harry was saying.

"I don't know. But it's possible. They were pretty upset by what Ginny, Remus and I told them when Hermione was in the hospital after she was hurt on the Astronomy Tower." Hermione had been so badly hurt by a miscast spell of Draco Malfoy's, she'd been taken to St. Mungo's to recover, where her grieving parents finally heard the truth about all the adventures she'd been having since she'd started at Hogwarts. Harry studied Ron's face for a long moment, pleased to see the first spark of life in his friend's eyes in many days. Harry didn't want to give

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Ron a false hope with what he'd just said, but it was a thought that stuck in his mind, that maybe the break-up was Hermione's parents' doing, somehow. He decided to change the subject entirely.

"Let's think of something fun to do. I'm thinking of getting tickets to a concert for Ginny's birthday present. Do you want to come along?"

"As a gooseberry? I don't think so," Ron snapped.

"You could bring a girl with you," Harry said patiently.

Ron straightened up and looked at Harry seriously. "No, Harry, that's all right. Thanks anyway," he said gently. "That's Ginny's present. I would spoil it for both of you."

"No, you wouldn't," Harry persisted.

"Thanks for asking, mate. Maybe sometime when it isn't her birthday, OK?" Ron replied, doing his best to be upbeat and friendly.

"OK. I'll hold you to that," Harry promised.

They went back and rejoined the party, and Harry was relieved to see Ron finally getting a plate and putting some food on it. He hoped Ron was on the road to recovery from his broken heart at last. But what were they going to do about Hermione when they all got together again? Harry tucked that worry into the back of his mind and went back to enjoying his guests.

A short time later, Dobby tugged on Harry's sleeve. "Harry Potter, sir? May Dobby have a word?"

Harry smiled and bent down to speak quietly with the elf, who was whispering. "Of course. What's up? Are we running out of food?"

"No, Harry Potter, sir, that's not it." Dobby looked around nervously.

Harry picked up on the elf's edginess instantly. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, no, sir, nothing is wrong. Dobby needs to ask Harry Potter's permission for something," he said, wringing his long-fingered hands and shifting his weight uneasily from foot to foot.

Harry glanced around. His friends were beginning to notice their quiet conversation. "Come with me, Dobby. We'll go somewhere we can talk." He led the elf into the kitchen, which was as full of people as the rest of the house. Harry glanced at Dobby, who nodded toward the pantry. "OK," Harry agreed, then followed the elf to the pantry door. Dobby opened the door and went inside, snapping his fingers to light the lamp inside the small room as Harry pulled the door shut behind him.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is very sorry to take you away from your guests, but . . ."

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"That's not a problem, Dobby. What's bothering you?" Harry squatted so he was at eye-level with the elf.

"Dobby and Winky. . ." Dobby's voice trailed off.

"Is everything OK? You're not fighting, are you?" Harry asked in concern.

"Oh, no, sir! We is not fighting at all! We is getting along very well! Dobby just. . .Dobby, um. . .it is difficult, sir." He was wringing his hands again.

"Spit it out, Dobby," Harry encouraged him.

The house elf looked horrified at the idea of spitting at his master.

Harry chuckled, understanding Dobby's expression. "It's just a way of saying, 'say what you mean,' Dobby."

"Ah. Yes. Well, the thing is, sir, Dobby and Winky. . .is. . .um. . ." He stopped again, looking very uncomfortable. He pulled his ears nervously.

"What?"

"Iswantingtomarry,sir," Dobby said in a rush.

"You and Winky want to get married?" Harry said with a grin. "That's brilliant! I'm very happy for you. When's the ceremony?"

"Ceremony?" Dobby asked, perplexed.

"How do house elves get married? Does someone lead a service or ceremony where you take vows, the way wizards and Muggles do?" Harry asked curiously.

"The master gives permission, then he tells the elves they is married to each other," Dobby explained.

"When do you want to do this?"

"Whenever it suits you, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said excitedly. "Dobby has been asking Winky for months now, and she finally agreed. Dobby wanted to ask Harry Potter's permission right away. Dobby is sorry to interrupt Harry Potter's party, sir."

"That's not a problem, Dobby. Don't worry about it," Harry assured him. "I think a celebration is in order, don't you? We already have all of our friends here, unless there are others you'd like to invite?"

"No, Harry Potter, sir. You and the Weezys and the professors who are here are our friends – and Miss Granger as well. She's the only friend missing."

"She won't be back from travelling until we leave for school, I believe," Harry told him.

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"Then everyone we would want to be here is here!" Dobby said, grinning broadly, but then his smile faded. "But Winky and Dobby does not want to impose on Harry Potter's party, sir."

"I would be honoured if you would have your wedding during my birthday party," Harry said sincerely. "And I believe all of our guests would enjoy being here for it, as well." He smiled at the delighted expression on his friend's face. "When do you want to do this?"

"When is it convenient for you, sir?" Dobby asked humbly.

"How about right now? Will that do?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby's huge ears were pricked upright with happiness, his face beaming with joy.

Dobby went off to find Winky and Harry moved back into the living room, where most of his guests were gathered. When he saw the house elves coming slowly through the door, he smiled at them and again silenced the music with his wand. Everyone looked at him expectantly. Those who had been in other rooms came in to see why the music had stopped.

"What's going on, Harry?" Ginny asked as she moved from talking to Professor McGonagall to join him.

Harry grinned down at her. "Just watch." He looked at his friends and grinned. "I had no idea when Ginny and I planned this party that it would have so many other happy occasions tied to it. Remus and Tonks got engaged!" He led a cheer for the blushing couple. "And now Dobby's just informed me that he and Winky want to get married!" More cheers erupted, making both house elves blush and drop their ears shyly. "Dobby says all that's required for them to marry is for me to give permission and say they're married, but I thought, since we're already in the middle of a party, why not make it a celebration?" More cheers and some whistles erupted from the crowd, who gathered around the house elves to congratulate them, shaking Dobby's hand and patting Winky fondly on the back.

"Are you two planning to have children?" Molly asked while she was talking to them.

"That is up to the master to decide," Dobby said, his ears suddenly drooping.

Harry heard this exchange. "Would you like to have children?" he asked.

Dobby turned his huge green eyes to look seriously at his master. "Oh, yes, sir!"

"I think it might be fun to have little house elves running around," Harry said, smiling at the thought. "But I want you to know this, both of you," he added. "Your children won't be slaves. They'll be born free. We'll find them good jobs with families willing to pay for their labour and give them vacation days when they're ready to go to work. And they'll be welcome to visit you whenever they want. Is that all right with you?"

Dobby beamed, but Winky looked crestfallen. "Our children will be. . .free?"

"You know I don't believe in slavery, Winky," Harry said kindly. "Don't you want your children to be free? There will be plenty of households willing to pay them when they're old

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enough to work." He glanced around at his friends and saw nods all around. "See? There are jobs waiting for them with the people in this room."

Winky looked around in amazement. "You good sirs and ladies would hire free house elves?" Her eyes widened as she saw all the smiling faces around her nodding. "You is too kind, all of you good sirs and ladies. Thank you," she said humbly.

"All right, we've got a wedding to plan!" Molly said enthusiastically. "What do we do first? What are you going to wear, Winky?"

Winky looked down at the pretty little dress she was wearing. "This?"

Harry glanced over at Molly and shook his head, reminding her that "clothes" had a bad connotation for Winky.

"It's beautiful! How about flowers? Do you want to carry a bouquet?" Molly asked.

"I believe I can provide that, if you'll allow me the honour," Dumbledore said, waving his wand and producing a bouquet filled with miniature roses and miniature orchids. "Will this do?" he asked as he handed it to Winky.

"Oh, Professor, sir, you is too kind to Winky!" she said, admiring the flowers with tears in her huge eyes.

Dobby took her hand and stood expectantly in front of Harry. "We is ready, sir," he said solemnly.

"All right. Do you take vows, or what?" Harry said. He glanced up at Dumbledore for help.

"Harry, they only need you to say they're married. If you'd like to say some words, or suggest some vows, that would be fine," the headmaster said.

"Erm, OK. I've actually never been to a wedding before, but I've seen them in films." Harry looked at Ginny for help. She just smiled at him, trusting him to do the right thing. *Blimey, what a responsibility*, he thought as he took a deep breath and tried to organize his thoughts. "Uh. . .OK. We're gathered here to witness the marriage of Dobby and Winky. They've chosen to spend their lives together in marriage and we're here to help them celebrate." *Yeah, that's a decent opening*, he told himself, *but what do I say next?* He thought a moment, then went on. "Dobby, do you promise to love Winky and take good care of her all of your life?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby replied enthusiastically.

"Winky, do you promise to love Dobby and take good care of him all of your life?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir! It will be my pleasure," she said, dropping her eyes and blushing.

Harry couldn't think of anything to add. He thought he'd covered the most important things in those few words. "Well, then, I pronounce you married! I wish you a long and happy life together." He grinned at Dobby. "You may kiss your wife."

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Dobby turned to Winky, taking her shoulders in his hands, and very solemnly rubbed noses with her. Winky was in tears and laughing at the same time.

"Throw the bouquet, Winky!" Fred cried. "Let's see who the next victim. . .erm, bride will be!"

Winky threw the bouquet and Tonks caught it, waving it triumphantly in her upraised hand, then handing it back to Winky.

"I'm glad I caught it, but you should enjoy it. Professor Dumbledore made it for you," Tonks said as she handed it to the house elf.

"Thank you, miss," Winky said, bobbing a quick curtsy before Harry could tell her off.

"Dobby, you and Winky have the rest of the night and tomorrow off as a wedding present," Harry told them. "We can clean up this mess."

"Oh, no, sir, Dobby and Winky. . ."

"Just got married and deserve a little holiday," Harry interrupted quickly.

The house elves waved as they headed off to their quarters, huge smiles on their faces.

Harry felt a hand clap his shoulder. "Well done," Dumbledore said. "I like the bit about their children, as well. Well done, all around."

"Thank you, sir. This has certainly been the most eventful birthday party I've ever had!" Harry said, grinning broadly.

Dumbledore moved off and Ginny took his place beside Harry, slipping her hand into his and leaning her cheek on his arm. She sighed as the elves closed their door behind them. "And they lived happily ever after," she said.

"Huh?" Harry said, smiling down at her.

"That's a line from old children's stories. I love stories that end that way. I think that's the way Dobby and Winky are going to live – happily ever after."

"I hope so," he replied. "I wouldn't mind living that way myself," he added, leaning down and rubbing noses with her.

"Sounds good to me," she agreed.

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Chapter 8 – Pleasure and Peril

Ginny's sixteenth birthday party was in full swing, with lots of laughter, plenty of good food and a pile of wonderful presents she was currently working her way through.

"Oh, Ron! It's brilliant!" Ginny cried as she opened a box revealing a broom servicing kit like Ron's and Harry's. "Thanks!"

"Now maybe you'll stop borrowing mine," her brother teased.

She'd saved Harry's present for last. It was very small, very thin, and she couldn't imagine what would be in there, but she knew it would be great – Harry's presents always were. She tore off the wrappings and opened. . .an empty box. She looked up at her boyfriend in surprise. "Did you forget something here?" she said with her eyebrow quirked up quizzically.

"Nope. Keep looking," he said, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

She moved the layers of tissue paper around and found a tiny note at the bottom of the box that said, "Keep looking."

"Keep looking?" she said, giving Harry a puzzled glance. "Where?"

He just grinned and shrugged his shoulders, then finally touched the wand in his pocket when she seemed to be at a complete loss for what to do next.

She cottoned on and pulled out her wand. "Now what?"

"It's possible something there has been transfigured," he suggested.

"Oh! Okay." She pulled out her wand and tapped the box three times. Nothing happened. She tapped the note three times and it turned into an envelope. She grinned at her success and opened the envelope to find. . .another note.

"Look in Harry's pocket," this one said.

"You're making me work for this, aren't you?" she laughed as she studied his pockets before deciding which one to check. The only "safe" one to check was the one on his shirt. Reaching into the others in front of her family was a certain route to embarrassment, and, while he might happily tease her all day long, she knew he'd never deliberately embarrass her. She reached confidently into his shirt pocket and pulled out two small cards. "Is this my present?" she asked, waving them under his nose.

"Yes," he said, smiling at her expectantly. "I hope you like that kind of card. They were the best present I could find for you."

She gave him a cheeky grin then looked at the small cards in her hand for the first time. She gasped and started jumping up and down, waving her hands in front of her face incoherently. Then she launched herself at Harry, squealing as she grabbed his neck in a bone-crunching hug, her feet waving excitedly in mid-air. "THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!"

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Harry, like everyone else in the room, was laughing hard now. "I suppose they fit properly, then?"

She lifted her ticket-filled hand from his back and gazed over his shoulder at them appreciatively. "Perfectly!"

"What is it, Gin?" Ron asked impatiently.

"Harry got tickets for us to see the Weird Sisters in concert!" Ginny cried ecstatically, letting Harry go long enough to wave the tickets in front of her family. She squealed in delight and jumped up to hug him tightly around the neck again, bouncing in excitement to the point of making Harry go "Oof!" and hold her still before she injured him further.

"Wicked!" Ron said.

"Cool," George and Fred agreed. "Well done, Harry!"

The night of the Weird Sisters' concert, Harry arrived at The Burrow on Sirius's motorcycle.

"Whoa! Where did you get that?" Ron asked enviously.

"It was Sirius's," Harry replied with a grin. "I found it in the basement behind a pile of rubbish. Remus and I worked on it to get it going again. He taught me how to ride it, too. I was keeping it a secret so I could use it tonight and surprise Ginny."

"Cool!" Ron breathed. "Can I have a ride sometime?"

"Yeah! It's brilliant!" Harry sat quietly enjoying the rich thrumming of the powerful motor, his eyes gliding over the sleek, beautiful lines of the bike. He'd never dreamed he'd have anything like this, and the fact that it had belonged to Sirius made it even more special to him. He glanced back up at Ron. "It flies, too. I hope your dad won't give me trouble about it being a misuse of a Muggle artefact. It was enchanted when I got it, and Sirius is gone now, so maybe nobody will get punished for it, eh?" he said hopefully. Ron just grinned in reply.

"Harry! Good to see you," Arthur said, coming out of the house. "What's that you have there?"

"It's Sirius's motorcycle. We're going to use it to go to the concert," Harry said, hoping his plans wouldn't be quashed by his girlfriend's parents.

"Sirius's motorcycle," Arthur breathed, walking around the big, heavy machine and admiring it openly. "It looks wonderful! Wherever did you find it?"

"In the basement. It had a Shrinking Charm on it and was sitting on a shelf. I thought it was a model, but Remus recognized it and told me all about it," Harry replied.

"Is that the one Hagrid rode to take you to Privet Drive when you were a baby?" Arthur asked.

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"The very one," Harry replied with a grin. "Remus thought I should enjoy it. It still flies – it's wicked fast." He looked seriously at Arthur for a moment. "I won't get in trouble for this, will I? I mean, Sirius is the one who enchanted it. I just inherited it."

"I won't say a thing," Arthur said amiably. "I'd love a ride on it sometime."

"I'll be happy to give all of you rides," Harry replied, his eyes lighting up as Ginny came out of the house, "but I have to take Ginny to this concert first."

"Hi, sweetheart!" she said excitedly. "Do I look all right?" She twirled around, her long hair flying like a silk scarf as she moved. She was wearing white jeans and a cute little green t-shirt that said "Weird Sisters Rock!" She carried a light jacket over her arm.

"You look great!" Harry said, putting down the kickstand on the bike so he could dismount and give her a quick hug.

"Surely you're not going like that," George teased.

"Why not?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"You both look too 'normal' – you need to look more like Tonks to fit in with that crowd," he assured them.

"Like Tonks? You mean with pink hair?" Harry asked, laughing in disbelief.

"Well, purple or green or blue or red – not Weasley red, mind you – would do just as well," George replied with a shrug.

"I know how to do a Glamour Spell," Harry said. "I do them on Merlin all the time. How's this?" With that, he waved his wand and his hair turned a beautiful bright sky blue, making the Weasleys all laugh and Ginny clap in appreciation.

"Now me!" Ginny cried, bouncing on her toes in excitement.

"Wait until I see if I can reverse this," Harry cautioned. "I'd hate to lose the sight of that pretty red hair forever." He waved his wand again and his hair returned to its normal glossy black. "How's this?"

"You look like your old self again," Ron said with a chuckle.

Harry turned to his girlfriend and asked, "Do you want us to match, or would you prefer to be purple or something?"

"Oh, let's match!" she said happily.

"Right, then! Here we go," Harry said dramatically, then put the blue Glamour on both his and Ginny's hair.

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"Oh, sorry I couldn't come out sooner, but I was in the middle of. . ." Molly began, wiping her hands on a dish towel as she came out of the house. She stopped and stared open-mouthed at Ginny and Harry. "What on earth?"

"We're fitting in!" Ginny said proudly. She glanced at her boyfriend, then added, "Oh, Harry, you should probably do your beard too, don't you think?"

"Uh, yeah," he said, and then complied, making the entire Weasley family laugh heartily to see him with his hair and beard bright blue. "Eyebrows too?" he asked cheekily.

"Why not?" Ginny said with a grin, and soon both of them were blue hair, eyebrows and eyelashes, as well as Harry's sky-blue beard.

Ginny giggled as she ran her fingers down the paler blue stripes that marked the grey streaks in his beard. "You still have your stripes."

"I could make them match, I suppose," he mused.

"No, leave them. They give you a rakish air," she said with a cheeky grin.

"Rakish? Is that a good thing or not?" he asked, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes at her teasingly.

"On you, it's brilliant!" she insisted.

"Well, all right then, as long as it's brilliant," he said agreeably.

Fred pulled a cap off of his head and put it on Harry. "Try this, mate," he said, putting the cap on back-to-front. "Now you're stylin'!"

"And your scar is hidden," Ginny said in sudden realization. "You're actually in disguise, Mr. Potter, sir!"

"Cool! Thanks, Fred!" Harry took two small things out of his pocket and enlarged them. He handed one of the now-life-sized helmets to Ginny. "Here you go, m'lady, for safety's sake. We'll be flying, so you might want to plait your hair."

"Flying?" Molly gulped uneasily. "On that?"

"It's perfectly safe, Mrs. Weasley," Harry assured her. "Remus says I'm as good on it as Sirius was. I'll take good care of Ginny, don't worry." He pulled Fred's cap off and stowed it safely in a pocket of his jacket, then put the helmet on.

"I know you will," she replied, determinedly forcing her nerves into submission. She looked at the two happy young people in front of her and smiled, then waved her wand over her daughter's back and Ginny's hair was instantly in a plait.

"Thanks, Mum!" Ginny said as she pulled on her helmet and buckled the chin strap. She swung her leg confidently over the motorcycle's saddle, looking up at Harry expectantly. "Let's go!"

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Harry got on and pulled her arms around his waist. "Hold on, sweetheart!" He popped the bike off its kickstand, revved the engine and drove down the Weasleys' lane at a sedate pace, then picked up speed and took off flying, disillusioning the bike, himself and Ginny just before they lifted off.

The engine of the big motorcycle throbbed noisily as they flew, making it nearly impossible to converse. Harry did a quick Silencing Charm on it so Muggles wouldn't hear them passing overhead. He swooped down low a few times just for fun, he and Ginny both laughing out loud with the joy of flight and the fun of being on the motorcycle.

"Sirius was a genius wasn't he?" Ginny called over Harry's shoulder at one point in the ride.

"For enchanting this?" he asked, and then felt her nod against his back. "Yeah, I think so. It's brilliant, isn't it?"

They flew on, over meadows, orchards, rocky outcroppings, then more villages and larger towns until they were nearing the suburb of London where the concert would take place. Harry got a wicked gleam in his eye, then called, "Hang on!" over his shoulder as he started a steep, spiralling dive. "WHOOOO-HOOOOOOO!" he cried in delight. Ginny matched him with a high-pitched squeal that ended just as they levelled off near the open meadow where a stage and stands full of seats had been set up for the concert. When they landed, Harry turned off the bike and sat there with a huge grin on his face. Ginny dismounted and pulled off her helmet, handing it to him.

"That was absolutely the most amazing thing I've done in I don't know how long!" she said excitedly. "Thanks for thinking of it!"

"I was hoping to have it ready in time for this," he said with a grin. "Knowing how much you love to fly, I thought you'd enjoy it." Harry took off his helmet and ran his hands through his hair, then remembered the cap Fred had lent him. He pulled it out of his pocket and put it on, back to front, as Fred had suggested. He watched Ginny as she turned to look at the activity near the stage while undoing her plait and using a small brush on her waist-length hair. The brilliant sky blue hair sparkled, catching red and gold glimmers from the setting sun. When she finished brushing it out, she shook her head, her hair rippled sensuously down her back, making Harry catch his breath. *I would never have believed I'd think sky blue hair was sexy*, he thought in amazement, *but on Ginny*. . . He chuckled, amused by his thoughts.

"Let's go!" Ginny urged him.

"I have to wait for the bike to cool a bit. If I put the Shrinking Charm on it now and put it in my pocket, it'll burn me!" he said, acting wounded that she had no concern for his personal safety. "And Remus said a Cooling Charm isn't good for older metal like this."

Ginny laughed at his act, then said, "You can't just park it?"

"Turns out it's a valuable antique bike, according to Remus, anyway, and it's enchanted as well. I don't really want anyone to steal it. It'll be cool enough soon," he assured her. "Look at those tents over there! They're selling stuff, aren't they?"

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"Yeah! Can we go and look once the bike cools?" she asked. "We still have time before the concert."

"Whatever you want, baby," he said with a tender smile. "Everything tonight is part of your birthday present."

Before long, Harry not only had his wand and an enchanted motorcycle with a Shrinking Spell on it in his pockets, but also several bags with newly purchased Weird Sisters t-shirts and other souvenirs. He was grateful he knew the Shrinking Spell, or he would have been burdened with loads of packages. Ginny was having a marvellous time shopping, but it was nearly time for the concert to begin and they needed to get to their seats.

"Oooo, these seats are great!" Ginny enthused as they settled into their places in a box above the side of the stage. Seats had been arranged in boxes on both sides of the concert stage, with the ground in front of the stage left open for those who wanted to dance, to sit on the ground or to bring their own chairs.

Harry pulled his miniaturized Omnioculars out of his pocket, enlarged them and handed them to Ginny. "I don't know if you'll need a play-by-play replay function for a concert, but at least you'll be able to see them more closely with these."

"Oh, Harry, you thought of everything!" she said. She was bouncing in her seat, she was so excited to see the band perform in concert. Yes, they'd played at the Yule Ball at Hogwarts in the past, but that couldn't possibly be like a full-blown open-air concert, could it?

Suddenly, the announcer's voice boomed over the area. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, witches and wizards, music fans of all ages! Raise your wands and give a cheer! *The one and only Weird Sisters are HERE!*"

The entire area erupted in a massive wall of sound made up of the cheers of the crowd, and the colossal booming thunder of the bass guitar playing a riff introducing the first song. The drummer joined in and soon the entire band was rocking their world with sound. Fireworks exploded above the stage nearly constantly, casting glittering sparkles of light over the crowd. People stood in their seats and screamed, stamped their feet, swayed or danced to the music, while shooting sparks from their wands in tribute. Harry and Ginny joined their voices in the cheers and waved their lit wands in salute to their favourite band. Before long, Harry and Ginny were standing and dancing in front of their seats like those around them, and then actually dancing on their seats, having a fabulous time.

"Let's go down by the stage so we can hear them better!" Ginny yelled in Harry's ear.

"What?" he said, completely deafened by the noise of the crowd and the highly amplified music blaring around them.

Ginny tried to explain again, but finally resorted to hand motions. He finally understood, laughing that she thought they could hear better anywhere else, and followed her down to the ground level, working their way through the happy, milling crowd until they were right in front of the stage. This close to the speakers, the sound from the amps made Harry's bones vibrate. It was a pretty weird feeling, but kind of fun, too. They danced wildly, completely caught up in the music and the excitement of the crowd. Once in a while, they'd see a friend

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from Hogwarts and would wave to them, but very few people recognized them, which they found to be quite fun once they understood what was going on.

The band played song after song, rarely taking any breaks, the fireworks increased in complexity and intensity, and the crowd just got rowdier with each song. During a rare quiet moment between songs, Harry began to worry when he heard some voices raised in anger. Glancing around, he noticed a gang of young men moving among the crowd, harassing unescorted girls, all of whom ignored them or turned their advances down abruptly. The gang moved from one cluster of girls to the next, being rejected repeatedly, then stalking off to the next group in a growing rage.

As the evening wore on, Harry could see the bullies were drinking out of bottles held in brown bags. He knew that wasn't a good sign. The young yobbs became more unruly as the evening progressed, and started getting more aggressive with the girls they encountered. Wildly drunk by this time, and having been snubbed by all the girls who were alone or with other girls, they began terrorizing couples, threatening the girls' boyfriends and trying to Vanish the girls' tops before their escorts could block the spells. The dancing crowd was so packed and so active, the security wizards couldn't keep up with everything that was going on, so this gang, which stayed as close to the centre of the dancing throng as possible, managed to get away unscathed for quite a while.

As the gang worked their way through the crowd and got closer to their position, Harry grabbed Ginny's hand and told her, "I'm sorry, but we'd better go. It's getting rough here."

Ginny looked where he was indicating with a nod of his head and blanched. Serious fights were breaking out between the yobs and the boyfriends of the girls whose tops had been Vanished. "Why do we need to leave? We can handle them!" she said defiantly.

"Getting involved in that fight doesn't seem like a good idea to me right now," he said, watching the bullies warily. The situation was fraught with so many dangers. Ginny couldn't Apparate yet, so he'd have a hard time getting her out of there instantly if things got nasty too close to them. Better to be too cautious and leave early than to take a chance.

Ginny looked back at the rowdy boys, her eyes absolutely furious for a moment, then sighed resignedly and followed Harry out of the concert area.

Once they were a distance away, Harry took out the motorcycle and enlarged it, and they roared down the road and then flew away. "Where to? The evening's still young," he called over his shoulder.

"Wherever you want to go, sweetie," she replied, tightening her arms around his waist and leaning against his broad shoulders. "This bike is such fun! Let's fly around a while."

"OK," he agreed. He Disillusioned himself, Ginny and the motorcycle and put a Silencing Charm on the bike's heavily throbbing engine. The wind whistled through their hair and the bike vibrated powerfully between their legs as they skimmed over rooftops and trees in the darkness. People on the streets below occasionally saw a faint shadow cross the moon, but couldn't make out what it might be.

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"Are you getting hungry?" Harry called over his shoulder after they'd been flying for an hour or so. "I'd planned to buy us some food at the concert. Fred said they usually have good stuff there. I'm sorry we had to leave so soon."

"I could eat," she agreed. "I think you were right. We did the right thing, leaving when we did. I don't mind, Harry."

"Well, I did promise your parents I'd look after you. Leaving was the best plan I could come up with at the time," he said with a shrug. "Where do you want to go? Anywhere special?"

"Your house," she said, giving his slim waist a hug.

"Works for me!" he said with a grin, and pointed the motorcycle toward London. A short time later, they arrived at 12 Grimmauld Place.

"Remus and Tonks are out for the evening, so it's just us and the house elves," Harry said as they walked in the front door, the now-shrunk motorcycle still ticking a bit as it finished cooling in his hand.

"So we have the place to ourselves?" she said with a lascivious grin.

"Yeah, we do," he said, grinning back at her. "Alone at last!" He put the motorcycle on a shelf by the door, hung Fred's cap on the hook there, and wrapped his arms around Ginny, kissing her until they were both dizzy. When they broke apart, they laughed and raced each other upstairs.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby called from the bottom of the stairs. "Is you and Miss Wheezy wanting something to eat?"

"Later, Dobby, thanks! And if anyone asks, we aren't here!" Harry called over his shoulder.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby agreed with a twinkle in his huge green eyes. "Dobby understands."

Harry and Ginny raced into his room and slammed the door, then fell laughing on the bed, trying to kiss without banging their teeth together. Their laughter soon gave way to sighs of pleasure as their kisses deepened and their hands began to wander. Harry was just working his way down Ginny's neck, nibbling, licking and nuzzling the soft skin below her ear, the delicate curve of her throat, and the sweet depression between her collarbones when he heard shouting and wailing downstairs. He sat up abruptly, listening hard.

"What the bloody hell is that?" he said, frowning in concentration as he tried to make out what the voices were saying, and who they belonged to.

"I don't know," Ginny said nervously.

Harry got up and straightened his clothes, then helped Ginny with hers. "Here's the plan. You sneak upstairs and come down in a minute. We were in Buckbeak's old room talking about curtains. What colour do you think?"

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"For Beaky's room? Yellow," she replied, still looking a bit confused.

"OK. Yellow it is. I'll go to the bathroom and flush the toilet so they think I was in there, and you come down when you hear it flush. Tuck your blouse in at the back, it's rumpled," he added as he quietly opened the door and peeped out. "Coast is clear," he whispered. "Go!" Ginny ran lightly up the stairs to Beaky's room and stayed there, glancing back at Harry worriedly as she quietly closed the door.

Harry crossed silently to the bathroom and flushed the toilet, then went clomping noisily down the stairs, Ron-style. "What's going on down here?" he called when he could see the group gathered in the entryway.

Mad-Eye Moody pulled his wand and pointed it at Harry. "Who the hell are you and how did you get into this house?" he demanded.

Harry put his hands up in surrender. "It's me, Mad-Eye. Harry." What was wrong with the man? He glanced around and saw several other wands pointed his way. "It really is me," he assured them. "What are you lot on about?"

"You don't look like Harry," Kingsley Shacklebolt said warily.

Ginny came lightly down the stairs at that moment. "What's going on here?"

"They don't think I'm me," Harry said in confusion. He was even more confused when Ginny laughed. "Why are you laughing?"

"You forgot the Glamour," she said, tugging at his hair.

"Glamour?" Mad-Eye growled, then squinted more seriously at Harry. "Glamour, is it?"

"Yes, I did a Glamour on our hair so we'd fit in at the concert," Harry replied. "Will you let me change it so you can recognize us? I'm reaching for my wand now," he said cautiously, keeping his eye on the wands still pointed at his heart.

"Go ahead," Moody replied warily, his wand pointed with unnerving steadiness at Harry's heart.

With a wave of his wand, Harry removed the Glamour and he stood there with his own black hair, Ginny with her long red hair.

Moody grunted, then said, "Let's see your scar, boy."

Harry sighed, then obediently pushed up his fringe so his double zigzag curse scar was visible. "Would someone please tell me what's going on? I thought Ginny and I were going to have a quiet dinner here after the concert, and here you lot are, storming in as if there's. . . wait a second. You wouldn't be here unless there was some emergency. What happened?"

The older wizards had all lowered their wands. Mundungus Fletcher belched loudly and said, "Dinner sounds good. What do you have?" as he scratched his belly and looked longingly toward the kitchen.

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The front door opened again and Albus Dumbledore came in. "Ah, Harry. I thought I'd find you here," he said serenely.

"Professor, what's. . .?" Harry began, but was cut off by a wail coming from the kitchen.

"Is that my mum?" Ginny said in horror. "What's wrong with her?"

"She thinks something terrible has happened to the two of you," Dumbledore said quietly. "Let's all go into the kitchen, shall we?"

Ginny ran ahead of the group and found her mother with her face buried in her arms, crying louder and louder, howling as if her heart was breaking. Arthur was crying too, but still doing his best to comfort his wife.

"Mum? Dad? What's wrong?" Ginny said as she ran to them.

"Mrs. Weasley? Mr. Weasley?" Harry said at the same time.

Arthur lifted his eyes, his face twisted in horrible grief. When their voices registered in his brain, he rubbed his eyes and began to laugh with relief. He gripped his wife's shoulders and cried, "They're here! They're safe! Molly, darling, they're safe!"

Molly raised her head and stared at him a long moment, not really comprehending what he was saying, then turned her head to see what he was looking at. "G-g-g-ginny?" she said in a quavering voice. "H-h-harry? You're alive?" She got shakily to her feet, holding her arms open to embrace her daughter.

"Yes, of course!" Ginny said, holding her mother close while her father rubbed her back. Arthur turned to Harry and pulled him into a hug. Molly couldn't seem to let go of Ginny, but finally lifted her eyes and reached out to touch Harry's shoulder with one trembling hand.

"You're all right? Both of you?" Molly said finally.

"Yes!" Ginny said, pushing back from her mother and gazing into her eyes. "What did you think happened to us?"

Arthur held up the small radio/CD player Harry had given him for Christmas. "We heard on the wireless that H-h-harry P-potter and his g-g-girlfriend had been k-k-k-killed at the concert," he stammered, tearing his eyes from his daughter's dear face to gaze at Harry. "I contacted Remus and Albus and they told us to meet them here."

"Where's Remus?" Harry asked in sudden fear, looking around. "And Tonks? And Ron and the twins? Are they all right?"

"Let's all sit down, shall we?" Dumbledore said with maddening calmness as he sat at the head of the long table. "We have a lot of catching up to do, I believe. Harry, is Dobby awake? I believe we could all do with some refreshment."

Harry no sooner thought of calling Dobby than the house-elf was standing beside him. "What would you like to eat and drink, ma'ams and sirs?" the elf asked, bowing a little.

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Harry grinned in spite of the gravity of the feelings in the room. "Dobby, what did I tell you about bowing?" he said, teasing the elf.

"Dobby's head is remembering, but sometimes Dobby's back is forgetting," the elf said with a smile, knowing Harry wasn't cross with him. As soon as the group told him what they wanted, he joined Winky, who had just come into the kitchen, and began putting together food and drinks for the gathered wizards.

When everyone was settled, Dumbledore began answering all the questions that had been thrown around in the last few minutes. "To answer the last question first, Harry, Remus went to identify your body. Tonks is with him. Ron and the twins are searching the concert grounds for your motorcycle. I suppose that was Sirius's motorcycle?" He smiled at Harry's nod. "I thought so. I contacted everyone and asked them to come here while you were speaking with Dobby. They should be here any minute."

At that moment, the front door opened and they could hear several people running hard down the hallway, reaching the kitchen almost before the front door could slam shut behind them.

"Where are they?" "Where *were* they?" "What the bloody hell *happened*?" "How could this happen?" "Are they all right?" Questions poured from the five people who suddenly filled the kitchen with nervous vitality.

"They're here!" Molly told her sons. "They're fine!"

"It was all a misunderstanding," Arthur said.

Harry had risen from his seat when he heard the door. Remus ran to him and pulled him into a tight embrace.

"I thought I'd lost you," the man murmured in a broken voice as he held his godson closely.

"Would somebody please tell me what the bloody hell happened?" Ron demanded. "Ginny, are you all right? Harry?"

"We're fine, Ron," Ginny assured him. "We've been here for a while. We came here to have dinner, and were upstairs talking about the colours for Buckbeak's old room when we heard everyone come in."

"I heard a toilet flush," Mad-Eye growled suspiciously.

"That was me," Harry said impatiently. "I'd like to know what's going on, too. Somebody, please explain?"

Remus, Tonks, Ron, Fred and George all found seats around the table and looked expectantly at Dumbledore.

"I was fairly certain Harry was alive, since I monitor him on various instruments in my office," the old wizard began, "but no surveillance system is foolproof, so I wanted to be certain that these two were all right. Since Arthur heard the news on the Wizarding Wireless Network, I knew something had happened, and that we would need to check into it. I also

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knew we needed to find you, Harry. From what I could tell, you seemed to be wandering aimlessly around for quite some time. Is this true?"

"Yes," Harry replied with a shrug. "We just flew around for a while. You know we both enjoy flying."

"Yes, I do know that," the old man said with a fond smile. "All right, then. What we know is this: a young man who resembles you was killed at tonight's concert. His girlfriend was injured quite seriously and has not regained consciousness. They lost whatever identification they might have had, but the young lady has long red hair and is petite like Miss Weasley, here. The young man has dark hair and round glasses like Harry's. We think the physical resemblance is what led to the erroneous identification. They had no identification on their persons for some reason. Perhaps it was stolen."

Harry and Ginny stared at each other in horror. "Someone. . . *died*. . . there?" Ginny gasped.

"Yes. Apparently the crowd got rather boisterous and. . . well. . . Let's start at the beginning. Why don't you tell us about the concert and why we found you here, and we'll tell you what we know. By the time we're all done, things may make some kind of sense," Dumbledore replied reasonably, nodding at Harry to begin.

"OK. Well, we got to the concert a bit early, so we looked at the stalls there. . ." Harry began.

"We got the cutest t-shirts, Mum," Ginny whispered in her mother's ear, earning a tremulous smile from her mum. Molly was still sniffing after crying so hard for such a long time.

Harry smiled at his sweetheart and went on. "When we finished shopping, we went to our seats and watched the first several songs from there. The seats were great ones, but we wanted to dance, so we moved down to the area in front of the stage where everyone was dancing. It was a lot of fun. The band played for a long time, with only short breaks here and there when someone would talk a bit while they changed instruments or costumes or something. During one of these breaks, I was looking around at the crowd. We'd seen some friends and waved to them earlier, and I was looking to see who else we knew. I saw a gang of blokes walking around. They seemed to be drunk or something – they were drinking out of bottles in brown paper bags, weaving as they walked, and talking a lot more loudly than necessary when the music wasn't playing. They started bothering people, and were getting, um, a bit rough in their behaviour."

"What Harry's trying to avoid telling you is that they started Vanishing the tops off girls," Ginny growled suddenly. "We were having such a good time, and then those great yobs had to go and spoil it."

Molly put her arm around her daughter and leaned her head against Ginny's, her hair and Ginny's intermingling in varying shades of ginger and auburn. "I'm sorry they spoiled it for you, dear," she murmured as she kissed Ginny's temple and rubbed her back comfortingly.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, they were causing trouble. From what I could see, apparently the first girls they bothered were just by themselves or with girlfriends, but then they started going after girls who were with guys. The blokes tried to fight the bullies, but they were outnumbered badly. These gits were all of Crabbe and Goyle's mould, far too big to be

allowed," he grumbled, throwing a glance at Ron, who gave him an understanding look in return. "I decided it would be best if we left, so we did. When we took off, it was just before the intermission. As we flew away, we heard them announce it. We were enjoying flying, so we just flew for a while, and then we came here to get something to eat, and that's more or less it."

"Thank you, Harry," Arthur said with heartfelt emotion. "I knew we could trust you to take good care of her."

"I honestly do my best," the young man assured him. "I don't want her to get hurt."

"I could've taken those great ugly gits," Ginny vowed.

"And I would've enjoyed watching you do it, and even helped you – but I promised to take care of you, and staying around for a fight didn't seem to fit with what your parents would expect," Harry said reasonably.

"I know," she said, giving him a cheeky grin, "but wouldn't it have been fun?"

"In this case, probably not," Dumbledore interjected. "These boys were young Death Eaters looking for ways to earn their way to higher standing in the group."

"Death Eaters?" Molly replied, aghast. "At the concert?"

"They're everywhere, Molly," Albus said sadly. "We have to learn how to get through life in spite of them. We can't allow them to keep us from doing what we want to do, or they've won another victory over us. Harry and Ginny were right to go to the concert, and they were right to leave when they did. Well done, both of you," he finished, nodding to the couple.

"So who was this bloke who was supposed to be Harry?" Ron asked, looking confused.

"I interviewed his friends about him," Tonks said, pulling out her Auror's notebook and referring to things she'd written there. "He's an American who came over here to do some research before taking a teaching position in an American wizarding school next month. He was with a group of friends, but they'd gotten widely separated during the dancing. That's why they didn't say anything to correct people when they first heard that Harry had been killed – they didn't know it was their friend. This couple's friends told me the young man had always thought it was fun that he resembled Harry Potter – apparently, he was quite a fan of yours, Harry – so he even got round glasses to look more like you. His hair looked like yours does when it's shorter, the way you used to wear it. He didn't have the scar, and his hair was dark brown, not black. I don't believe his eyes were green, either, but the spells they used on him made his eyes look funny, so it was hard to tell. He wasn't as tall or as broad-shouldered as you are now. At first glance, when we were still at a distance, both of us thought it was you – he had that much of a superficial resemblance to you." She stopped and gripped Remus's hand. He'd gasped when she mentioned their first sight of the boy's body. "He really did look a good bit like you. But when we looked at him closely, we knew it was someone else. The girl had long red hair and was petite, but other than that, she didn't resemble Ginny at all."

"So how did you all find out about this? When did it happen?" Harry asked, still bewildered by it all.

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"I was listening to this marvellous wireless you gave me while I was reading the paper this evening," Arthur told him, obviously still unnerved by the evening's events. "They interrupted the programming to announce that you'd been k-k-killed at the Weird Sisters concert, and. . .and your g-girlfriend was f-f-feared to be d-dead as well." He cleared his throat harshly, then went on. "I sent a message to Albus and Remus right away, and Albus said to meet him here. Fred had heard it on the wireless as well, and let us know that he, George and Ron were going to the concert grounds to find out what they could. We tried to stop them. . . ."

"Somebody needed to find out what was going on," George said reasonably. "We were much closer to the concert grounds than you were, Dad. And you had to look after Mum, after all."

"When we got there, we stayed on our brooms and saw the. . .the b-bodies on the ground," Ron said in a hollow voice. "I told Fred and George I didn't believe it. It couldn't be you. We didn't even think about the Glamour Charms you put on your hair. If we'd thought of that, we wouldn't have been so worried. It was a madhouse down there. We saw Remus and Tonks arrive, so we thought it would be more helpful for us to look for your motorcycle. I thought if it was you, the motorcycle would be there somewhere, but we never found it, so we thought. . .we hoped. . .it wasn't you and Ginny down there. And then Dad contacted us and told us to come here."

"I put a Shrinking Charm on the bike and had it in my pocket. You wouldn't have seen it even if it had been me who was hurt," Harry mused. "But thanks for trying," he added, seeing the crestfallen look on his best mate's face.

"So what happened to those gits, anyway?" George demanded. "I hope they toss them straight into Azkaban."

"Azkaban is too good for the likes of them," Fred snarled.

Harry looked from one twin to the other in shock. He'd never heard them sounding so vicious. They'd always found a way to laugh off even the worst of situations. Thinking their baby sister had been murdered must have really torn them apart.

"So now what?" Harry asked. "I didn't recognize any of those bullies we saw. Did they catch them all?"

"The Security wizards got to them quickly," Dumbledore replied. "They were, as you surmised, drunk, as well as trying to earn their Dark Marks. They've been taken into Ministry custody."

"Meanwhile," Arthur said, "they're still reporting on the wireless that Harry is dead." He indicated the headphones hanging loose around his neck. "I just heard them do an update on the story. They've added Ginny's name to it now. That poor girl must have died."

"Oh, no. Our friends will be devastated!" Molly said, wringing her hands. "How do we stop this?"

"I have an idea," Albus said. "Excuse me a moment." He got up and went to the fireplace, tossed some floo powder in and stuck his head in the fire. A few moments later, he straightened up and said, "Harry, would you come with me please?"

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"Where are we going?" Harry asked as he came around the table.

"To see the person who can set this right. Minister Bones." He glanced back at the group around the table. "Save us some pudding. We'll be back soon." With that, he stepped into the fire and disappeared.

"Harry!" Ginny called just as he was about to follow Dumbledore into the fire. "Your beard! They'll recognize you faster without it."

"Right," he said, and as he stepped into the fire, his beard was already disappearing.

Dumbledore and Harry appeared moments later in the drawing room fire of Minister of Magic Amelia Bones.

"Good evening, Minister," Dumbledore said graciously. "We seem to have a situation on our hands."

"Mr. Potter!" she said in relief when she saw Harry. "I was so worried when I heard the news! Are you quite all right?"

"I'm fine. So's Ginny," he assured her.

Dumbledore hurried to explain the situation, with Harry filling in details as needed. Minister Bones called an assistant and soon had a press conference set up, which was held in her front parlour.

"Thank you so much for coming," she told the reporters who were just quieting after getting their equipment set up. "There has been a terrible mistake made in your reporting this evening, and we want the situation rectified immediately. Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are alive and well."

Her announcement was met with a barrage of shouted questions.

"Please! Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll be patient, Mr. Potter and I will do our best to answer your questions." She glanced behind her and Harry came through the door into the parlour, standing beside her and trying to see despite the onslaught of dozens of flashes from camera lights. Once the group stilled again, Minister Bones told the story of what actually happened, and how the mistake in identifying the victims had occurred. "And now we have Mr. Potter here with us. He has agreed to answer a few questions – mind you, I said 'a few,'" she reminded the over-eager crowd. "Harry, call on whomever you wish," she said graciously, then moved to a nearby chair and sat down, leaving Harry to face the reporters alone.

"Erm. . ." he began intelligently. He cleared his throat and soldiered on. "Before we begin, I'd just like to say how sorry I am that this couple died. I was told that the man's name was Malcolm O'Donnell, and his girlfriend was Marilyn Chadwell. You should be writing about them. They're the story tonight, not me."

The room was silent for a moment, save for the sound of quills scratching on parchment. The reporters, sensing Harry had said all he had planned to, began raising their hands to ask questions.

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"OK, you there, in the blue robes, yes, you," Harry said, calling on a small man to his left.

"Mr. Potter, why were you at the concert?" the man asked.

"Why does anyone go to concerts? My girlfriend and I like the Weird Sisters' music," he said with a shrug.

"Why were you not recognized?" asked the next person Harry called on.

Harry smiled briefly at the memory. "We had Glamour Charms on our hair so we'd fit in with the crowd."

"What kind of Glamour?" the same man asked.

"I made our hair blue," Harry replied reluctantly. *So much for what could have been a great disguise*, he thought as he watched the reporters write down his every word.

"Can you show us?" someone in the back called out.

An internal dialog flashed through Harry's mind at the speed of light. *Damn. I don't want to do this, but if I don't, some stupid git at one of these rags will probably change a photo to make our hair blue anyway.* He sighed in resignation, then almost smiled. *At least they don't know I can change my hair and beard at will. I guess I'll still have some disguises left after all.* He glanced at Madam Bones, and then at his headmaster. Receiving a nod from each of them, he said, "I suppose," then waved his wand briefly, turning his hair a bright sky blue, just as it had been for the concert. The reporters laughed at the change in Harry's appearance and took loads of pictures.

"That's a good one!" someone shouted.

Harry smiled as he removed the spell. "We thought it was fun."

"What do you think about this man trying to look like you?" asked the next reporter Harry indicated.

"I think it's a very bad idea to try to look like me. My life isn't the calmest, safest one you could ask for," Harry said bluntly. "I mean, I'm a target! Why would anyone WANT to look like me? That sounds disrespectful to Malcolm O'Donnell, and I don't mean it that way at all, but if anyone else has this idea, I certainly hope they don't do it." He pointed at another reporter.

"How's your girlfriend taking all this?" the woman asked with a simpering smile.

"She enjoyed the concert quite well until those blokes started pushing people around. When things started to get rowdy, we left. She's sorry this couple died. Both of us wish none of this had happened. Our families and friends all heard about this long before we did and were terribly worried about us. That's why I agreed to meet you this evening. We want the rumours stopped before anyone else who loves us gets the wrong idea. We're both fine, well, happy, and all that stuff. That's the message we want to get out. We do appreciate your help in stopping the rumours and spreading the truth." With that, Harry decided he'd had enough

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publicity for one night. "I think that's all, then. Thank you for helping us set the story straight. Good night."

"Harry! Harry!" a young woman cried out. "Please, one more question!"

He sighed and turned back to face her. "Yes?"

"Penelope Clearwater, *Teen Witch Weekly*. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Oh, hi, Penelope! I didn't see you there." Harry knew Penelope had been Percy Weasley's girlfriend when they were both at Hogwarts. "Um, well, I'm still working on that, you know?"

"But it's your last year at Hogwarts, Harry. What are your plans? Are you and Ginny serious? Are you going on for more schooling, or playing professional Quidditch or what?" she persisted.

Yeah, she was a Ravenclaw, all right, Harry mused as he thought about how to answer her without getting too far into his personal life. *They do love their research*. "That's more than one question, and I already answered that one," he said with a smile, hoping that would satisfy her. Seeing her look of disappointment, he relented. None of the other reporters ever looked disappointed when he didn't answer questions, and he did actually know Penelope a bit from school. "Um, the answer to the question about Ginny is none of your business, thank you," he finally said with a blush. "As for my plans after Hogwarts – if a professional Quidditch team recruited me, that would be brilliant, but I plan to be an Auror, so I suppose I have three more years of study ahead of me." He smiled at the young woman, wondering if she and Percy were still seeing each other, but not willing to ask her in front of the rest of the press corps. "It was nice to see you again, Penelope. Thank you all for coming. Good night."

Early Monday morning, Harry was working in the shop when a large package arrived for him.

"What's that?" Ron asked as Harry untied the package from legs of the two huge grey owls carrying it.

"Dunno," Harry said, as mystified as Ron. "There's no return address. It's heavy." He gave the owls each a treat and started tearing open the wrapping on the package. "Whoa!" he cried in delight as a handsome dragonhide jacket rolled out of the wrapping.

"Wow! Who sent you that?" Ron asked, his eyes wide in amazement.

"Dunno – there must be a note in here somewhere," Harry said, holding the jacket to one side and pawing through the wrappings. "Nope, nothing. Oh, wait, there's a piece of parchment sticking out of this pocket." He pulled out the note and read, "To Harry Potter, one of our favourite fans. We're sorry you didn't get to hear the entire concert, and that we didn't get to meet you. Next time we're in town, you'll have four complimentary tickets waiting for you, so you and your girl can bring friends along for protection! We hope you'll all stay and have dinner with us after the show. We're fans of yours, as well, and we're looking forward to meeting you. All the best, The Weird Sisters. P.S. – We're sorry about what happened at the concert. We're tightening security measures at future concerts as a result. We were very happy

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to hear you and your girlfriend weren't injured. – W.S." Each member of the band had signed his name below the P.S.

"Wicked!" Ron said, reading over Harry's shoulder. "Can I come next time?"

"Of course!" Harry said, laughing. He looked from the note to the jacket and back again, not sure which item he thought was more extraordinary. "This is so cool!"

"Go on, then, try it on!" Ron urged.

Harry held the jacket at arm's length and looked it over. It was a beautiful emerald green with "The Weird Sisters" embossed on the back, the raised letters on the dragonhide enhanced with a spell that made the lettering change colours constantly. He took off his work robes and tried on the jacket, which fitted him very well. "This must belong to the bass player," Harry said as he put his hands in the pockets and moved around inside the jacket, getting it set just right on his shoulders.

"Why do you say that?" Ron asked in surprise.

Harry grinned and pulled his hand out of the pocket. It was full of guitar picks. "These, and the fact that he's the biggest guy in the band. The jackets the others guys wore wouldn't come anywhere near fitting me."

"Can I try it?" Ron said wistfully.

"Yeah, have a go," Harry said cheerfully, pulling the jacket off and handing it to his friend. "Then I can see how it looks!"

Ron put the jacket on and ran his hands over the wonderfully soft but tough leather. "Wow. This feels great," he said admiringly.

"Looks good, too. I can't wait to call Ginny and tell her about the tickets!" Harry said, a huge grin on his face. As he finished speaking, he heard Ginny calling on his ring. "I was just talking about you," he said as he answered her call.

"Guess what I got?" she said excitedly, ignoring what he'd said.

"What?" he said in amusement, having an idea what might be coming.

"A Weird Sisters jacket! It's green dragonhide and has sparkly letters on the back!" she squealed, jumping up and down in delight.

"That's wonderful, baby," he said sincerely.

"I can't wait to show it to you! It's so beautiful! It's the same colour as your eyes," she said, so excited that her words were running together.

"I can't wait to see it on you. That green with your hair – spectacular!"

"You're so sweet! Did they send you something?"

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"Yeah, I got a jacket, too," he told her with a huge grin. "And they promised me tickets to the next concert, and dinner with them after the show!"

Ginny squealed, totally incapable of speaking for a moment. When she caught her breath, she told him, "They sent me an autographed photo. Isn't that wonderful? And a handwritten note, and they all signed it!"

"That's great, sweetheart! Does your jacket fit?"

"It's a bit big. Mum knows a tailoring charm that should fix it," she said. "Does yours fit?"

"Yeah. Ron's got it on now. He's being my mirror so I can see how it looks." Harry grinned at Ron, who was doing his best to look at the jacket without taking it off. His twisting gyrations while trying to see over his own shoulder were quite amusing. "We'll have to wear our jackets the next time we go out," he told Ginny. "We'll match again, without having to resort to blue hair."

Ginny was still too elated to speak sensibly. Finally she blurted out, "Weird Sisters ROCK!"

"Yes, they do," Harry agreed.

A few days later, the furore over Harry's presumed death and the murders at the concert had finally started to die down. Harry and Remus had finished their dinner and were reading in the library when Tonks showed up.

"What a day!" she griped as she flounced into the room and dropped into an armchair near Remus's.

"Are you hungry?" Remus asked, smiling at her.

"No, I had something earlier. But I do have some news." She looked at Harry to make sure she had his attention too. "Those blokes who killed that couple at the concert? They knew you were going to be there! Someone at the ticket office told them."

"How would they know Harry was going to be there?" Remus asked, confused.

"I gave my name when I ordered the tickets, so they could send them to me," Harry replied slowly. "I never thought about that putting us in danger." A cold chill ran up his spine as he realized he'd inadvertently put Ginny in danger and caused the death of the couple who'd resembled them. His emotions ran clearly across his face.

"Harry, stop that," Remus said sharply.

"Stop what?" the young man replied, surprised out of his reverie.

"Stop blaming yourself. I can see it in your eyes, you're thinking that couple died because your name was on those tickets."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

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"You cannot take the blame for this, Harry," Remus said, leaning forward to squeeze the boy's shoulder comfortingly. "Albus was spot on when he said you and Ginny had every right to go to the concert. We can't let the Death Eaters keep us from living our lives."

"But. . ."

"But, nothing," Remus insisted. "You did nothing wrong."

Harry sighed and thought about what his godfather was saying. After a few minutes, he looked up at Remus and Tonks and said, "I've learned something from this, anyway."

"What's that?" Remus asked quietly.

"I won't order things in my own name anymore. I don't want to put anyone else in danger."

"That's probably a good idea," Tonks said. "What name will you use?"

"I don't know. I'll come up with something, I suppose," he said with a shrug. "Did they find out who told them I had ordered tickets?"

"The person who did it has disappeared. We'll find him," Tonks assured him.

With only ten days to go before they left for Hogwarts, Harry and Ron had their heads together over a table, working hard to complete a new weapon they and the twins were developing for the Ministry of Magic. While they were deeply absorbed in their task, an eagle owl arrived, dropping a letter in front of Harry.

"Watch it!" Harry grumbled at the owl. "You almost got it in the Explosive Boils Potion!" He picked up the letter carefully, and made sure it was clean before he opened it. He didn't want to be covered in the exploding pustules this potion would cause.

"Who's it from?" Ron asked as he measured more ingredients.

"Dunno." Harry cleaned his hands and then opened the envelope. His breathing sped up and his eyes widened just before he gasped, "No!"

"What's up?" Ron asked, staring at his friend. Harry's face was white, and Ron could feel the atmospheric change that preceded an explosive display of his infamous temper. "Calm down or you'll blow up the shop! What's wrong?"

"I've got to go," Harry muttered in a choked voice as he headed for the lab door.

"What? Where? What's in that letter, anyway?" Ron said, aghast. He could tell something was horribly wrong, but he had no idea what. He quickly took off his work robes, tossing them on his stool as he marked his place in his ingredient list. If he didn't, whoever tried to continue what he was doing would be in for a nasty shock. Adding any ingredient out of order in this fiddly potion spelled disaster in many unthinkable forms. "Harry, wait up!"

"I need to leave," Harry was telling Fred. "Ginny's in trouble."

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"What do you mean, 'in trouble?'" Fred said, bristling a bit.

"Draco Malfoy and his thugs have kidnapped her. They sent me a ransom note." Harry's face was grim.

"I thought those buggers were in Azkaban!" Fred said in confusion.

"Dumbledore told me a few days ago that they'd escaped. The Ministry's kept it quiet. There's something going on about Malfoy's father's money, too – it's tied up in some legal situation. His mum is busy fighting with the Ministry over it. I suppose Malfoy thought this was a way to get money and get back at me as well," Harry said tersely.

"But to kidnap Ginny. . .?" Ron couldn't get his mind around the situation at all. "Ginny was at home with Mum when I left this morning," he said slowly, but then his face suddenly drained of colour. "*Mum!* They'd have to kill her to take Ginny away!"

"I'm an idiot," Harry muttered suddenly, shaking his head in disgust as he pressed on the ruby in his ring. "Ginny Weasley," he said firmly. He got no response. "GINNY WEASLEY!" he cried. "Damn! She's not answering."

"Maybe they took her ring?" Ron suggested hopefully.

"Or she's unconscious and can't answer," Harry replied grimly. He ran to the fireplace and tossed in some floo powder. "The Burrow," he ground out as he knelt on the hearth. "Mrs. Weasley, are you there?" he called in as calm a voice as possible when his head arrived in her kitchen fireplace.

"Hello, Harry, dear! How nice to see you!" Molly said as she dried her hands on a dish towel.

"Hello," he said, relieved beyond belief that she was all right. He did his best to be polite and not panic her. "Is Ginny there? I'd like to speak to her."

"She's out picking blackberries, dear. Why don't you call her on your ring?"

"I tried that. She's not answering."

He debated whether to tell her about the note, but then he heard George saying, "You'd better tell her, mate. And we'll need to tell Dad, too."

Harry looked at his friends' mum. She was beginning to look a bit worried. "Um. . . I have some rather bad news, I'm afraid. I was hoping to find out it was a hoax."

"Bad news? Are the boys all right?" Molly said, a frown of worry crossing her face.

"It's Ginny. I just got a ransom note for her. It says she's been kidnapped by Draco Malfoy and his gang. I wouldn't put it past him to send something like this as a hoax. That's why I contacted you when Ginny didn't respond to my call on her ring."

Molly sat down hard, all the breath gone from her body, her face white as a sheet.

"Kidnapped? Ransom?"

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"Yes. I'll take care of this, Mrs. Weasley," Harry assured her. "They're after me, not her. I'll get her back safely for you." Molly just nodded. "Hang on one sec," he said, and pulled his head out of the fire.

Harry, Ron, Fred and George all Apparated into the house, the sudden appearance of their four large bodies crowding Molly's kitchen. Ron wrapped his arms around his mother, who had started sobbing. George started to toss some floo powder in the fire.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked.

"Contacting Dad," George replied.

"Good idea," Harry said as he headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Fred asked.

"To look for Ginny," Harry tossed over his shoulder. "Where does she go to pick blackberries?"

"Just in the edge of the woods over the hill," Molly choked out between sobs. "That's where she said she was going."

Harry took off at a run, wand at the ready, Ron and Fred close behind him. They spread out a bit as they ran up the hill, scanning the fields and the edge of the woods as they went, looking for enemies who might be waiting in ambush. George stayed behind to look after Molly and wait for their dad to arrive.

Arthur Apparated in front of the house as the boys ran up the hill toward the woods. He looked at them, and then saw George standing in the doorway watching their progress.

"Where's your mother?" Arthur asked as he ran into the house.

"Kitchen," George replied tersely. "I'm going to pop back to the shop and get Fred's and my brooms. Harry has his in his pocket. I'll grab Ron's Firebolt when I get back. We'll need them to look for her, I expect." With that, he Disapparated.

"Molly, dear, what happened? George only told me Ginny was kidnapped and for me to come home right away. What's going on?" Molly told him what little she knew and they clung to each other for a long moment, then both Apparated to the edge of the woods, following the sounds of the boys' voices as they ran calling for Ginny.

"Here!" Fred called. "I've found something!"

Everyone soon joined him. He'd found Ginny's overturned bucket still half-filled with blackberries, with more berries spilled across the ground. Many of the berries had been trampled by large feet. Recent rains made it easy to see the footprints of her captors.

"Nobody but Crabbe and Goyle have feet that big and wide," Harry snarled. "And these smaller prints must be Malfoy's. There are a few other sets as well. And these are Ginny's," he added, his voice catching as he studied the tracks. Near her footprints was the impression of a body on the ground, just her size. A few long red hairs were caught in a tree root, glittering

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brightly as they moved in the slight breeze. "This is where she fell." His voice broke as he finished speaking. He touched the hairs with one gentle finger, then tugged them free and put them in his pocket.

"Malfoy couldn't have got close to her without Stunning her," Ron commented, staring at the impression of his sister's body in the soft ground. He looked at Harry, his eyes bereft. "What do we do now?"

"I suppose I have to do what the ransom note says," he said uneasily. "I'll go to Gringotts and get the money. They said to bring the ransom at sunset, that they'd send another owl telling me where to deliver it, and they'd give me Ginny in exchange. They said I had to come alone."

"No!" Arthur said, putting his hand on Harry's arm. "That's what they want you to do. We need to find her and rescue her. There's no reason for them to keep her alive. They'll have the money, and you as well, if you show up when they expect you."

"Dad's right, Harry. We need to think this through, and act as fast as we can," Ron said resolutely. "I have an idea how to deal with it, if you can just find her." He looked at Harry significantly.

Harry gazed back at Ron, his brain whirling incoherently, a high whine of fear in his ears. Ginny was in danger. He didn't know where she was. What was Ron trying to tell him with the raised eyebrows and stares he was giving him?

"You could. . .you know. . . *look* for her, Harry," Ron said, squeezing his friend's arm, hoping to get him to understand without having to say any more.

"Look. . .OH! Yeah!" Harry said, understanding filling his face as he remembered the power of his glasses to locate people. He'd been too upset to remember. "Good thing you suggested that, mate," he said quietly. He raised his voice enough for the others to hear. "Let's spread out and see if we can find which direction they went," he suggested, then headed off away from the others, Ron on his heels. When they got a short distance away, Harry said the incantation that would turn on the search function of his glasses, along with Ginny's name. "I see her!" he said breathlessly. "I see her!"

"Where is she?" Ron urged.

"She's tied to a tree in the forest. It can't be far from here – I can see the steeple of that little church in Ottery St. Catchpole in the distance between the trees. The trees are much bigger than those in your woods, absolutely huge ones. Where would that be?"

"There's a forest on the other side of Ottery St. Catchpole that has a lot of big trees," Ron suggested.

Harry was quiet for a moment as he concentrated on his glasses again. "She's not moving. She alive," he said quickly to reassure his friend. "She must be either Stunned or unconscious, I think." His face was both relieved and even grimmer than before.

Ron noticed the change in Harry's expression. "Is she hurt?" he asked hesitantly.

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"There's blood and bruising on her face, and her clothes are badly torn," he replied, rage vibrating through his body.

"Harry, temper. You're going to blow something up!" Ron warned.

"I'm doing the best I can," he snapped. "Sorry." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his Shrinking Charmed Firebolt, then enlarged it. "I'm going after her."

"Wait a minute, mate," Ron urged. "We'll come along. We want to capture those sods. You don't need to do this alone."

"Fred? Ron? Dad? Where are you? I've brought our brooms," George called. "Have you found anything yet?"

"Here, George," Ron called. "Harry's worked out where she is. We need to get moving."

The Weasleys converged on Harry's and Ron's location. "How did you...?" Molly asked.

"She's in the forest on the other side of Ottery St. Catchpole, I believe," Harry replied, not answering her question.

"Here's what I think we should do," Ron said, the strategist in him taking over.

A short time later, the Weasleys were doing their best to keep up with Harry on his Firebolt. Arthur had Summoned a broom from their broom shed for Molly so she could go with them. Harry was going to rescue Ginny however he could – Ron had suggested several ideas that he could use, depending on the circumstances, and Harry had some ideas of his own. The others were going to hunt down her captors. At least, that was the initial plan. All of them had a Disillusionment Charm on them so they could fly stealthily, and Molly had put a Silencio on herself so she wouldn't cry out and give their location away. She was so distraught, she didn't trust herself to stay quiet.

The Weasleys could see Harry in the distance ahead of them, circling over the forest, looking for Ginny. A silvery Adfero shot from his hand toward them as he hovered over a small gap in the trees.

"He says he's found her. She's alone, so we need to spread out and look for them," Ron said tersely.

"Did he say how she was?" Arthur said in a shaky voice.

"No. But he sounded very angry," Ron replied. "That Adfero was dangerously strong. He's nearly out of control." He shook his head in worry for his friend as well as his sister. "Follow the plan, so Harry knows what to expect from us." The others nodded, and they spread out in a search pattern, wands at the ready.

What Harry saw when he found Ginny horrified him. Through a gap in the huge trees, he could see he could see the girl he loved dangling in agony from her bound wrists, which were tied to a branch above her, her feet bound to the tree's trunk, just as he'd envisioned her via his glasses. She was moving now, tugging at her bonds and rocking her head violently back and

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forth as she fought. He couldn't detect any sounds coming from her, but maybe it was the distance – or perhaps she had a Silencing Charm on her. In his vision when he'd searched for her, she'd had her jeans and a t-shirt on, ripped and torn but still mostly intact. Now her beautiful body gleamed like ivory in the dappled light of the forest, with only her long, vivid hair left as covering. She was bruised and cut everywhere Harry could see. They'd taken pleasure in beating her, or worse.

That's not how I saw her, he muttered in horror as he circled above her, trying to find the best position to ensure his plan would work without injuring her further. *She wasn't naked. They've been at her!* His blood roared in his ears. He'd tear them limb from limb when he found them. There wouldn't be enough pieces of them left to bury.

His face contorted with both fury and fear, Harry pulled out his new wand. He hadn't used it that much yet, but at this distance, he'd need all the power available to do what he had in mind. "*Relashio*," he muttered, releasing her bonds. Before her body hit the ground, he said "*Accio Ginny*," putting as much power behind it as he thought he could without hurting her. Yes, he'd summoned the Firebolt from a longer distance with his old wand for the Tri-Wizard Tournament, but the Firebolt could fly on its own and didn't weigh very much. Moving a human body would take a great deal more effort. Now Ginny hurtled up from the ground, flying at breakneck speed toward him. He sent her an *Adfero* as she lifted from the ground, "*Ginny, it's Harry. Don't be afraid, I've got you.*" He could see her wide, frightened eyes looking everywhere for him, but she couldn't see him because of the Disillusionment Charm. When she was ten feet from him, he said "*Aresto Momentum*," then did a Cushioning Charm to give her a soft landing as he flew to meet her and swept her up into his arms. He wrapped her in his cloak as he sent a quick *Adfero* to Molly, saying, "*I've got her – join me at The Burrow*," then wheeled the Firebolt around and zoomed off at top speed, heading for her home, where he'd leave her with her mother, then return to the hunt for her captors with the Weasley men.

"What did they do to you, baby?" Harry asked as they flew. Ginny was trembling so hard, it was difficult to hold her on the broom. "Tell me, I need to know."

She shook her head continuously, her hands scrabbling frantically at his chest as she did so.

"What is it? What are you trying to do?" he said, slowing down enough so it was safe to look down at her. He turned her face up to his. Her mouth was moving, but no sounds came out. "Oh, sorry," he muttered, and removed the Silencing Charm. "Better? Talk to me, baby. Why are you scratching my chest?"

Ginny sobbed, but her fingers kept digging at him wildly.

"What are you trying to do? That hurts, by the way," he said, worried about counteracting her frenzied motions while they were flying. She was making it hard to keep the broom balanced.

Finally, words burst forth between the sobs. "Don't hurt me! *Help! HARRY!*" she keened, hitting him when she wasn't scratching him madly with her fingernails.

Finally past the village below, he slowed the broom and removed the Disillusionment Charm, revealing himself. "It's me, baby, it's Harry! I've got you! You're safe now," he said, turning her face up to his again. "Look at me, Ginny! It's me!"

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Her frantic eyes finally focused on his and she gasped, "*Harry!*" and wrapped her arms tightly around his chest.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said as he started flying toward the Burrow again. "I didn't mean to scare you. I forgot about the Disillusionment Charm – and removing it over the forest would have been a bad idea anyway. With you covered in my cloak, we were invisible, except for that gorgeous hair of yours. At this distance, it probably looked like a red bird or something if someone on the ground saw it," he said, doing his best to calm her. "Didn't you hear my Adfero? I tried to tell you what I was doing."

She shook her head. "I thought. . .I thought it was a trick," she muttered, pressing her face against his chest, breathing in his scent. If she hadn't been so frightened, she would have recognized him despite his being Disillusioned. He smelled so wonderfully of sunshine, fun, warmth, courage, and most of all, love – all the things that made him Harry. She held him tightly, never wanting to let him go, her body racked with sobs of relief now, rather than terror.

"You're safe now," he assured her, squeezing her gently with the arm that supported her back. "Tell me how you are. Did they. . .I can see they touched you. Did they. . .did they. . .rape you?" His rage was building again.

Ginny trembled more violently in his arms when he asked, shaking her head.

"Tell me, baby. Did they?"

"No!" she shrieked.

Harry didn't know if she meant they didn't rape her or if she didn't want to tell him or what. Very confused and fighting hard to control his absolutely murderous rage, he flew on.

The Burrow was in sight when a silvery Adfero reached him. Ron was asking how Ginny was. Harry tried to respond calmly, so his Adfero wouldn't hurt his friend, but it was all he could manage to tone it down to a safe level.

"*She can't answer me sensibly, she's crying too hard,*" was the message he sent back to Ron. He was afraid to tell his friend that he'd found her naked, or about what he thought might have happened to her.

When they got to The Burrow, Harry carried Ginny to her room and tried to lay her gently in her own little bed, but she wouldn't let go of him. She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him tightly in her terror. He held her closely as she sobbed.

"It was Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, right?" he asked, tilting her head up so he could look in her eyes. She nodded, her face white. "Tell me what happened." She just gazed at him with frightened eyes. "Never mind, you can tell me later," he said, pulling her into a warm embrace again.

Molly landed outside the house, calling as she ran in the door. "Ginny! *Ginny!* Harry, is she all right? Where are you?"

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"Up here, in her room," Harry answered.

In moments, Molly was in Ginny's room, throwing herself on the bed and wrapping her arms around both Harry and Ginny, sobbing in relief. She kissed the back of Ginny's head over and over, and kissed Harry as well.

"Thank you, Harry, thank you, thank you," Molly cried, running her hands over her daughter's back, which was still covered in Harry's cloak. Ginny kept her face buried in Harry's shoulder, trembling terribly.

"Ginny? Sweetheart?" Harry said, lifting her chin to look into her eyes, his face grim. "I need to go help your dad and brothers look for Malfoy and his gang. Your mum's here. She can look after you. All right?"

Ginny clung to him tightly again, not wanting to let him go, burrowing her face into his chest as if it would take getting inside his skin for her to feel safe. Sobs shook her body. Molly rubbed her back, stroked her hair, crooning comfortingly to her as Harry held her in his arms.

After a few moments, Harry said, "Sweetheart, I need to go and help them. We can't let those . . . we can't let them get away." He couldn't think of a word bad enough to call his former classmates.

"Don't leave me, please don't leave me," she moaned.

Harry looked at Molly, his heart torn in two. He didn't want to leave Ginny, but he was a fighter and should be out there fighting alongside the Weasleys.

Molly understood and nodded at him. "Ginny, dear, your dad and brothers are out there searching for those nasty boys. Harry wants to help find them. I'll take care of you. Please let him go."

Ginny raised her head enough to look at Harry. "You want to leave me?"

"No, I don't. But I do want to be sure those gits are captured, and the more of us who are searching for them, the better. And I don't want your dad and brothers to wind up in Azkaban. The mood they're in, they may rip them limb from limb. I want to protect your family, sweetheart. Please let me go."

With a tiny nod, she released him. "Be careful. Come back to me."

"Always," he promised, and rose to leave.

A commotion downstairs made Harry and Molly both pull out their wands. Harry strode to the door while Molly stood protectively in front of her daughter. Soon they both relaxed, recognizing the voices of the Weasley men. Harry bounded down the stairs.

"Did you catch them, then?" he asked eagerly.

"Yeah!" Ron said brightly. "Malfoy screams like a girl even when he's not Polyjuiced into a woman's body, did you know that?" he chortled, referring to the time Malfoy had Polyjuiced

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himself into the appearance of Professor Sinistra in order to attack Harry on the Astronomy Tower after their last exam the previous term.

"That's what I would expect of him," Harry replied grimly. "What did you do to make him scream?"

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that," Ron said gleefully. "Fred turned him into a ferret and George and I inflated Crabbe and Goyle. We gave them exploding boils and a few other choice things, then bounced all three of them all the way here while Dad brought the others." The twins were hooting with laughter, and even Arthur had a grin on his face, which became an anxious frown when he saw Harry.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Scared. I don't know what injuries she may have. We didn't examine her – we were just trying to calm her down enough to let me join you in the hunt," Harry replied grimly. "Where are they? What did you do with them?"

"They're trussed up like the veritable sacrificial lambs," Fred said, a triumphant gleam in his eye, "hanging from the rafters of the henhouse."

"Hanging. . . ?" Harry was astonished. "You hanged them? Are they dead?"

"No, more's the pity," George replied with distinct disappointment. "Dad wouldn't let us go that far. They're nicely tied up and gift wrapped, ready for the Aurors to take them back to Azkaban. But we did have a bit more fun with them, and plan to have a bit more while they're still in our custody."

"What kind of fun?" Harry asked with great interest. The twins at their worst were the most creative jinx and hex-casters he'd ever seen. He hoped they'd done something awful to those boys that could never be reversed.

"Let's just say their own mothers wouldn't recognize them," Fred chortled.

"Good!" Harry snarled, his anger apparent.

The Weasleys looked at him warily, their high spirits over capturing Ginny's captors evaporating instantly. "Harry? What's wrong with Ginny?" Arthur asked carefully.

Harry sighed, looking from face to face, then sat down suddenly on the stairs, pushing his glasses up and rubbing his eyes wearily. "I didn't want to tell you while you were hunting. If any of us gets accused of murder, it should be me. I might be able to get away with it, especially in this case."

"*Murder?*" Fred said, uncharacteristically serious.

"If you'd seen . . .," Harry began, his shoulders locked in tension, his face stony. He finally took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders, trying to force himself to relax before he blew something up by accident.

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"Seen what?" Ron asked, sitting next to Harry on the steps. "What happened to her? Is she OK?"

"She's. . .she's been hurt. She has bruises and cuts on her. I think they beat her with their fists," Harry replied in disgust, his fists clenched so tightly, the nails were cutting his palms. He forced his hands open, willing each muscle in his body to relax before he hurt one of his friends by accident. He heard the collective gasp from the Weasley men as he answered them, then heard Molly wailing upstairs. Apparently she'd just removed Harry's cloak and seen her daughter's nude body, jumping to the same conclusion Harry had.

"Molly?" Arthur called up the stairs. "What's wrong?" He pushed Harry and Ron aside and raced up the stairs two at a time.

The twins and Ron started to follow him, but then turned to Harry. "Tell us, mate," Ron said grimly.

"She was tied to a tree, her arms above her head," he replied, his voice soft but ringing with rage, "but she's naked. I wrapped her in my cloak. I guess your mum just uncovered her." He looked at the three stunned brothers with serious eyes. "I've asked her if they raped her, but she just screams 'no' at me. I don't know if she means they didn't, or if she just doesn't want to tell me."

"Let's go," Fred said, turning toward the door.

"Yeah. We're going to kill some Slytherins today," George vowed.

"No, guys, wait. If anyone's going to be blamed for killing someone, let it be me," Harry said. "Everyone knows Malfoy's been after me for ages. I can make it look like self-defence."

"You're talking about cold-blooded murder," Ron said, looking at Harry oddly.

"I'm talking about keeping you lot out of Azkaban," he replied seriously. "It's me they were after. I'm the one who needs to deal with them. And there's nothing cold about my blood, believe me."

For once, Ron was being the reasonable one. "They're tied up, they're Petrified, so they aren't going anywhere. Let's see how Ginny is before we go off half-cocked, all right?"

There was a very long moment of silence in the room. "Right," the twins agreed reluctantly, then started up the stairs toward their sister's room.

"Harry?" Ron said, gently prodding his friend, who had turned his pitiless face toward the door to go outside as the twins headed upstairs.

"What?" Harry snarled, his mind already working on ways to kill those boys and make it look like self-defence.

"Coming? Ginny needs you more than Malfoy does right now," Ron said gently, hoping his words would get through to his friend. He had to wait for several long, tension-filled moments to get a reply.

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Harry thought seriously about ways to kill Malfoy and his cohorts, and the many excellent reasons for doing so. They kept getting out of Azkaban since the Dementors had joined Voldemort and told him all of the prison's secrets so he could release his followers whenever he wanted. Killing these boys would remove the threat they presented. It would prevent other people being injured while trying to capture them, since they were already trussed up. Killing them would be satisfying to Harry on so many levels, and they certainly had earned it. But, the mature part of his mind said, if he did that, he'd be sinking to their level. If he was going to have a career as an Auror, an elite law enforcement official, he should obey the law, right? He struggled quietly with these ideas for several long minutes.

Harry's temper and his conscience were still fighting when Ron's quiet "Ginny needs you" finally registered in his mind. He sighed heavily, finally giving up the idea of revenge. He was determined to do the right thing, the kind of thing Dumbledore would do. "All right," he finally replied, his shoulders sagging. He turned and started up the stairs, Ron right on his heels.

When Harry and Ron reached Ginny's room, Molly was tucking her into bed, Arthur just turning back from having closed the curtains, the twins standing by the wall gazing at their sister uncomfortably. Finally, Arthur sat on the edge of Ginny's bed and his sons joined him, all of them talking at once, each brother trying to top the other as they tried to cheer up their baby sister. Harry stood back and smiled at the scene, his anger momentarily forgotten in the face of the palpable love in the room.

Molly allowed the visit to go on for a few moments, then shooed her sons out of the room, saying, "She's tired. Leave her be, she needs to rest. I'll be down in a few minutes." As Harry started to follow the boys, she added, "Not you, Harry. I'd like you to stay here a bit." The Weasley boys looked at her and then at Harry in confusion, but went downstairs obediently enough.

"Harry, dear, close the door, would you? There's a good lad," Molly said distractedly.

"What's up?" he asked cautiously, looking from Molly to Arthur to Ginny, then back to Molly.

"She's injured," Molly said, wringing her hands. "Terribly injured. I was wondering if you could try your healing skills on her?"

"Yes, of course." He sat on the edge of her bed across from Arthur, taking Ginny's hand in his, kissing it and already rubbing at the rope burns there, doing what he could to heal her. "Did I hurt you? I was trying to be so careful, but the spell had to be powerful to lift you so far and fast enough to get you away before they noticed. . ."

"You didn't do anything wrong, dear," Molly assured him. Her composure shattered as she went on. "Those nasty little *heathens* put their *hands* on her!" She did her best to stifle a sob. "She's a mass of bruises. They. . .they. . ." She lifted devastated eyes to Harry. "Well. . .you saw."

Arthur rose and put his arms around his grieving wife, gazing brokenheartedly at his daughter.

"Yes, I saw," Harry replied. He swallowed hard and asked the question he'd been trying to get answered ever since he'd found Ginny. "Did they rape her?"

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"They were planning to. . . r-r-rape her, but they didn't have the chance, thank God. They were going to rape her and then k-kill her. They didn't care if she was alive when you delivered the money or not." Molly fought for control, then ploughed on. "The only reason they hadn't done it yet was because they were fighting over who would be first. That's why they weren't with her – the fight had taken them further into the woods. But they put their hands all over her, those *bastards*, and they injured her. She's a mass of bruises and cuts. They were *horrible* to her!" Molly pulled out of Arthur's embrace and stood gazing at her daughter, wringing her hands anxiously, tears sliding down her cheeks. "She doesn't want to go to St. Mungo's to be checked. I don't know how you do what you do, Harry, but I know you're good at healing some things. Would you please look at her?"

Ginny had turned her face into her pillow as her mother spoke, curling her body up protectively and crying quietly. Harry reached out and rubbed her shoulder gently. "Gin? Baby? I'm so sorry! What do I need to do? What's the worst injury?"

She pulled away from his hand, sobbing harder.

"Did I hurt you, baby? Tell me what you need," he said anxiously, afraid to touch her now. "Tell me how you feel. Where does it hurt?"

"I feel. . .," she snarled furiously between sobs, "I feel *filthy*! I don't think I'll ever feel clean again."

"Why, baby? We'll get you washed in no time." He glanced up at Molly, thoroughly confused. She shook her head and shrugged, not having any more understanding of how to handle the situation than he did.

"They. . .they *touched* me. They hurt me! I feel so *dirty*," Ginny sobbed, flinching away whenever Harry tried to touch her.

"Do you not want me here?" he said quietly. "Am I scaring you?"

"NO! No, please, don't go away," she sobbed. "I need you, Harry."

"You're flinching when I touch you. Am I hitting sore places?"

"No. I'm just . . .so ashamed. . . ."

"Of what?" he said, dumbfounded.

"They . . . they abused me. They said awful things. They" She broke off, sobbing incoherently. "I'm filthy now. You won't . . .you won't. . . ."

"I won't what?"

"Want me anymore. I'm dirty," she sobbed.

He was astonished and saddened by her words. "Ah, baby, you could be covered in owl dung and I'd still think you were the most beautiful girl in the world," he said, his voice filled with love. He lay down next to her, putting his head on her pillow, nose to nose with her. "Nothing

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they could do would make me love you any less," he assured her quite seriously. He reached out one gentle finger and wiped the tears away from her eyes, then started gently rubbing the bruises and cuts on her face. She stiffened at his touch, then finally began to relax under his ministrations, going from racking sobs to quiet crying after a few moments.

"Better?" he asked as she quieted. She nodded mutely. "Can you tell me what I need to work on? What did they do to you?"

Her eyes filled with tears again. "They. . .they threw me from one to the other like a Quaffle while they had a Petrificus Totalus on me. They kicked me in the ribs and chest. They pulled up my shirt and played with my breasts, squeezing them until I was screaming inside, but they had me Petrified so I couldn't cry out. They pinched my bum and squeezed it and slapped it. Malfoy hit me the most, saying it was what I deserved for being a Blood Traitor and a friend to Muggles and Mudbloods. And they laughed about it. Said they were damaging me so you wouldn't want me anymore."

Harry fought his rage and forced himself to concentrate on her needs. What she needed most right now was reassurance of his love. "And you believed them?"

"No, not what they said. But they made me feel so . . . and then I thought you probably wouldn't want me anymore. I'm all damaged. I'm ugly." She sobbed again, and he pulled her into his arms.

"My sweet girl, you could look like Mad-eye Moody and I'd still love you. You don't seem to mind my scars or my weird hair. Why would I mind if you're not perfect? It's what's inside you that I love – your fiery spirit, your generous heart, your sense of fun, so many things, not just your beauty." He felt her sigh as she settled her head on his shoulder.

"Your scars don't bother me, and I actually love your hair, so stop calling it weird," she chided him gently after a moment.

He chuckled. "That's my girl. Stand up for Harry's weird hair."

"It's not weird, it's cute," she insisted, nestling closer to him.

"If you say so," he said agreeably. He let her rest there a few minutes, then kissed her forehead and moved out from under her, sitting up to gaze down at her. "I know you're in pain. I may be able to help get you well more quickly than you might do on your own. Tell me where to start. What hurts the most?"

She blushed magnificently. "My breasts and my ribs." She looked uneasily at her parents, as did Harry.

"Erm," he began uncomfortably, glancing from Arthur to Molly. "To heal her, I have to touch her. And I should see her bare skin. Are you all right with that?"

Arthur glanced at Molly, then nodded. Molly took a deep breath and nodded as well.

"All right, then, baby, let's see what's going on here," he said, pulling the covers down and unbuttoning the pyjama top Molly had put on her. He took a deep breath, bracing himself as

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he lifted the two sides of the pyjama top and moved them aside. Ginny's beautiful white breasts were covered in livid red handprints, deep purple bruises, even some cuts. It was even worse than he remembered from the glimpses he'd had before he'd wrapped his cloak around her. *Bloody hell*, Harry thought in a panic, *please don't let me be sick*. There was barely any unmarked skin on her breasts or ribcage. A fist-shaped bruise flamed reddish-purple on her side. Other similar marks abounded.

"I will kill them," Harry murmured, stifling his rage again the best he could.

"Not if I get to them first," Arthur said, rising to leave the room, horrified by the sight of his daughter's abused body.

"Arthur, no!" Molly cried. "They're bound up now. If you kill them, that's murder, not killing in combat."

"So I'll untie them after I kill them," Arthur said, his face hard and angry.

Ginny was crying again. "Please, please, Daddy, don't do it! I don't want you in trouble."

"Better me than your brothers or Harry," Arthur said. "When your brothers hear about this. . ."

"You go downstairs and tell them, and then make sure none of you leave the kitchen," Molly ordered. "There will be no cold-blooded murders here."

"I could kill them with my bare hands and have no guilty conscience at all," Arthur snarled. "Look what they did to my *baby*." His voice broke as he said this.

"Erm. . ." Harry began uncomfortably, "maybe you'd better make sure the boys are still in the house."

"Why?" Molly said, wringing her hands.

"They asked me what happened and I told them," he replied. "I also told them I can probably get away with murdering those gits but they can't, so they should leave them to me." He looked up at Arthur. "The same goes for you. Everyone knows Malfoy's been after me for a long time. Maybe my being famous will finally be useful and keep me out of trouble. I don't want any of you going to Azkaban."

"Nor do we want you going there, lad," Arthur said, suddenly sobered. He was angry enough to kill those boys, but apparently Harry had already thought out a plan to not only kill them, but protect his friends as well. That fact alone chilled Arthur enough to cool his temper somewhat. "We don't want you to take such a chance either."

"Please, Harry, please," Ginny begged him, "please don't get into any trouble. I couldn't bear it."

"Some things just need to be done," he argued, his rage doing its best to bubble to the surface again.

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"Not right now," Molly said, rubbing Harry's back, trying to calm him. "Ginny needs you. Those boys don't."

Harry touched Ginny's face lightly, soothing away a bruise there as he thought. He looked at Molly and Arthur. "You're right. There shouldn't be any murders here. Then whichever of us did it will get into trouble, and Malfoy will have won a victory over us. We can't have that. He won't get any victory out of this, not at all."

Arthur studied Harry's face for a long moment, then looked at his sobbing daughter. "I'll do whatever you want, dear girl."

"Go and talk to the boys, then, please? Leave Malfoy to the Aurors," she begged.

"That's a good idea," Molly said. "We should call the Aurors."

"I'm surprised they aren't here already," Harry commented. "I'd heard they were supposed to be keeping a close eye on me after that couple was killed at the concert."

"Maybe they think you're safe here at The Burrow," Molly said, tearing up again. "That's a mistake no one will make again. It's not safe here anymore." She began to cry and Arthur put his arms around her, holding her closely for a moment before heading downstairs to talk to his sons.

Harry looked at Ginny. "Ready? I'll be as gentle as I can," he said. She nodded. He cupped both hands lightly around one of her breasts, sensing for internal damage as he started massaging away the external bruises.

Molly watched him for a while, not having seen him heal anyone before. She was amazed at how soft his touches were, and yet the bruising lightened with each touch.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?" he asked. "Does it feel better yet?"

"A bit," she said nervously. "Am I all right?"

"Getting there," he assured her. He moved his hands to the other breast, anxious to see what internal damage there might be. He worked on that breast much longer than the first one, then moved his hands to her rib cage and abdomen, sensing for injuries as he worked. He moved his hands back to the second breast he'd worked on and turned to her mother. "You should call a healer. She has internal damage that I don't know how to heal."

"Can you tell what it is?" Molly asked anxiously.

"There are blood clots in her breast, I think, and I'm afraid to work on them. It's . . . complicated in there. Some of her organs seem to be bruised. I'm working on those now. There's some internal bleeding, but I think I've stopped that. And she has some broken ribs as well. There could be things I've missed – I don't have any healer training, you know. This is all just done by instinct."

Molly was appalled. She swallowed hard a few times before she was able to speak again.

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"Should we take her to St. Mungo's?"

"I honestly don't know," he replied. "If you can, get Healer Pomfrey. He knows about my ability and will understand what I've done here." Molly hurried from the room.

"I have blood clots in my breast?" Ginny said with a renewed burst of tears. "How will I ever nurse a baby?"

"You have plenty of time to heal between now and then," he assured her. "I'm trying to sort them out, and I'm sure the healer will know what to do. Try to rest while I do this, all right?" After he'd worked a while longer, he felt Ginny finally relaxing under his hands. "Feeling better?"

"Your hands are so nice and warm," she murmured. "Feels good. My breasts aren't aching as much as they were."

"You have the most beautiful breasts," he whispered, leaning down to kiss her since they still had some privacy. "They're going to be fine. They already look loads better." He moved his lips from hers to the tip of each breast, kissing each one tenderly. "Better now?" Ginny chuckled in response. "Ah, that's my girl. I love your laugh."

"You're such a good healer, Harry. I love your bedside manner," she teased.

"Getting your spirit back, I see," he teased in return. He cocked an ear toward the open doorway, then gave her a wicked grin just before he leaned down and gave each breast some very gentle but delicious undivided attention.

Ginny arched her back and made happy murmurs in the back of her throat, while tears streamed from her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" he said when he noticed. "Did that hurt?"

"No! It didn't hurt. It felt fantastic! It's just that . . . I thought. . . I thought you'd never want to do that again," she said with a shaky laugh.

"Ah-ha. Medical expert that I am, that's exactly why I did it," he teased her, "plus, that's my fee for house calls." He grinned at her cheekily, enjoying her laughter, then stilled. "Oops, back to work, someone's coming." He covered her breasts with her pyjama top and was working on the bruising on her abdomen when her parents reappeared.

"How is she?" Molly asked anxiously. "Oh, Ginny! You must feel better. I see a smile there."

"I do feel better. Harry's wonderful." She looked at her boyfriend, her love shining in her eyes.

Harry chuckled at her, then glanced up at her parents, blushing when he saw Arthur's knowing smile. He glanced back down quickly, working hard on the fist marks he'd found on her ribcage.

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"The Aurors were downstairs when we got there – the twins called them. As soon as she heard how you were, Tonks left to get Healer Pomfrey," Arthur said. "Kingsley wants to talk to you, Ginny. He needs a statement before they take those boys away."

Ginny's eyes lost their smile as she looked at her dad. She hesitated, then said, "OK," in a small voice.

A few moments later, Ginny's small room was filled with too many bodies. Kingsley Shacklebolt, three other Aurors and her family as well as Harry were packed into the small space.

"Just tell us what happened in your own words, Miss Weasley," Shacklebolt said formally.

"Erm. . . I went to pick blackberries in the woods just over the hill," she said, pointing in the direction she'd taken. "I must have wandered off our land, following the berry bushes. I know there are wards on our part of the woods, but I didn't realize I'd gone past them until I thought I felt something. . . as if someone was watching me or something. I pulled my wand out and turned around, but Malfoy Stunned me before I could hex him. I fell over and he, Crabbe and Goyle fought over who was going to carry me. There were some other blokes there as well, but I didn't recognize them. They. . . they put their hands all over me," she said with a disgusted shudder. "Malfoy put me on his broom with him – the other boys are so big, there was no room for me on their brooms with them. We flew a short distance and landed in a clearing in the woods. Malfoy called an eagle owl to him and attached a letter to its leg, sending it off to Harry. Then he said, 'Let's have some fun while we're waiting.' They put a Petrificus Totalus on me when the Stunning spell wore off, then tore my clothes, touched me where they shouldn't, poked me, threw me around, lifted me by my hair, hit me, beat me. I think I have some loose teeth, actually," she mused sadly. Her family and Harry reacted with a variety of gasps and moans. She went on with her story. "They got tired of how hard I was, being Petrified, so they took off that spell and put a Silencio Charm on me. They tied me to a tree with my hands over my head. I tried to kick them to defend myself, so they tied my feet to the trunk. They hit me some more, then shredded or Vanished the rest of my clothes." Her face burned with humiliation. Stifling a sob, she forced herself to go on. "They decided they liked playing with my breasts the best. I guess they haven't seen any before, they were so fascinated, the great wankers," she finished with a snarl in her voice.

"Language, Ginny," her mother said automatically.

"I'm not sorry, Mum. If I knew worse words for them, I'd use them," Ginny said stoutly. "The blokes I didn't know started fighting with Malfoy over who got me first, and then they all got into it. Their fight took them into the woods and I was left alone."

"Who got you first?" Ron said slowly, horrified at what he was hearing.

"Who got to. . . rape. . . me first," she murmured with a shudder. It took her a moment to calm down enough to continue with her story. "I was fighting my bonds when suddenly they let go. I couldn't believe I'd got them loose that easily – I was tied quite tightly. It hurt my wrists and ankles where the ropes were, and my shoulders because I was hanging by my hands. When the ropes let go, I started to fall to the ground, but then I flew up in the air very fast and I was scared to death!" She hesitated, her eyes straying to Harry. "I couldn't see what was drawing me up. Harry had a Disillusionment Charm on himself and his broom. I was so scared. I didn't

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know who it was, or how he was drawing me to him, but he pulled me onto his broom and brought me home."

"Is that everything?" Shacklebolt said. She nodded. He turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter? What's your statement?"

Harry told them about receiving the letter from the eagle owl and all that had happened after that.

"It was a Summoning Charm? How high were you?"

"About two hundred feet, I think. The trees are very tall there, about 150 feet, and I wanted to be high enough above them that Malfoy and his gang might not notice me."

"You never cease to amaze me, Mr. Potter," Shacklebolt said in admiration. "All right, I think we have enough to be going on with. We took statements from your parents and brothers downstairs, Miss Weasley. I know there's a healer on the way and that you're tired, so we'll go now and let you get some rest."

"Thanks," she murmured, glad to see them leave. Everyone but Harry followed them downstairs to complete their statements.

"Loose teeth, huh?" Harry said, sitting on the edge of her bed again. "You didn't mention those before, nor your aching joints."

"They weren't the most painful thing. You asked what hurt the most," she reminded him.

"Oh yeah. Well, let's get these other things fixed as much as possible then, shall we?" he said, already running his fingers down her jaws, searching for the sites of injury. He did what he could to fix her teeth and healed the rest of the bruises on her face, then worked on her shoulders, wrists and ankles a little. "I'm not sure what to do for your shoulders. I think I'll leave them for the healer, all right?"

She nodded.

"Where else? Show me."

She rolled over and pointed at her bum. Harry took a deep breath, hoping her parents wouldn't come in and be upset with what he was doing, then pulled her pyjama bottoms down, exposing her buttocks. Like her breasts, they were covered in purpling bruises shaped like hands, fingers or fists. He went to work and had about half of them done when Molly and Arthur returned.

"Oh dear. I didn't know it was that bad," Molly cried.

"It was worse," Harry growled. "I'm about halfway finished healing this area now."

"How do you do that, Harry?" Arthur asked, moving closer to watch him work.

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"I don't know how to explain it. I kind of concentrate the magic between my hands, when I'm using both hands. That's how I sense for internal injuries. Rubbing away bruises – I honestly have no idea how that works. When I did it the first time, it just felt like the thing to do, and that's still how it is. I feel a little, erm, vibration, I guess you could say, in my fingers while the bruises are disappearing. I have no real explanation for it." He rubbed his thumbs gently over the remaining marks on her bum and then pulled her pyjamas up over her again. "I think that's all I can do for now," he said, straightening up and stretching out his back, rolling his neck and shoulders. He looked up at Arthur. "I'd love to hear how you lot captured them, and what all you did to them. I know how creative Fred and George can be."

"We'll tell you about it later, lad," Arthur replied quietly, his eyes on his daughter. "Your patient still needs a bit of attention."

Ginny was crying again. "What's wrong now, baby?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know, I just can't stop crying," she wailed as she turned on her side and curled up into a tight ball of misery.

"Where does it hurt?" her mother asked, tenderly smoothing the hair away from her face.

"It's not. . . I'm not. . . I don't know," she moaned. Molly and Arthur exchanged a distraught look, frightened by their normally courageous daughter's distress. Molly gathered her child into her arms and rocked her. Harry held her hand and Arthur rubbed her back gently.

"How about a Cheering Charm?" Harry asked suddenly. "Would that help?" Ginny nodded. He performed the charm and was pleased to see a small smile appear. "That's a bit better, then, right?" he said encouragingly.

"A bit," she replied, releasing her mother and sliding back under the covers.

"Help's here!" a cheery voice called from downstairs. Tonks followed Ron into the room, Healer Pomfrey in tow.

"Here's your personal physician," Ron said dramatically, trying valiantly to be funny.

"Thanks for bringing him, Tonks," Harry replied. "Thanks for coming, Healer Pomfrey."

"My password's 'scar on my sister's elbow,' Harry. Come and tell me what you've done so far, and then I'll examine my patient," Marcus Pomfrey said.

Harry joined Pomfrey in the hallway while Tonks sat on the edge of Ginny's bed, talking cheerfully about nothing in particular, changing the shape of her nose and eyebrows to be silly, doing her best to make Ginny smile. Ron sat on the arm of his mother's chair next to the bed and just gazed at his sister with sad eyes, his arm comfortingly around his mum. The twins had gone out to the henhouse with the Aurors. Arthur stood by the window staring out at the henhouse, his face grim. Pomfrey and Harry soon returned, and the healer took Tonks' place at Ginny's side.

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"I hear you've had a rough day, young lady," Pomfrey said kindly, "but knowing Harry's skills, there probably isn't much left for me to do. Let's see what we have here." He glanced around at all the people in the room and added, "Could we have some privacy please?"

Ron, Harry, Tonks and Arthur moved toward the door. Molly didn't budge.

"Harry!" Ginny cried suddenly, her eyes wide with fear.

Harry looked from her to the healer, who nodded, and came back to sit by Molly. "It's OK, I'm not going anywhere," he said comfortingly.

She relaxed visibly when he sat down and took her hand. Before long, Healer Pomfrey had finished his examination.

"Harry, you've done an excellent job. I really wish you'd consider training as a healer. You're a natural."

"I don't want that kind of responsibility, thanks," he said nervously. "I don't like having people's lives literally in my hands like that, but I do like to help them when I can."

"Just think about it. You'd be brilliant," Pomfrey said with a smile. He looked from Ginny to Molly, then back at Ginny. "You've suffered a tremendous amount of trauma, but you already know that. You have broken ribs and loose teeth, both of which I can fix in a few moments. Harry's already stabilized them somewhat. You have a bruised spleen and bruised kidneys. Harry did some repair work there that stopped the bleeding and started the healing, so that's already much better. I have to say, I've never seen such trauma to breasts. Harry was right, you do have some blood clots in the left one, but we can have that fixed in no time. You'll be in bed for three days. Your broken ribs and loose teeth will be healed in a few moments. The soft tissue injuries will take a little while longer, but it won't be bad. You'll be uncomfortable as you heal, but not in real pain." He reached into his carryall. "All right. The potion in this blue bottle is to heal your injuries." He looked at Molly. "One teaspoonful every six hours, all right? She'll need this for three days. The potion in the green bottle is a restorative to help you get your strength back. Three drops twice a day. And the one in the purple bottle is Dreamless Sleep potion. Use that as needed, but no more than three doses a day. It should make you sleep for eight hours at a time with no dreams at all. However, given the experiences you've just had, some nightmares might break through. It's rare, but it does happen." He looked at Molly again. "Someone should sit with her tonight. By tomorrow, she should be a lot better."

"We'll take good care of her," Molly assured him warmly. "What can she eat?"

"Liquids only for two days, then soft foods the third day, then a normal diet after that," he replied. "Make sure she drinks plenty of water, juices, and so on. Give her as many fluids as she's willing to take. That will help her heal more quickly."

"All right," Molly replied.

"Harry, were you injured? Do I need to look at you?" he asked.

"No, Ginny was the only one hurt this time," Harry assured him. "I managed to catch her without any bump at all, so my back isn't sore or anything."

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"Well done." Marcus gathered his things and prepared to leave. "Let me know if she has any problems," he said as he opened the door.

"We will," Molly assured him.

Harry followed Pomfrey out into the corridor, leaving the door open for Ron, Tonks and Arthur to go in and see Ginny. "Healer Pomfrey?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for coming all this way. I know healers don't normally make house calls anymore."

"Where you're concerned, I make house calls. I don't normally, but I seem to be your personal physician now. I rather like that actually," Pomfrey said with a grin. "You're an interesting young man, Harry. It's a pleasure to know you. I cannot tell you how impressed I am with how you diagnosed and healed Miss Weasley. Well done."

Harry blushed. "Thanks."

"Take good care of yourself, Harry," Pomfrey said, turning to go down the stairs.

"I will. Goodbye, Healer Pomfrey."

The healer turned back and grinned at Harry. "Marcus."

"Sorry?"

"Why don't you call me 'Marcus'? We see so much of each other, we may as well be friends," he said with a grin.

"I'd like that – as long as every visit doesn't involve me or someone I care about being hurt or sick!" Harry replied with a chuckle. "And you owe me a Quidditch game."

"Yes, I do, don't I? We've had to reschedule every time we've set one up."

"This Saturday, you should come out here and we'll play. There are enough Weasleys around here to field two small teams. It'll be great," Harry said, grinning.

"You're on! I'm actually free this Saturday. See you then!"

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Chapter 9 – Difficult Decisions

When Harry re-entered the room, he found Ginny crying in her mother's arms again. He glanced from Molly to Arthur, hoping for an explanation.

"They took her jewellery," Molly said quietly in response to his look.

"I noticed her necklace and ring were gone," Harry replied. He sat on the side of the bed and rubbed Ginny's back. "It's OK, sweetheart. I'll get you new ones."

"They threw them down somewhere in the woods," she said between sniffles. "They crushed them. They heard you calling me on my ring and Crabbe stamped on my hand and broke the ring so it fell off my finger when he couldn't just pull it off. I thought he'd broken my hand." She looked sadly at her hand. Harry had healed the bruises and cuts, but there were still faint scratches on her skin showing where the delicate filigree of her ring had been snapped in two.

"Your finger isn't broken, is it?" Harry said in concern, taking her hand in his. "Your hand didn't seem to be that painful when I worked on these cuts."

"No, it's fine. The ring cut my finger a bit, but you've already healed those, see?" She turned her hand to show the healing injuries.

"I'm sorry, baby," Harry said, kissing her hand gently.

"And what did they do with your wand?" Molly asked quietly.

"I lost it where they caught me," Ginny said miserably. "I don't know if they broke it or not."

"The twins and I will go and look for them," Ron offered, standing up and heading for the door. "We should be able to find them with Accio Charms, don't you think?" he asked Harry, who nodded. "We'll be back soon, Ginny," he promised his sister, waving as he left her room.

"Be careful, you lot!" Molly called after him. She looked at Harry and Arthur. "I expect you're hungry, aren't you? I'll just go make some dinner. And you're getting soup, young lady. What would you like?"

"Whatever you want to make, Mum," Ginny replied, sounding both weary and sad. "I'm not very hungry."

"We need to get fluids into you, so you will eat something!" Molly said with determination, then went downstairs to cook.

Some time later, Ron and the twins returned, their faces triumphant. "Found 'em!" Ron cried as the three of them entered Ginny's room. "They're a bit the worse for wear. . ." he said apologetically as he put the broken jewellery in Harry's outstretched hand.

"Oh, I'd say so, yeah," Harry said, frowning at the crumpled pieces of gold in his hand that had once been Ginny's promise ring and her Gryffindor lion pendant, both gifts to her from Harry. He glanced at Ginny and saw unshed tears in her eyes as she stared at the gleaming pile of rubble in his hand.

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"Found your wand, too," Fred said, handing it to Ginny. "Good as new!"

"It wasn't damaged?" she said in surprise.

"Nope, we checked," Fred replied. He waved it grandly and several colourful small birds flew out of the end of it and twittered around the room before settling on the sill of the open window, where they sang cheerfully for a while before disappearing. Ginny rewarded him with a faint smile.

"We did try doing Reparo Charms on the jewellery, but we stopped before we made a right mess of it," George said apologetically. "I don't know why they didn't work."

"These pieces both have spells on them," Harry offered. "It's possible those spells interfered with the Reparo Charms." He turned the ruined ornaments over in his hand and sighed. "I imagine the jeweller in Hogsmeade can fix them. He made them himself."

"It's all right, Harry," Ginny protested feebly. "You don't have to. . ."

"It won't take long, sweetheart," he assured her. He looked at his watch. "He should be open for a while longer today. If you'll be OK for a while, I can pop up there now."

"Don't go alone!" she cried anxiously.

"I'll go with you," Ron offered.

A short time later, Harry and Ron Apparated in front of the jewellery shop in Hogsmeade.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Weasley! How lovely to see you!" Mr. Joyero said cheerfully. "What can I do for you this afternoon?" He noticed the grim look on the boys' faces and sobered immediately. "What's wrong?"

"My girlfriend was attacked today, and they damaged her jewellery. She's quite upset about it," Harry said quietly.

"Is she all right?" Mr. Joyero asked, his brow furrowed in concern. "Who attacked her?"

"She'll be fine. She just needs time to heal," Harry assured him, hoping he was right. "She was attacked by some stupid gits trying to be Death Eaters," he said through clenched teeth. He took a moment to calm himself, then held out Ginny's ring and pendant. "Can you fix these? We've tried Reparo Charms, but they don't work."

"That's because of the spells on them," Mr. Joyero replied, looking at the crushed bits of gold in the young man's hand. "Oh, dear. Someone did quite a thorough job."

"Can they be repaired?" Harry asked anxiously. He didn't like the sceptical look on the jeweller's face.

"Hmmmm," the man mused. "Let me see." He took them from Harry, put his jeweller's loupe in his eye and turned them over in his hands, inspecting them closely. "Ah. Yes. Broken prongs. Lost the ruby from the ring, I see, and the peridot is cracked. The band is badly

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crushed, as well as being snapped in two there where it's thin. The pendant. . .oh, dear. Hmmm," he said, glancing up at Harry.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, sighing heavily at the same time.

"Are they completely ruined?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Can you give me at least an hour?" Mr. Joyero said. "These will both require some quite delicate repair work. Even with magic, it will take some time. Or would you prefer to buy her something new, perhaps? It might be less expensive. . . ."

Harry's face fell. "I'd prefer to give these back to her, if possible. They mean a lot to her," he said earnestly.

"I'm sure they do. Well, if you gentlemen will give me an hour to an hour and a half, I'll know something by then."

"Might they be repaired by then?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I can't say, Mr. Potter. I'll have to start working on them and see how truly damaged they are, and how easily they go back into shape – if they will at all, without cracking. They might have to be completely remade. I just won't know until I work on them."

"All right. We'll come back later, then," Harry agreed. When they left the shop, he and Ron Apparated back to The Burrow.

"We're back," Ron called as the two of them entered the kitchen.

"Come and eat. I was just setting things out," Molly invited.

"How's Ginny?" Harry and Ron asked at the same time.

"She ate a bit of soup, and she's sleeping right now. You can go up and peep in at her if you want to," Molly replied.

Harry and Ron climbed up to her room and opened the door quietly. Ginny lay curled up on her side, her hand tucked under her cheek, her hair splayed across her pillow like a crimson shawl. She was fast asleep and looked very young, her lashes dark scarlet feathers against her pale skin. Arthur was sitting in a chair near her bed, reading the paper. He glanced up as the boys came in.

"Any luck with the jeweller?" Arthur asked softly.

"He's working on them," Harry said with a shrug. He wasn't going to say anything about the possibility that they couldn't be repaired unless Ginny asked him directly. He was grateful she was asleep so she couldn't ask him any questions.

After a meal both boys just picked at, Harry and Ron returned to the jewellery shop. As they opened the door, Harry called out, "Mr. Joyero? We're back."

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The man came into the shop from the back room. "Hello, gentlemen! Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is, I can repair the pieces, and they're nearly done. The bad news is, I had to replace all the gems and add a bit of gold to strengthen various parts, and I had to replace the pendant's chain entirely, so the costs are higher than I'd hoped they'd be."

"But they're repaired? They look like new?" Harry said hopefully.

"They will when I've finished," Mr. Joyero assured him. "I need about ten more minutes. Can you wait, or do you want to come back?"

Harry looked at Ron. "She's asleep. Why don't we wait?"

"Sure," Ron replied easily.

The boys wandered around the shop looking at the various things on display there. Harry found a pretty little box and ran his finger gently over the top. It was oval in shape, with a lovely cloisonné horse enamelled on the top. The edges were golden-coloured filigree, with cloisonné on the sides showing a herd of horses running endlessly around the box in a meadow littered with flowers of all colours. Harry lifted the lid and looked inside. It was lined in rich, golden velvet, and played a lovely, haunting song when the lid was fully lifted. He smiled, not able to place the tune, but knowing he'd heard it somewhere. He could tell by the lyrical, yearning, passionate sound of it that it was a love song.

"What's that?" Ron asked, coming over to look over Harry's shoulder.

"It's a music box," Harry said. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Horses, huh? Ginny loves horses."

"I know." Harry closed the box and lifted it, looking for a price tag, or at least the name of the song.

"No tag. That means it's *really* expensive," Ron said with a teasing grin.

"Yeah. But she'd like it, wouldn't she?" Harry mused. "I like the song, too."

"That's an old Italian love song, Mr. Potter," the jeweller said, having overheard their conversation. "And that box isn't terribly expensive. I can look the price up for you in a few moments."

"OK," Harry said, carrying the box with him as he wandered around the shop. "What are these?" he asked as he turned a vertical rack with sparkly decorations on it.

"Oh, those are my wife's latest project," Mr. Joyero said cheerfully. "Jewelled hair clips. They're costume jewellery, not fine jewellery, so they are quite reasonably priced. We wanted to have some economical, fun items in the shop for the Hogwarts students."

"Those are pretty," Ron said wistfully, thinking about how one of the clips would look in a certain wild mass of unruly brown hair. He willed himself not to think about Hermione. He was going to get past his grief over her breaking up with him, or die trying.

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"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Oh, look! This one's a Firebolt, isn't it?"

"Yes," Mr. Joyero agreed, coming to see what they were looking at. "My wife and I are great fans of Quidditch. She got permission from the company to make the Firebolt as a hair clip and a brooch. They're quite nice."

"How does this work?" Harry said, looking curiously at the mysterious fastening on the clip.

"The young lady pulls a section of hair back, or all her hair, however she wants to style it, and fastens this around it. It snaps into place like this," the jeweller said, demonstrating with the Firebolt hair clip.

"If I buy her this box, she won't have anything to keep in it," Harry mused quietly. "She never takes her jewellery off."

"So buy her that Firebolt clip and she'll have something to keep in the box," Ron said with a smile, knowing that was where Harry was going with his thoughts.

"Yeah," Harry replied, brightening visibly. "How are the repairs going?" he asked, looking up at the jeweller.

"Just finished. I think they look very good. I doubt anyone could tell they've been damaged," the jeweller said, holding the repaired ring and pendant out for their inspection.

"Wow. You did a brilliant job!" Harry said excitedly. "I'd never have believed you could mend them, they were so mangled. Thanks!" He turned shining eyes to the jeweller. "This will mean so much to her. You just don't know."

"I'm glad I could repair them, Mr. Potter. I like to keep my customers happy." He gave Harry the price of the box and the hair clip, as well as the repairs, all of which Harry paid with no complaint. Once his purchases were wrapped, he and Ron left the shop and Apparated back to The Burrow.

"We're back again," Ron called cheerily as they entered the house.

"How did it go?" Molly asked, looking up from her knitting.

"He managed to mend them. They look great! Is she awake?" Harry asked.

"She might be. I haven't given her any Dreamless Sleep potion yet. She's been sleeping on her own so far. No nightmares," she said, holding up crossed fingers.

"That's good," Harry replied, then started up the stairs. When he got to her room, Ginny was turning over and rubbing her eyes, just beginning to wake up.

"Hi, sweetheart!" he said, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," she said, trying to sit up a bit. "Where were you? I woke up earlier and you were gone."

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"I went to Hogsmeade," Harry replied, bending over her to arrange her pillows more comfortably. While he was so occupied, she slid her arms around his neck and pulled herself close to him, nestling her head in the crook of his shoulder and soaking up the comfort and warmth of his embrace. He sat on the edge of her bed and held her like that for several minutes as she relaxed, then finally began to wake up a bit more.

"Hogsmeade? What for?" she asked, pulling back to look at him.

Harry looked at her fondly as he sat on the edge of her bed. Her hair was rumpled up around her head in a frowsy halo and she was still so pale that her freckles stood out boldly on her face, but she did look better.

"I had some business to take care of," he said, grinning as he dangled a bag just out of her reach.

Her eyes opened wide at the sight of the bag from the jewellery shop. She was worried he'd spent a lot of money on new jewellery for her. She wanted her own things back, not something new. "What have you done?" she asked suspiciously.

"Simply taken care of my girl, that's all," he said cheekily.

"Huh?" She looked perplexed.

"I'm not going to tease you too much, you're just not up to it right now," Harry said, smiling as he pulled two small boxes out of the bag. "Which one do you want to see first?"

"That one," she said, pointing to the ring box.

"Here you go," he said, opening it and showing her the promise ring he'd given her not that many weeks before, with his name carved on one side of the two interlocked hearts, and hers on the other, with each of their birthstones in the hearts, ruby for him, peridot for her.

"Oh, Harry! It looks like new!" she cried in delight, but then she frowned. "It isn't new, is it?"

"No, this is your own ring, which Mr. Joyero went to a great deal of trouble to repair. He also improved the communication charm on it. Now if I call you, nobody else will be able to hear my voice. I had him put the same improvement on my ring, as well."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Put it on me, please?" she asked, holding out her left ring finger.

"Gladly," he said, taking the ring and sliding it onto her finger as he spoke the sizing incantation, then kissing her hand before releasing it.

Ginny's eyes were sparkling. She held her hand up to admire her ring, then looked up at Harry. "I was so worried that he wouldn't be able to repair it. Thank you!"

"You're completely welcome."

"What's in the other box?" she asked, an intrigued smile on her face.

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"What, this old box? Nothing much," he teased, holding it out of her reach.

"You said you wouldn't tease me!" she protested.

"I said I wouldn't tease you *much*," he corrected. He handed her the box and she opened it with a cry of delight to see her pendant fully restored.

"Would you put it on me?" she said, holding the pendant by its delicate chain, obviously thrilled to have it back.

Harry leaned over and helped her sit up enough for him to fasten the pendant around her neck. She lay back on her pillow looking much happier than she had when he'd entered the room.

"Feel better now?" he said with a smile.

"Loads. I'm so used to wearing them, I really missed them," she told him seriously.

"Well, if you're so happy, I guess you don't need this, then," he said, lifting the bag and shaking it so it was evident that there was something else inside.

"What's that?"

"It's a get-well present, but if you're already fine, well, then, I suppose. . ."

"Harry!"

"OK, I'll stop teasing you now," he said, "but only for a little while. You're just too much fun to tease!" He handed her the bag and waited to see her reaction to his gift.

Ginny lifted a beautifully wrapped box from the bag. "What's this?"

"That's wrapping paper and ribbon," Harry said cheekily. "The gift's inside."

She chuckled and rewarded his impertinence with a bright smile.

"Made you laugh," he said with satisfaction.

"Yes, you did," she agreed, then opened the jeweller's box and found the cloisonné box inside. "Oh, it's beautiful! And it has horses on it!" She lifted shining eyes to her boyfriend. "Thank you, sweetheart!"

"Open it," he urged.

She opened it and beautiful music filled the room. A ghostly image of a beautiful night sky with a full moon and stars appeared above the open box, and small images of owls flew across the moon. The picture was the perfect accompaniment to the music, poignant, mystical, and lovely.

"Mr. Joyero added the image as a get-well present to you," Harry told her.

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"It's beautiful! And what a gorgeous song! And is this. . .it's a Firebolt!" she cried, lifting the hair clip out of the box.

Molly, Arthur and Ron stood in the doorway watching Ginny enjoying her presents.

"Mum! Isn't this beautiful?" Ginny said, holding up the music box.

"The music drew me upstairs. It's an old love song we used to hear on the wireless years ago," Molly said, leaning against Arthur and swaying in time to the music. "What a wonderful gift!"

"The Firebolt is a hair clip," Harry explained. "It fastens this way," he added, showing her how the clip worked.

"I'll put it in my hair as soon as I'm up," Ginny promised. "Thank you, sweetheart. You're too good to me."

"The feeling's mutual," he said, leaning down to kiss her. "You need to rest, young lady. Healer's orders!"

"OK," she said, settling back down into her bed and smiling as Harry made quite a business of tucking her in. He put the music box on her bedside table, the clip inside it.

"Harry, why don't you stay with us tonight?" Molly urged. "You can have the twins' room if you like. They've gone back to London. I know you're tired."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley. I'll take you up on that offer," he said, a yawn escaping before he could catch it. "Oh, sorry!"

"I'll sit up with Ginny," Arthur said. "You lot go on to bed."

Everyone said goodnight and soon the house was quiet except for Ron's snores and the occasional thumping of the ghoul in the attic.

Hours later, Harry silently descended the stairs from the twins' room and opened Ginny's door as quietly as possible. He stepped into the room and stood gazing down at her, his heart in his eyes. Arthur woke from a light doze and saw him standing there.

"All right, there, Harry?" Arthur murmured.

"Couldn't sleep," Harry replied, moving around Ginny's bed to take a seat beside Arthur. He sat gazing at her in silence for several minutes, then put his face in his hands, suddenly looking quite miserable.

"What's wrong, lad?" Arthur asked, reaching over to rub the boy's back comfortingly.

"Mr. Weasley. . .I, uh. . ."

"What is it?"

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Harry turned and looked at the man, his eyes very serious. "Ginny's been attacked twice recently because she's my girlfriend. I mean, she wasn't actually attacked at the concert, but she would've been if we hadn't used that Glamour Charm," he said, tension in his face. "It's my fault."

"No, it isn't," Arthur assured him quickly. "You've done nothing wrong."

"No, but she's being attacked because she's with me." Harry looked over at the sleeping girl, his face twisted in pain. "I think. . ."

"What?"

Harry looked steadily into the older man's eyes, willing him to understand. "I love her, Mr. Weasley. I'd do anything to keep her safe."

"I know."

"I think. . . I think I'm going to have to break up with her." He wrung his hands, his body tense and miserable. "I don't see any other way to protect her."

"Ginny loves you, Harry, I'm sure of it. It would break her heart," Arthur said, his voice filled with concern.

"And mine, as well," the boy replied, pushing his glasses onto his forehead and rubbing his eyes hard. "And I should break off ties with the rest of you. I'm endangering all of you," he said desolately.

"I won't hear any of that, young man," Arthur said firmly. "You are part of this family, and were long before you and Ginny started seeing each other."

Harry looked at Arthur with heartbroken eyes. "I don't want to endanger you. Not any of you."

"And how do you think Ginny would take that? She'd hex everyone around her until we found wherever you were hiding and dragged you back to her," Arthur said with a chuckle. "And then she'd probably hex you, too! I made the mistake of trying to break up with Molly 'for her own good' when we were young. I thought she might want to have the freedom to go out with other chaps to be certain of her heart before we became too serious. Oh, the fury! And the hexes she threatened me with for even *thinking* of such a thing!" He chuckled at the memory. "Well, let me tell you this, young man," he said, leaning toward Harry confidentially, "that little witch sleeping so peacefully in that bed has twice the temper of her mother! You don't want to cross her – nor do I!"

Harry smiled and chuckled, amused by the picture the older man was painting, and knowing it wasn't much of an exaggeration. "I know you're right, but still. . . she'd be safer –"

"No, she wouldn't," Arthur interrupted. "She'd put herself in danger to go looking for you. You know she's done that before. If you don't care for her anymore and want to break up with her for that reason, I won't stand in your way at all. But if you want to sacrifice this relationship thinking it will keep her safer, well, that's a sweet and noble sentiment on your part, but completely unacceptable." Arthur's face was adamant. "Listen to me, Harry. Love

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doesn't come along all that often in life. If you've found it, don't throw it away lightly. And the Weasley family includes one black-haired young man as well as all these redheads. Don't you forget that." He ruffled Harry's hair lightly and smiled at the young man, hoping he'd set the boy's mind at rest.

"I want to do the right thing," Harry said hesitantly, "but I don't know what that is, if it isn't breaking up with her."

"The right thing is to follow your heart, lad. You have a good heart and you always do your best to look after those around you, especially the ones you care for. We trust you to take the best possible care of our daughter. And you've never let us down."

Harry was quiet for a while, then looked up at the older man. "Thanks. That means a lot to me."

"I meant every word," Arthur said fondly. "Sometimes, you're my favourite son, did you know that? When the others are up to all kinds of mischief, there you are, quietly doing your best at whatever you're doing." He grinned at Harry's blush. "I know you get into monkey business as well, but that's when Ron or Fred or George or one of the others are my favourite son. It all works out in the end." He patted the young man's back affectionately. "You're a good lad, you are, and don't you forget it."

"Thanks," Harry said, his face beginning to look a bit relieved.

"What Dad said," came a small voice from the bed. "You'd better listen."

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," Harry said quickly.

"What's all this rubbish about breaking up with me?" she said imperiously. "If you think I'd ever let you go, you've got another think coming, mister!"

"What did I tell you?" Arthur told Harry with a chuckle. "She's her mother all over again."

"And that's a good thing," Harry assured her quickly, seeing her mouth already opened to protest. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, now that Dad has straightened you out," she quipped.

"You're acting a bit stroppy again. You must feel better," Harry said in amusement.

"I believe I'll go have a cup of tea," Arthur said, standing up. "Do either of you want something?"

"No, thanks," Harry said with a grin, knowing Arthur was giving him time to make up with Ginny for even thinking about ending their relationship.

"I'm fine, Dad, thanks," Ginny said, smiling and thinking exactly what Harry was.

"Right, then. I'm off to the kitchen for a bit," Arthur said, leaving the room and closing the door quietly behind him.

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"What was all that about?" Ginny said as soon as they were alone. "You thought I'd be safer if you and I weren't together?"

"I was just trying to protect you, baby," Harry said, moving over to sit on the side of her bed.

"Bad idea, Mr. Potter," she told him firmly.

"How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know that you were trying to be noble and Dad set you straight," she said seriously. "Don't throw our love away."

"Never," Harry promised. "I'm sorry. I was just—"

"Trying to do the right thing. I know."

"Am I forgiven?"

"You could grovel a bit more," she teased, "I rather like that sometimes."

"Grovel, grovel," he said, leaning down to nuzzle her neck, making her giggle. He moved his lips to hers and kissed her softly, just barely brushing her lips with his, drinking in the scent of her breath and rejoicing that she was alive, safe, and loved him enough to risk her life to stay with him. Her tongue tickled his lips and he opened his mouth, welcoming her in, a sigh of pleasure escaping as he wound his tongue around hers. He pulled back slowly, kissing her lightly again before sitting up. "Was that enough grovelling?"

"Nowhere near enough," she purred, pulling on the front of his dressing gown to draw him down to her again.

"Your dad's coming back up," Harry warned, then gently caressed her breast as he kissed her and moved back to his seat.

Arthur came in to find both young people smiling tenderly at each other. "Ah, I see you've made up." He chuckled when he saw their bright blushes. "I suspect you'll sleep better now, Harry, since you've got that problem off your mind."

"Yes, I will," Harry agreed. "I have to go to work tomorrow, so I'd better try to get some sleep." He rose and kissed Ginny lightly before leaving. "Good night."

"Good night, Harry," Arthur said fondly.

"Night, sweetie," Ginny said.

Harry turned and smiled at them again before closing the door quietly and going back to bed.

Ten days later, the Weasleys were hurrying across the platform toward the Hogwarts Express.

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"Do you have everything?" Molly called as Ginny and Ron dragged their trunks toward the waiting train.

"Yes, Mum, we're fine," Ginny called over her shoulder, looking around anxiously for Harry. She brightened considerably when she saw him, Remus and Tonks come through the barricade. "There's Harry!" she said as she lifted her hand high, waving for him to join them.

Harry waved back at her and stopped his rush across the platform long enough to get his annual send-off hug from Molly Weasley.

"You're all set then?" Molly asked Harry as she smoothed his sweater over his broad chest. "Let me know if you need anything!"

"I will," he promised. "I'm all set. Thanks."

"Do take good care of yourself," she said, suddenly quite serious.

"I will – and I'll take the best possible care of Ginny and Ron, as well," he said, equally serious.

"I can't ask for more than that," she said, pulling on his shoulders so he would bend down for a final kiss on the cheek. "Have a good term, dear!"

"Thanks! See you at Christmas!" With that, Harry turned and ran toward his waiting friends, glancing back to wave at Molly, Remus and Tonks. Remus was going to Apparate to Hogsmeade later in the day, after tying up some loose ends at home.

Ron led the way into an empty compartment.

"What's that?" Harry asked as he saw his friend lift a large cage onto the overhead storage.

Ron turned around and held the cage in front of him. Inside was a beautiful barn owl. "It's my present for being made Head Boy," he said proudly. "Mum bought him when we came to London today. His name's Barney."

"Barney for a barn owl?" Harry said in amusement.

"Yeah," Ron replied with a resigned shrug. "Ginny named this one too."

"Barney's a cute name for a barn owl," she said defensively.

"And now you have Pig?" Harry asked, helping her stow the tiny owl's cage.

"Yes! Thanks for letting us use Hedwig," Ginny said, reaching up to push an owl treat through the bars of the beautiful snowy owl's cage.

"I think she enjoyed living in the country," Harry said, lifting his trunk up to the shelf as well. Merlin flew up and settled next to Hedwig's cage, then began preening his feathers when Harry removed his scarlet macaw Glamour Charm.

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"We've got a compartment full of birds," Ron said, gazing at Barney in great satisfaction.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, pleased to see Ron looking reasonably happy. Harry, Ron and Ginny had dreaded the trip back to Hogwarts for various reasons, all of which involved Hermione. Harry and Ginny were worried about how Ron was going to react to seeing her again, and Ron, who had barely smiled since he'd received her letter, was wondering if he'd ever feel cheerful again without the help of a Cheering Charm, which he put on himself nearly daily now just to survive.

"We've got to go to the Prefect's carriage for a little while," Ginny said apologetically.

"Go ahead. I'll be fine," Harry said. When they left, he sat in the corner of the compartment and leaned his head against the window. *I can't believe this is the last time I'll take the train to start another term at Hogwarts*, he mused. *It doesn't seem possible*. He watched the landscape pass by for a while, then dozed off, waking up when Ginny and Ron came back into the compartment. Ron was in an obvious fury, but said nothing.

"Sorry, sweetie, we didn't mean to wake you," Ginny said, sitting down next to him and choosing to ignore Ron's bad mood.

"No problem," he said, following Ginny's lead with regard to Ron. Harry knew they would have seen Hermione in the Prefects' Carriage. That must be why Ron was so grouchy. Harry cast around for something to do to get Ron's mind off of his lost love. Finally, it came to him. "Want to play Exploding Snap?" A rapid-fire game ensued that was such fun, even Ron smiled from time to time.

After a while, Harry excused himself, saying he was going to the loo. Ron leaned back into his corner and stared gloomily out of the window, Ginny gazing at him in concern. Harry squeezed her shoulder affectionately as he left. He wandered down the corridor, having no intention of going to the loo. He'd seen Hermione arrive after he and the Weasleys had boarded the train. She seemed to be avoiding them, but he wanted to talk to her and find out what was going on. Finally, two carriages forward, he found her sitting in a compartment by herself, her nose buried in a book, as usual, but her expression forlorn.

"May I come in?" he asked, poking his head in the door.

Her expression brightened immediately. "Hi! Yes, please, come in! How are you?"

"I'm fine. I missed hearing from you. Why'd you stop writing?" he asked, having already decided that beating around the bush would take too much time.

"I . . . I . . ." She stopped, nonplussed. Finally, she sighed and said, "I just didn't know what to say."

"Why not? We're best friends. You can tell me anything, you know that," he said sincerely. "What's going on with you? Are you engaged to this bloke Lorenzo?"

"Engaged?" she said with a nervous titter. "Heavens, no."

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"But you're serious about each other?" He had steeled himself before coming in here to ask her every tough question he could think of. It was taking all of his Gryffindor courage to manage this conversation, but there were too many friendships hanging in the balance to not give it his best effort.

Hermione hesitated. "Erm. . .no."

"You're not serious about him?"

"No, Harry, I'm not."

"Is he serious about you, then?" He was getting more and more confused. Her few letters had given every indication that she and Lorenzo were completely involved with each other.

"No. He never was."

Harry studied Hermione's face carefully. She seemed to be deflating before his eyes. "What's going on, then?"

She bridled. "Whatever do you mean?" she said stiffly.

"Hermione. . .why did you break up with Ron? Why did you lead both of us to think you were in love with Lorenzo? Why did you even go out with him? You've broken Ron's heart. He's been a mess ever since he got that letter from you." Normally, he wouldn't reveal such information about Ron, but he thought she should know the results of her actions.

"I. . .my. . .um," she said, at a loss for words.

"Spit it out," he urged her impatiently. "What happened?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm such an idiot," she wailed, then was silent.

"Do you want to elaborate on that?" he said with half a smile. Hermione rarely thought of herself as being stupid in any way.

"I made a mistake. An absolutely huge mistake," she finally said after several moments of silence.

"Go on."

She sighed heavily. "When I got home for the holiday, my parents were in a right state. Apparently the things you and Ginny and Remus told them about my life at Hogwarts took some time to strike home, and when they did . . . well, they wanted to take me out of Hogwarts."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. We didn't mean to upset them, but at the time, it seemed important to answer their questions. They seemed all right at the party."

"Yes, they enjoyed that, but then they saw the Dementor attack and finally understood what they are and . . .well, everything got messed up. They wanted me to live like a Muggle again."

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"I'm sorry. But what's that got to do with Ron?" Harry asked, thoroughly confused.

Hermione sighed again, wiping angrily at the tears spilling down her cheeks. "My parents and I have never fought. Never! We've always been close, but we fought non-stop from the time I got home until we arrived in Italy. I told them I'm old enough to make my own decisions, and I plan to finish my education at Hogwarts, and go on to further education after school, maybe even university. When we got to Italy, I was determined to go off on my own and not spend any more time with them than necessary. Our first stop was Florence – I told you they call it 'Firenze' like the Centaur's name, didn't I?" Harry nodded. "They'd been there for a dental convention a few months earlier and wanted to have detailed tours of the city and the rest of Tuscany during our holiday. They'd met Lorenzo when they were there for the convention, and they liked him very much, so they hired him to be a private tour guide for us over the holiday." She stopped talking. She was twisting her fingers together nervously, and refused to meet Harry's eye. "Lorenzo. . .well. . .when I met him. . .oh, I can't tell you this, Harry!" she said suddenly, stifling a sob.

"Why not?"

"It's. . .you wouldn't understand."

"Try me," he insisted.

She finally raised her eyes to his. "Have you ever seen someone who. . .who made your heart stop? A stranger? Or someone in a film, perhaps? But that person is so beautiful, it takes your breath away?"

"Ginny makes my heart stop and takes my breath away on a regular basis," he admitted with a blush.

"But a stranger, Harry? Has that ever happened with a stranger?"

Harry was silent a moment. "When I met Casey. . .yeah. I do understand. She was so beautiful, and I looked like a tramp in Dudley's clothes. I thought I had no chance with her. It was a shock when she started being so friendly to me."

"Yes, that's it exactly! All my life, I've read these love stories – don't laugh, you know I read everything! – where the hero was tall, dark and handsome, with a charming accent and laughing eyes." She looked at her best friend as if seeing him for the first time. "Well, that could be you, actually," she said, blushing madly, "but in my mind as I read, the man looked like Lorenzo. And he has that lovely Italian accent, and such a gentleman, such nice manners, so courtly. . . ."

Harry sighed. "It sounds as if you love him."

Hermione looked up at him suddenly. "I was swept off my feet! Here's this gorgeous man who's an *adult* – he's 23, did I tell you?" Harry nodded. "And he's attracted to *me*! We share so many similar interests, and he's so well-read, and such a student of art and architecture and history and so on. . .well, he was fascinating to talk to, and a pleasure to listen to. He asked my opinion about so many things, and he *listened* to me! We talked about everything. It was so wonderful. . .and he liked me, he really did. He treated me like such a lady. His manners

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were so courtly – he bows a bit when he meets people, he kissed my hand when we met, he always opened doors for me and held my chair for me – I was blown away by it. I thought I loved him. I was so uncomfortable when I got Ron's letters, because of the way I was feeling about Lorenzo, that I just couldn't write back to him. I couldn't lie to him, and I couldn't tell him the truth, either. And honestly? I've only dated Viktor and Ron, and Ron's serious – he wants to settle down, and I'm not ready for that! I thought I should have more experiences, go out with other men before settling down."

Harry was getting angry. "Or do you mean you didn't want to 'settle' for Ron?" he snapped.

"No, that's not it, not at all!" she said, clearly upset that he'd misunderstood her. She sat quietly for a few minutes, gathering her thoughts. "To be quite honest, I think you may be right, Harry. I was afraid I'd be 'settling' for Ron, making the wrong decision, if I didn't go out with some other men, and there was Lorenzo, wanting to spend time with me." She put her hand on Harry's arm. "Please don't be angry with me. I loved Ron – I still do. But I was afraid of what he wanted. I don't want to stay at home with a house full of babies. I want my own career, and I want an education and I want to travel and" She finally wound down, seeing the look in Harry's eyes.

"Ron wouldn't expect you to just stay home and have babies. He knows you want a career."

"I know, but. . ."

"You love Ron, but you want to experiment with other guys, is that it?" he said in a low, furious voice.

"I . . . yes, I guess that's right," she admitted uneasily. "At least, that was how I thought at the time."

"Did it ever occur to you to tell him you wanted to slow things down?" he snapped.

"No. When I was with Ron, I was happy. But my parents. . . and then Lorenzo. . . ."

A sudden idea hit Harry. "Your parents want you to go to a Muggle school, and now they want you to have a Muggle boyfriend, is that it?"

"Yes, exactly! I was so tired of fighting with them, and Lorenzo was so. . . so perfectly what they had in mind for me, and perfect for me in many ways, too. We had a lovely time together," she said sadly.

"I don't want to hear how lovely your time was with him," Harry growled. "This conversation is about Ron."

"I don't know what to do, Harry. I'm so miserable," she said, tears streaming down her face.

"If you think you're miserable, you should have seen Ron," Harry snarled, heartsick at the memory. "You broke his heart, Hermione. He loves you. He thought you loved him."

She cried quietly for a long time as she absorbed what he'd said and the pain she could hear in Harry's voice. Finally she sighed and said, "I saw him in the Prefects meeting, but he wouldn't

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look at me, wouldn't speak unless he had to, and never to me, not ever." She sniffled and Harry handed her his handkerchief. "Thanks."

"Don't girls ever carry tissues or hankies anymore?" he said irritably, watching her dab at her eyes.

She chuckled. "I should carry a box of tissues, I've been crying so much lately. I'm sorry. I'll wash it before I return it, all right?"

"Yeah, whatever," he grumbled, then sighed. "What do you want to do?"

"I really, truly love Ron and want to make up with him."

"Are you sure of your feelings now?"

"Oh, yes! I can't tell you how awful it was for him to not want to look at me or speak to me."

"You have no idea how he's grieved over you. You're seeing him under the influence of a massive Cheering Charm. For a long time, Cheering Charms had no effect on him, he was so miserable." Harry leaned his elbows on his knees, rubbing his hands together thoughtfully and staring at nothing. "So you want to try to get back together with him? You're over Lorenzo?"

"Yes," she said humbly. "And yes, I'm over Lorenzo."

"Do you have any idea how to do it?"

"No. Do you?"

He shook his head. "Nope." They sat in silence for several minutes. "Tell you what. Come to the compartment with me and talk to Ginny for a bit. Ron's there, and maybe that will be a way to break the ice."

"Do you think so?" she said hopefully. "Is Ginny angry with me too?"

"I don't have any other ideas at the moment. Let's try it and see what happens. Ginny's your best friend and she's been as hurt by all this as I have. She wants us all to get back together. I think if you and Ginny make it up, you'll have a better chance at getting through to Ron." With that, he stood up and opened the door, waiting for her to exit before him. He escorted her through the two carriages and down to the door to his compartment. He held Hermione back out of sight and looked into the compartment. Ginny and Ron were still sitting there alone and silent. Harry slid the door open, put his hand on the small of Hermione's back and pushed her through the opening, not roughly, but not as gently as he normally would, either.

"Look who I found," he said casually, guiding Hermione firmly to sit on Ron's bench, while making certain she would have no other options by lying down on Ginny's bench and putting his head in her lap, taking up the entire bench with his long form.

Ginny looked at Hermione coldly for a moment before a large head with messy black hair plopped in her lap. "Hi there, handsome," she said, a smile crossing her face as she looked down at him. "What are you up to?"

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"Studying your nostrils at the moment," he said with a crooked grin. "They're quite lovely, you know."

"My nostrils?" she said, chuckling at his teasing. "What else would they be, after all?" She smiled at him and started playing with his hair, finger-combing it into various patterns and styles as she loved to do whenever she could get her hands into it.

Harry magically lengthened the bench so he could stretch out all the way. "Say hello to Hermione," he prompted.

"Hello, Hermione," Ginny said, still smiling from Harry's playfulness. "I didn't mean to ignore you, but I had this great lump deposited in my lap that seemed to need attention."

"A great lump, am I?" he protested mildly.

"Just your head, luv," she assured him, "and I love it, knots and all." She looked over at the other girl, who was trying to sit in as small a space as possible. "Good holiday?" she said, much more coolly now.

"Not really," Hermione replied. "My parents. . . well. . . ."

Just then, Neville and Luna opened the compartment door. "Hi!" Neville said cheerfully. "Good to see you lot!"

"Hi, Neville," Ginny and Harry said at the same time.

"Harry, are you feeling all right?" Neville said with concern, looking at his friend lying with his head in Ginny's lap. The last time he'd seen Harry had been on the train ride home from Hogwarts the previous term, when Harry had suffered a severe head injury.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry assured him with a grin. "Just taking advantage of Ginny's lap being such a good pillow."

"How was your holiday, Luna?" Ginny asked her friend as Luna and Neville sat down on the opposite bench, forcing Hermione to scoot closer to Ron. Ron cringed away, doing his best to avoid being touched by her.

"It was lovely," Luna said dreamily. "Dad and I went to the Amazon looking for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. We'd heard there was a newly-discovered band of them there."

Harry stifled his laughter and sent a quelling look at Hermione at the same time. "Did you find any?"

"Oh, yes! They were wonderful!" Luna said excitedly.

Harry couldn't resist asking, "Did you bring one back with you, or get pictures of them?"

"Oh, no, we couldn't bring one back! That would be terrible! They're an endangered species, you know," Luna said seriously.

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"No, I have to say I didn't know that," Harry replied. "But did you get pictures?"

"I drew some. Dad's photo equipment got wet and wouldn't work. We were in the Rain Forest, and it's very hard to keep things dry there."

"I'd like to see your drawings sometime, Luna," Ginny said kindly. "I'm sure Harry would, as well."

"They're packed away, but I'll show them to you soon," Luna promised. She leaned around Hermione and looked at Ron, who was staring fixedly out of the window. "Hello, Ronald."

"Hello," he said without turning his face toward her.

"How was your holiday, Ronald?" Luna said, oblivious to his attempts to be left alone.

"OK," he responded grumpily.

"It doesn't sound as if it was OK," she commented wisely. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he snapped.

"Ron and I worked in the twins shop making joke products," Harry offered, trying to get Ron off the hook and keep Luna's feelings from being hurt.

"That sounds like fun!" Neville enthused. "What did you make?"

"First, we made an assembly line to speed up production," Harry explained, "and then we helped them develop some new things, as well as producing the ones they've been making for a while."

"What kind of new things?" Neville persisted.

"One I liked quite well is the Butterfly Bon-Bons. If you eat one, you grow huge iridescent blue-green butterfly wings and antennae for a few minutes. It's a very pretty effect," Harry replied.

"Are you two fighting?" Luna asked, looking from Ron to Hermione, who was trying her best to look composed, but failing miserably.

"No," Hermione snapped at the same time as Ron.

"Oh," said Neville uncomfortably. "Well, we just wanted to say 'hi.'"

"Sorry, mate," Harry said quickly. "You just caught them at a bad spot."

"I hope you two make up soon," Luna said sincerely, taking Neville's hand and lacing her fingers through his. "True love is too rare to throw away lightly." Neville blushed royally.

"Are you two in love, then?" Ginny asked quickly. She looked from Luna to Neville and back again, and wondered why it didn't show on their faces if they actually were in love.

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"Oh, no," Luna said, squeezing Neville's hand fondly. "We're in like, not in love."

"In 'like'?" Harry said with a crooked smile.

"Yes. It's wonderful! I highly recommend it. But you four," she said, indicating Harry and Ginny, Ron and Hermione, "have been in love for a long time now. You shouldn't be fighting, Ronald. What did she do to hurt you?" For some reason, Luna had always spoken only to Ron, never to Hermione, and she was talking around Hermione now as if she wasn't there at all.

"C'mon, Luna, we don't really need to pry," Neville said awkwardly, getting to his feet and pulling on her hand.

"Maybe we can help. We're very good at being in like." She turned her huge eyes from Neville to the other four in the compartment. "I've been watching the four of you to see what it's like to be in love instead of in like. I'd hate to think there was trouble in paradise," she said seriously. "Maybe we can help you solve your problem. What is it?"

"Um, thanks anyway, Luna," Hermione said, her body tense as she fought to control her tears. "Ron and I will have to work things out on our own."

Ron made a disgusted sound and stood up quickly, storming out of the compartment without even an "excuse me."

"Was it something you said?" Luna said, finally actually looking at Hermione. Hermione sighed and shook her head, not knowing what to do next.

"C'mon, Luna, we still have other people to visit," Neville said, trying to get her moving.

"Harry," Luna said, standing up and leaning over his face as he lay with his head still in Ginny's lap. Her long dirty-blond hair swung down and tickled his nose. Ginny pushed it away with a subtle movement so as not to offend Luna, but the other girl didn't even notice.

"What is it, Luna?" he replied uncomfortably.

"How's your head? Neville and I helped when you got hurt on the train last time, you know," she said proudly.

"Yes, I know. Thanks. It's fine now," Harry replied, trying to push his head deeper into Ginny's legs to get away from Luna with her huge, odd eyes. She was so close, he couldn't see her clearly.

"He's fine, but he's tired," Ginny said, leaping to his rescue. "He needs a nap. We'll chat with you later, all right?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Neville said as he opened the compartment door and pulled Luna toward it. "Sorry to bother you lot."

"Harry, if you still have headaches from that injury, I have some powdered Spazblatt Horn I'd be happy to share with you. It's supposed to have great restorative powers," Luna said seriously.

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Ginny caught Hermione's eye and mouthed "Spazblatt Horn?" at her as Luna stared fixedly at Harry.

"Uh, no, that's all right. Thank you, though. I appreciate the offer," he said as kindly as he could.

"Let me know if you change your mind," she said serenely, then followed Neville out of the compartment.

"Whew!" Ginny said when they were gone. "That was awkward!"

"Yeah," Harry said, sitting up and chuckling. "Spazblatt Horn? What the heck is a Spazblatt?"

"Probably the double first cousin of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack," Ginny said, giggling. She finally sobered. "Well, it's too bad Ron's gone, but I would like to know what happened this summer, Hermione. You were starting to tell us something before Neville and Luna came in."

"OK, let me go and find Ron. You girls behave yourselves while I'm gone," Harry said, squeezing Ginny's shoulder and ruffling Hermione's hair affectionately as he left the compartment. He was determined to save all the friendships involved among the four of them if there was any way to manage it.

He found Ron sitting in Hermione's empty compartment. "What's up, mate?" he said companionably as he sat down opposite Ron.

Ron was actually holding Crookshanks and petting him, his face tormented and full of grief. "I hate this stupid cat, but"

"I know. He's hers and you wanted to touch something of hers, right?" Harry said compassionately.

"Yeah." Ron couldn't look much more miserable if he tried.

"She's ready to explain what happened. Come back and listen to her, all right?" Harry asked, reaching over to touch his friend on the arm.

"Why should I?"

"So you'll know. She told me what happened, and I think you should hear it from her, not from me. C'mon, let's go back."

"Are Neville and Looney still there?" Ron asked cautiously.

"No, they're gone," Harry assured him.

Ron put Crookshanks down and reluctantly followed him back into their compartment, sitting as far from Hermione as possible, since Harry had once again made sure that his and Ginny's bench was full of Harry.

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Harry turned on his side, his head in Ginny's lap once more, and said, "To pick up where we left off, Hermione was telling us she didn't have a particularly good holiday. Her parents argued with her over the adventures she's had at Hogwarts, which you, my girl," he said, looking up fondly at Ginny, "Remus and I told them about when she was in hospital."

"Yes," Hermione said, glad he'd broken the ice. "We've never fought before. They were going to keep me from coming back to school. They wanted me to finish my education at a Muggle school, then a Muggle university, only go out with Muggle boys. . . ." She glanced guiltily at Ron.

"So they don't like wizards anymore, huh?" Ron snapped. "And me in particular?"

"No, sweetheart, it wasn't you," Hermione began.

"Sweetheart"? Where do you get off calling me 'sweetheart'? You *broke up* with me, remember?" he snarled, getting to his feet and storming toward the door again.

"Ron, wait! Let her explain," Harry cried, sitting up and putting his hand on his friend's arm.

Ron snatched his arm out of Harry's grasp. "Why the bloody hell did you bring her in here anyway?"

"There are a lot of friendships at stake here. I thought – " Harry began.

"You *thought*? It bloody well doesn't seem like it!" Ron snarled, then threw the compartment door open so hard it shattered. He stormed off down the corridor, slamming the passageway door so hard that it bounced back open as he exited the carriage.

Harry stood in the doorway of their compartment, staring after his friend miserably. *This is going to be even harder than I thought*, he mused, sighing heavily before stepping back inside and doing a Reparo Charm on the door.

Hermione was in floods of tears, babbling incoherently. Ginny was torn between being livid at her and wanting to comfort her. Harry finally moved from the doorway and sat beside her, taking her in his arms and letting her cry on his shoulder.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Ginny snarled suddenly, her wand pointed steadily at Hermione. "Let go of him!"

Harry looked at his girlfriend in shock. "Ginny, what. . .?"

"The last time she got her hands on you, she nearly killed you, or don't you remember? Have you asked for her password? Do you honestly think you can trust her after all she's done?" Ginny snapped. "I mean it, Hermione. Move away from him, or I'll hex you so nobody will recognize you."

Harry and Hermione moved away from each other. Hermione looked as if she'd run away any second, her heartbroken eyes moving uneasily from Ginny to Harry and back. Harry sat there in astonishment at Ginny's behaviour, then finally began to speak.

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"You're right, I didn't ask for a password," he admitted. "Hermione?"

"Norbert."

"Yes, that's it," he said, looking anxiously back at Ginny. "What else do you want to know, Gin?"

"Is she under Imperius, or possessed or wearing poison somewhere?" Ginny prompted.

"You're good at this, you know," he said with an admiring grin.

"Somebody needs to look after you," she snapped, "because you're simply too trusting!"

"Thank you, baby," he said sincerely, knowing she was quite serious and that she was being wiser than he'd been by trusting Hermione too soon. Not that many months ago, Hermione had been possessed by Bellatrix Lestrange and had attacked Harry, inserting poison capsules under his skin as she raked her nails over his body in a possession-induced passion. He would have died if not for Professor Snape being there with the proper antidote when one capsule broke as they were being removed from his body. Now he took Hermione's chin in his hand and turned her face so he could look at her eyes. No flickering, wavering oddities in their brown depths, so she wasn't possessed, and none of the vacant look of someone under Imperius. He rubbed his thumb over her lips. Dry. No poison lipstick, not that he would have kissed her anyway. He lifted her limp hands in his and inspected her nails, which were short, clean and poison capsule-free. "She seems to be OK, baby. Just upset."

"You come sit by me again anyway, Harry. You're not safe over there," Ginny insisted.

Harry moved over and sat next to her, putting his arm around her and kissing her temple. "Thank you for looking out for me when I don't remember to look out for myself," he said tenderly.

Hermione laughed shakily. "All we need to top all of this is an interruption from Malfoy," she mumbled.

Ginny stiffened. "*What?*" she said, staring in fright at the door.

Hermione had been talking to herself. She looked up at Ginny and saw the other girl's face was white as a ghost. "What's wrong?"

"You mentioned Malfoy," Harry said, pulling Ginny into his arms and comforting her.

"So what? He's in Azkaban, isn't he?" Hermione said, completely confused.

"Voldemort had some people broken out of Azkaban. Malfoy and his bunch were among them. They, um – " he glanced down at Ginny, uncertain how much to tell, "they attacked Ginny ten days ago. She's still shaky from it at times."

"They attacked you?" Hermione said, aghast. "I'm so sorry! What happened?" Seeing the other girl collapse into Harry's shoulder, her body trembling hard, Hermione backed off. "You don't have to tell me about it. I'm sorry I wasn't here to help you through it."

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Ginny snapped upright and glared at the other girl. "You weren't here, but Ron was, and Harry and the twins and my parents," she shot back defiantly. "Friends and family are supposed to help each other through hard times. They were all there for me, and I appreciate that more than I can say. But Ron. . .we've all been trying to help Ron all summer, but he keeps pushing us away. You caused that, Hermione. You, not Malfoy."

Hermione burst into tears and got up to leave, but Harry held out his hand and magically pushed her back into her seat. "Stay, Hermione. We have to clear the air or we'll never be friends again, and I, for one, don't want that."

Ginny was trembling as much with rage as with reaction to being reminded of her ordeal at Malfoy's hands. "What are you going to do, Harry? Force us to be friendly?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," he said, and then did a Cheering Charm on each of them before they could protest. "Feeling better, ladies?" he asked as each girl relaxed. They nodded. "All right then. Ginny, I'm going to tell Hermione about what happened to you so she understands. No one else at school needs to know, but Hermione's your best friend. It might help you to talk with a girlfriend about what happened. Is that all right with you?"

The Cheering Charm was a light one, so the girls weren't giddy, but were over their anger and sadness for at least a short time. Ginny looked up at Harry trustingly and nodded in response to his question.

"All right, then. Hermione, Ginny had a horrible experience ten days ago. She's healed from it physically now, but I think it will take her a good while longer to get over it emotionally. It might be a help to her if you know what happened so she can talk to you about it. What I'm going to tell you doesn't leave this compartment – it's just between the three of us and the Weasley family, all right?" Hermione nodded, her eyes big and solemn. Harry sighed and launched into the story of Ginny's kidnapping and eventual rescue. Ginny buried her face in his shoulder as he talked. He rubbed her back comfortingly, but carried on relentlessly with the story. Hermione's eyes widened in shock as she heard the tale, and a look of horror grew on her face as the light Cheering Charm he'd put on her wore off.

"Oh, Ginny, how awful!" Hermione said when Harry finished the story. "I read about what happened at the concert, so I knew you'd had a scare then. I was so glad the second edition retracting the story in the *Daily Prophet* arrived just a few minutes after I'd read the first one! I was heartbroken! I didn't know what to do when I read you'd both been killed, but nearly as soon as I started reacting to the story, a second owl delivered the issue with the retraction of the story and Harry's interview with the press. That was awful enough, but this?" She couldn't think of anything else to say. Finally, she took a deep breath and said, "I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Ginny turned her face from the shelter of Harry's broad shoulder and looked at the other girl. "No," she said in a small voice. "I just have to get over it."

"If you ever want to talk or anything," Hermione offered, "I'm here for you."

Ginny nodded, still nestled in Harry's arms. "I wish. . ."

"What?" Hermione said quietly.

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"I wish you'd been around when it happened. I could've used a girl talk then."

"What about now?" Hermione said kindly.

Ginny hesitated a long moment, then glanced up at Harry, who leaned down and kissed her forehead as she sat up. "OK," she said nervously, glancing from Hermione to Harry.

"I get the message. I'll go and find Ron while you two bond, how's that?" he said, glad they were willing to talk to each other again.

"Thanks, sweetie," Ginny said, squeezing his hand as he got up to leave.

"I'll be listening for any fireworks from in here," he warned as he opened the door. "Behave yourselves!"

"I think we're past the fireworks stage," Ginny said quietly. Her eyes were sad but resolved. She knew she needed to work through her feelings about the attack, and Hermione had always been her best friend. Who better to help her with things she couldn't bear to tell her boyfriend or her brothers or parents?

"OK, girls, I'll be back in a bit," he said, closing the door softly behind him. They started talking as soon as he closed the door. He watched for a moment, then started down the corridor, wondering where Ron had gotten to and how heavy a Cheering Charm it would take to get him to listen to Hermione.

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Chapter 10 – Friendships Old and New

Harry meandered down the corridor of the Hogwarts Express, stopping in various compartments to visit briefly with his friends. He'd gone through two carriages before he finally found Ron sitting in a compartment with Susan Bones. He stood outside the door for a few moments, not really wanting to interrupt what seemed like a pleasant conversation. Ron glanced up and saw him standing there.

"Hey, mate," Ron said, looking more cheerful than he had all day. "Come on in."

"Thanks! Hi, Susan," Harry said as he sat down opposite her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. It's nice to see you, Harry. How's your head?" she said.

"It's fine," he replied. Everyone he'd talked to had asked about his head injury from the attack he'd suffered during their last train ride together. "Did you have a nice holiday?"

"Nicer than yours, by far," she said with a sympathetic smile. "I was sorry to read about the attack at the concert. I'm glad you and Ginny are OK."

"I'm thankful your aunt is Minister of Magic," Harry said earnestly. "She did a fantastic job of getting those rumours squashed."

"I'm so glad she was able to help!" Susan replied sincerely. "She told us what a mess it was, getting the press to cooperate in spite of giving them a press conference with you. She had to lean on some of them to retract the stories rather than making the stories of your deaths even more sensational."

"Wow, I didn't know," said Harry, his eyes wide in surprise. "I'm not really surprised they'd want to do that, though. They seem to take a great deal of pleasure in making people's lives miserable. It's brilliant she was able to make them actually print the truth for once."

"She's my favourite auntie," Susan said with a smile. "She acts tough, but she's a sweetheart. She thinks the world of you, Harry. She's told me so."

"That's very kind of her," Harry said with a blush.

Susan smiled at him, and glanced shyly at Ron. "I was telling Ron about how often she talks about you two. She has the greatest admiration for both of you, and how brave you are, what you've done with the D.A. and all."

"That's good to know," Harry said, grinning and thinking what a pleasant change it was to have a Minister of Magic who was fair, just and firmly in his and Dumbledore's corner.

"Are you and Ginny still together?" Susan asked suddenly.

"Yeah, sure! Why?"

She shrugged. "You came here alone – I just wondered. I only know her from D.A., but I like her a lot. You seem much happier since you've been with her."

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"Yeah," he replied, blushing again, thinking about how he felt about Ginny, and glad that his contentment showed. "She's chatting with a friend right now – girl talk, you know – so I thought I'd stretch my legs and do a bit of visiting of my own." He'd almost said "with Hermione" but managed to change it to "with a friend" at the last moment. *No point in upsetting Ron again*, he mused.

"Oh, if you and Ron –" she began, starting to get to her feet.

"No, it's OK. I didn't mean to interrupt your chat. I see him all the time, you know," he said with a grin. "We both worked in the twins' joke shop during the holiday, did he tell you?" She nodded.

Harry noticed Ron giving Susan little glances that showed an interest he hadn't seen in his friend in ages. After receiving Hermione's letter, Ron had flirted with every girl on Diagon Alley, and had gone out with as many as he could talk into it, but he'd never shown the kind of attraction he was showing toward Susan. Harry smiled and said, "I'm just popping in and saying 'hi' to friends as I walk down the train. It's good to see you, Susan. See you in D.A.?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it," she said with a smile.

"See you later, mate," Harry said to Ron, who gave him his first real smile since Harry had entered the car. *He was worried that Susan was being so friendly to me! He really is attracted to her*, he reflected as he left the compartment with a friendly wave to both of them.

Harry wandered back toward his own compartment, still stopping to visit when he saw someone he hadn't spoken to yet, waving to those with whom he'd already chatted as he passed their doorways. Finally, he arrived back at his compartment and stood outside looking in. The girls had their heads together, apparently looking at something in Ginny's hands. Harry heard music and knew Ginny was showing Hermione the music box he'd given her. She'd worn her hair in the Firebolt clip today. It sparkled beautifully against her burnished red hair.

"Is it safe for me to come in, then?" he asked in a mock-nervous voice, "or is this a boy-free zone?"

"You can come in," Ginny said with a happy smile. "You're a genius, you know."

"I am?"

"Of course!" she said, laughing.

"OK, if you say so!" he said equitably, then settled onto the bench opposite them, stretching his long legs across the opening and propping his feet on the bench beside Ginny.

"Don't you want to know why you're a genius?" Ginny teased.

"Oh, I figure it's a combination of genetics and good looks," he said, smirking at her. Just as he expected, she bopped him on the foot. "Ow! What was that for?"

"You being smug!"

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"Me? Smug?" he said, laughing now. "I thought I was a genius, not smug!"

"A smug genius, then!" she retorted playfully.

"You haven't told me why I'm a genius," he said, leaning back and putting his hands behind his head. He caught Hermione's eye. She was enjoying Harry's and Ginny's teasing banter.

"Thank you, Harry, for coming up with a way for Ginny and me to get back together," Hermione said sincerely.

"You're quite welcome," he said with equal sincerity. "And is that why I'm a genius?"

"One of the many reasons," Ginny said, gently tweaking his toes through his trainers.

"Ouch! You're abusing me, woman!" he said, acting horribly wounded, which made the girls laugh. He joined their laughter, then said, "I'm glad you sorted things out."

"Which leaves Ron to deal with," Ginny said, suddenly serious.

"Maybe not," Harry said cautiously.

"What do you mean?" Hermione said, her face anxious.

"He's, um, in a compartment with Susan Bones and he seems to be rather. . .happy there," he explained carefully.

"Susan Bones?" Hermione said, crestfallen. "What do you mean by 'happy'? What's he doing that makes him seem happy with her?"

"They're not snogging or anything, but he's looking at her differently than he's looked at any girl since you broke up with him," Harry replied, watching her reaction closely.

A single tear ran down Hermione's cheek. "Oh," she said in a small voice.

"Oh' what?" Harry prompted.

"Oh, I guess that's how it is, then," Hermione said with a heavy sigh, doing her best not to cry. "He's moved on."

"Hermione," Harry said, leaning forward and taking her trembling hands in his, "he was badly hurt. He's been trying to get over that hurt ever since. This is the first sign of life I've seen in him in weeks." He didn't know what else to say.

They were all quiet for several minutes, and then Ginny said, "You know, it's only fair, really."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked her, releasing Hermione's hands and leaning back in his seat again.

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"Well. . . Ron's the only one of us who has never gone out with anyone else. Taking Padma to the Yule Ball doesn't count, because he didn't want to go with her and he didn't pay any attention to her. So he's honestly never had a girlfriend except for you, Hermione. Harry had Cho for a little while –"

"One disastrous afternoon in Hogsmeade," Harry said, shuddering at the memory. "It seemed as if the only thing she knew how to do was cry. I was such an idiot, I had no idea what she expected me to do, and when I finally cottoned on, I couldn't imagine snogging her in that shop with all those other people watching." He shook his head ruefully. "Poor Cho," he said, saddened by the memory of his first crush, who had died in the Battle of Little Hangleton last term.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I don't mean to bring up sad memories for you," Ginny said quickly.

"I know. You're just making a point," he said, understanding where she was going with this line of conversation.

"Exactly. Well, after Cho, you had Casey, so that's two more girls' experience that you have than Ron. I went out with loads of boys before you finally noticed me. Hermione had Viktor as a boyfriend first, then Ron, and then Lorenzo. Ron has the least experience in relationships of all of us. He takes everything to heart, and he's always, *always* loved you, Hermione, even before he was aware of it," she said kindly to her friend. "But it may be a very good thing for him to find a new girlfriend for a while so he can be certain of his heart, certain of his feelings for you."

"You think he'll come back to me after going out with Susan?" Hermione said hopefully.

"It's possible. You came back to him after Lorenzo, didn't you?" Ginny said reasonably.

Hermione nodded, unshed tears in her eyes again. "But what if—"

"If that happens, then it was *never meant to be*," Ginny said, emphasizing each word seriously, "and it's good that you both learned this lesson before doing anything more serious, like getting married. You know that's where Ron was headed with you, don't you?"

Hermione nodded. "And I wasn't ready for that."

"Are you now?" Harry asked quietly.

She looked at him, her heart in her eyes. "If he'll have me back. . . I don't know if I'm ready for that kind of commitment yet, but I'd like the chance. Or maybe I am ready, I don't know. I'm still sorting things out. I do know that I honestly don't care what my parents think anymore. I don't care about anything. I just miss him so much."

"It will all work out for the best in the end," Ginny said optimistically. "In the meantime, we've mended our friendship, and we'll just have to work out how to be friends with both you and Ron without anyone having hurt feelings – if it can be done."

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Ron returned to their compartment just before the train pulled into Hogsmeade, gathered his things and left again without saying a word.

"Your owl is beautiful," Hermione said hesitantly as he carried his things past her. He didn't even acknowledge that she'd spoken.

"He'll come round eventually," Ginny said with determination. "You'll see. He's just so stubborn."

"He's a Weasley, after all," Harry teased, tickling her nose with the end of her hair. She'd moved over to sit next to him just before Ron showed up.

"You are so bad," she said, using her hair to tickle his nose in return.

"If you ever cut your hair, we're going to be frustrated for ways to torment each other," Harry said, giving her a one-armed hug and kissing her temple.

"Then I'll never cut my hair – it's far too much fun to torment you, Mr. Potter!" She tickled his nose again. He just laughed in response.

Hermione sighed. She missed the playful times she'd had with Ron. Lorenzo wasn't playful at all, not the way Ron was, and she'd missed that even when she was infatuated with the Italian. Since Harry had brought her things into the compartment, including Crookshanks, she was able to change there, so she got up and put her robes on over her travelling clothes. "We're almost there. I've got some Head Girl things to do," she said with a sigh as she handed Crookshanks to Ginny to hold for her.

"Congratulations on that, by the way," Harry said sincerely. "Not that it was a surprise or anything," he teased.

"I may resign if it continues to be this hard to work with Ron," she said sadly.

"Don't do anything rash," Harry warned. "You two will find some way to work together. Just be patient and don't lose your temper."

"I'll try," she said, waving as she left the compartment. "Thanks, both of you. See you later."

"Well, THAT was fun!" Harry said, heaving a sigh of relief when she was out of sight.

"Fun, was it?" Ginny said, poking him in the ribs. "In whose opinion?"

"Not bloody well mine," he said grimly. "This was the most uncomfortable train ride –"

"Since the last one, when you had your head bashed in," she quipped teasingly. He grimaced and nodded.

The Sorting Ceremony was enjoyable, as usual. Those who were sorted into Slytherin were booed and hissed at by many of those in the other houses, making the tiny First Years cringe as they crept over to the table with the smallest group around it. Many of the older Slytherins

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had either been jailed or left school to join the Death Eaters. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were noticeable by their absence. Arthur had pulled some strings at the Ministry to keep the story of their attack quiet for Ginny's sake.

Many whispers ranged the Great Hall wondering what had happened to those who were missing from the student body. Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione didn't participate in these whispers, just shrugged and made noncommittal sounds when asked their opinions on the subject. Harry kept his arm protectively around Ginny and kept renewing the light Cheering Charm he'd put on her when the murmurs about Malfoy and his friends had started. Ginny looked at him gratefully whenever he renewed the charm.

Finally, Dumbledore got up and raised his hands for silence. "Welcome! Welcome to another year at Hogwarts!" he cried, smiling benignly around at everyone. "I need to remind you, especially you First Years, that the Forbidden Forest is strictly off limits to students. Hogsmeade visits will begin in October for those students who are Third Year and up – please be certain your permission forms have been signed and turned in to your Head of House. Mr. Filch informs me that he has added ninety-seven new things to the list of forbidden items. I believe every one of those is a Weasley Wizarding Wheezes product. Good for the Weasleys!" he said, beaming at Ron and Ginny. "Their business is booming, so I hear. Quidditch trials will begin in two weeks. Sign up sheets are posted in your House Common Rooms. You First Years may have read about Dumbledore's Army in the papers this past term. Dumbledore's Army, which we call 'D.A.', is a group of students who do extra study on defensive spells. The D.A. meetings are led by Harry Potter, with the assistance of Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley. Professor Lupin," he said, indicating Remus, who was sitting two seats away from him, "works with the D.A. as needed. The number of people permitted in D.A. is limited, so as to ensure that each member gets enough individual attention. If you are interested in joining D.A., you will find sign-up sheets in your House Common Rooms, next to the Quidditch sign-up forms. The D.A. meetings are quite important, and are not to be entered into as a lark. D.A. participated in battles this past year, resulting in many injured students, and some loss of life, as well." He paused, sadness flitting across his face. "Let us lift our glasses once more to the fallen."

The Great Hall resonated with the sound of many scraping chairs as everyone stood up and lifted their goblets, intoning "The fallen" in solemn voices.

"Now, then," he continued briskly as everyone sat back down. "Our new Head Boy and Head Girl have already instructed the new and returning Prefects on safety procedures we're implementing this year. Do listen to your Prefects and the Head Boy and Head Girl, as well as your teachers. We have your best interests at heart and are trying to give you a safe and happy experience here at Hogwarts. I bid you all good night, and hope this is the beginning of a happy, healthy, successful year for us all!"

"Hear, hear," Harry muttered as they all stood up to leave, hoping he could manage to stay out of the hospital wing this year.

"I heard that," Ginny teased him, knowing what he was thinking.

Harry smiled down at her and wrapped one arm around her, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head. "Reading minds, now, are we?"

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"Only yours," she said sweetly. "You're hoping to stay out of the hospital wing this year, aren't you?"

He looked at her in surprise. "That is exactly what I was thinking! How did you know?"

"I was thinking the same thing," she replied, her eyes twinkling as she smiled up at him.

"You know me too well, dear lady," he said as he gave her one last squeeze before she ran off to do her Prefect duties.

"Whoa, this is cool!" Harry said, gazing around the Head Boy Suite Ron had just moved into. It was at the top of the boys' dormitory and was the most room to himself Ron had ever had in his life. The spacious suite was beautifully furnished with a big four-poster like the ones in the floors below, a fireplace, a work table, a desk, two sets of shelves, numerous lamps, several squashy armchairs, a wardrobe and its own very elegant bathroom.

Ron looked around, stunned at the largesse around him. "Wicked," he breathed. "Harry, come look at the view! The lake looks so tiny from up here." The moon and stars, as well as the few lights still on in the castle, were reflected in the lake far below them.

"Yeah, we're nearly as high as the Astronomy Tower," Harry agreed as he joined Ron at the window. The circular room had windows that looked out in three directions. The room would be bright and airy in the daytime. Now at night, the room seemed to be filled with stars from the three large windows.

Ron had been tied up all evening getting younger students settled and answering questions from incoming Prefects. This was the first chance he'd had to see his new room, and he'd wanted Harry to join him.

After they explored the room a while and hung up some Chudley Cannons posters, their conversation finally slowed. Harry said, "Well, I suppose I should go to my room now." He started toward the door, then turned back to look seriously at his best friend. "It's going to be strange to be at Hogwarts without you in the next bed."

"Yeah, I've been thinking that too," Ron said, looking gloomy.

"Our room is too empty with only three beds in it," Harry said quietly, missing Seamus as well as anticipating missing Ron. "Anytime you want to come and visit. . . ."

"Yeah, same to you. My door's always open to you," Ron said with a sad smile as Harry left and started down the stairs. "Good night."

"Night," Harry called up to him just before he disappeared around a bend in the stairs.

Ron got ready for bed and climbed in, pulling his curtains around the bed tightly. If he worked at it, he imagined he could almost hear Neville's snores, Dean's nose whistling, and Harry's murmurs in his sleep. Almost. But not quite.

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In his room, Harry climbed into bed and closed his curtains tightly. Neville's snores cut through the night. Dean's nose was whistling as it always did until the dead of winter, when his allergies subsided. Ron's deep, rumbling snores were nowhere to be found. Harry put his hands behind his head, looking up at the canopy over his head and wondering how long it would be before he stopped missing the sound of Ron's snores.

The next morning, Ron, Harry and Ginny sat together at breakfast, Hermione sitting several places further down. The other Gryffindors had noticed the breach in the friendship, but no one had said anything yet. As they ate, Professor McGonagall handed out their class schedules.

"Double Potions first thing today," Harry groaned.

Ginny patted his hand sympathetically. "Look at it this way, sweetie. At least you'll get it over with early!"

"And no Malfoy in class," Ron murmured low enough so Ginny wouldn't overhear.

Harry nodded, glancing at Ron. "Yeah. That's worth looking forward to right there."

"What is?" Ginny asked, having only heard Harry's comment.

"Getting it over with early," he replied quickly, glad she hadn't heard Ron. "Double Defence after that – great!"

"Yeah. What's Remus got planned for us this year, d'you know?" Ron asked curiously.

Harry looked at his friend, glad to see him finally taking an interest in life again. *Did Susan make this great a change in him already?* he mused. "Dunno. He's talked about a lot of different things. He'd planned to go to Rumania this summer for a research trip, but there was just too much going on here for him to go. That changed what he'd planned to do this term a bit."

"What was he going to study in Rumania?" Ron asked.

"Vampires, and a cure for lycanthropy he heard is being developed over there."

"A cure?" Ginny said excitedly. "That would be wonderful!"

"Yes, but he thinks it's just a rumour. That's why he wanted to go and meet with the researchers in person. I was going to go with him, but with all the problems the Death Eaters are causing, it just didn't seem to be a good time to go," Harry said. Roving bands of Death Eaters as well as Dementors were the scourge of the country, attacking Muggles and wizards randomly throughout the United Kingdom. "Remus has been busy helping Tonks and the Aurors develop some new stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" Ron prompted. Harry hadn't mentioned this before.

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"Secret stuff," Harry replied with a shrug. "He only told me about it when I asked him for probably the fifth time when we were going to Rumania." He grinned, looking for a moment like a five year old who couldn't stop asking "are we there yet?" "He got a bit annoyed with my pestering him and finally told me he was working on this project he couldn't talk about. *I* thought the project he was working on was romancing Tonks," he added with a snort of laughter, "but apparently that wasn't his only task this summer."

"Looks like romancing Tonks was one of his projects after all," Ginny said wisely. "Have they set a date for their wedding?"

"Christmas," Harry said. "I think it will be brilliant!"

"Where will it be?" Ginny asked.

"At our house," he replied.

"Will they live there with you, then?" she asked.

"I suppose, at least for a while. I'd be happy for them to stay there, but they may want their own place at some point," he said with a shrug.

"It will be nice for you to have two godparents around for a while," Ginny said quietly, studying his face and knowing how hungry he'd always been for a real family. Now he had a chance to have one, with Remus and Tonks marrying. She could see he was excited at the thought.

A slow smile crossed his face. "Yeah," he said quietly. "It will. Tonks is great. It will be fun to have her around all the time."

In their Potions class that morning, Harry and Ron were constantly reminded about how glad they were that they'd spent the summer working in the twins' shop. They now had a much better understanding of why certain ingredients had to be prepared very specific ways, and added in a particular order. The twins were excellent teachers, and potions, being the basis of many of their joke products, were a speciality of theirs. And Harry and Ron had found it much easier to take instruction from the twins than from the ever-annoying Snape.

"Pass me the powdered ferret spleen, would you?" Harry said.

"Here you go," Ron said, passing a small container across the table.

As he reached for the container, the hairs on the back of Harry's head stood up and he pulled his hand back, doing a quick wandless shield around himself and Ron, then flicking his wrist slightly and muttering "*Reverto*."

"What's up?" Ron said, noticing what Harry was doing.

Just then, a wad of parchment hit the shield and rebounded, flying back the way it had come and landing in the cauldron of Blaise Zabini.

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"Wicked!" Ron said, impressed. "You'll have to teach me that one!"

"What's this?" Snape drawled sarcastically, looking at the soggy parchment in the middle of Blaise's cauldron.

"Potter threw it at me!" Blaise stormed angrily, uncertain how his parchment had rebounded to his own cauldron. He hadn't seen Harry do the spell that had returned it to him.

Snape used his wand to lift the parchment out of the cauldron and dry it off. He opened it and stared at it for a moment, then leaned toward Zabini and said, "Now, why would Mr. Potter do a caricature of *himself* being hexed somehow – I assume that's what this crude drawing shows, since the stick figure has hair sticking up everywhere and round glasses – and send it into your cauldron? Don't you think it a bit odd?"

"No!" Blaise insisted. "He did it!"

Harry, like the rest of the class, had turned to watch the confrontation. His mouth had dropped open at the accusation, but he bit back the retort he wanted to snarl across the room.

Snape turned to look at Harry. "Mr. Potter, what do you know about this?"

Harry put on his most innocent face. "Nothing, sir. I've never seen that before," he said quite honestly. *Well, my back was turned when it got here, and it bounced right back to whoever threw it, so I really didn't see it,* he thought, doing his best not to look smug.

Snape looked around the room. "Does anyone have something to contribute to this discussion?" Silence. "No? Well, then, I suggest you all get back to work!" He turned back to Blaise. "Mr. Zabini. I suggest you leave Mr. Potter and his friends alone," Snape said silkily.

Blaise went red with fury. "Why?" he snapped. "You never told Malfoy–"

"That will be five points from Slytherin for your cheek, Mr. Zabini," Snape drawled. "And if there are any further outbursts, you will receive a detention." He strolled away to supervise the other students' work.

"Five points," Blaise grumbled. "And what's he doing standing up for Potter anyway?"

"Dunno," Daphne Greengrass, his table partner, said with a shrug.

"Harry," Ron whispered. "What's Snape doing, sticking up for you?"

"Dunno," Harry replied, glancing at his professor. "Odd, that."

"Morning!" Harry said brightly when he saw Ron coming into their room a few days later. Ron was already dressed, a rare enough thing in itself. Harry usually had to drag Ron out of bed, he was so hard to awaken. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep," Ron muttered darkly.

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"Why not? Your room must be nice and quiet," Harry said, trying to be happy that his best mate had such a nice place to live, even if it meant they no longer lived together.

Ron leaned in close to Harry and whispered, "I hate that room."

Harry was shocked. "Why?"

"It's too bloody quiet. I miss hearing you blokes snore."

"You can move back in anytime you want. And I don't snore!" Harry protested with a laugh.

"I may take you up on that. And you do too snore," Ron countered, beginning to smile.

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not!"

"Do too!" The longer this went on, the more both boys grinned.

"Do not!"

"Do not what?" Ginny said. Their mock-argument had taken them down into the Common Room.

"Harry says he doesn't snore," Ron said with a chuckle. "Tell him he snores, Gin."

"You snore, Harry," she said regretfully, "but only a little bit. When you're staying at The Burrow, I hear two sets of snores coming out of Ron's room."

"Do not!" Harry teased, acting horribly wounded.

"Do too!" Ginny and Ron retorted playfully. After tormenting Harry about his supposed snoring for a while, Ginny finally admitted that he only snored occasionally, and then softly. He was more likely to mutter incoherent things in his sleep than snore.

"There! Told you!" Harry said triumphantly.

"She said you do snore, though, mate," Ron pointed out.

"Do not!"

"Do TOO!" Ginny and Ron said together, making all three of them laugh.

They went down to breakfast in good spirits. Ron was working hard at putting at least some of his grief over Hermione behind him. It all came crashing back on him when they arrived at the Great Hall. There was Hermione, looking very pretty, her hair haloed by the bright morning sky illustrated by the ceiling. She also seemed rather lost, sitting by herself halfway down the Gryffindor table and looking quite glum. Ron's shoulders slumped a bit when he

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saw her, but then he looked determinedly across the hall to the Hufflepuff table. When he spotted Susan Bones, he straightened his posture and strode over to her side, sitting down as if he belonged there.

"Well, that's interesting," Ginny said watching her brother's performance.

"You think?" Harry said, still trying to sort out how Ron's being with Susan was going to impact the friendship between him, Ginny, Hermione and Ron.

"Yeah," she replied, sitting down across from Hermione, who brightened instantly.

"Good morning!" Hermione said, glad her friends had joined her.

"Hi," Ginny replied. "What's good this morning?"

"The kippers are quite good today," Hermione said, passing the platter across the table.

The three friends ate in silence for a few minutes, and then Hermione spoke. "Is he really interested in Susan, or is he just avoiding me?"

"I honestly don't know," Ginny said. "Do you, Harry?"

"I think he likes her, yeah, but not seriously. Still, she's the first girl he's managed to chat with for more than five minutes without whinging about Hermione's dumping him." He glanced over at Hermione. "Sorry."

"No, it's OK. You were just telling the truth," she said with a sigh. "I don't know what to do."

"Do you want my advice?" Ginny whispered, leaning across the table a bit and glancing side to side to make sure no one was eavesdropping.

"Of course!" Hermione said excitedly.

"Just go about your business. Act as if everything's fine. He needs time to get Susan out of his system. When they're through, you have a clear field. Don't get entangled with anybody or you may miss your timing."

"Wow, you've really thought this out," Hermione said in admiration.

"I dated a lot of boys before Harry finally stopped being so *thick*," she said, tapping her knuckles lightly against the side of his head.

"Hey!" he protested.

"What's not true about anything I said?" she said, teasing him.

"Well. . .uh. . ."

"Then why are you complaining?" she said serenely.

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"Erm. . . ." He had nothing to say, so he grabbed her hand and nibbled on her fingers.

"What's that for?" she said, laughing.

"Paying you back for being so cheeky, miss," he said, nibbling on another finger.

"I need that to eat with, you know," Ginny said, trying to pull her hand away.

"Then you shouldn't be using it to knock on innocent boys' heads," he replied archly, making Ginny giggle. He kissed each of the fingers he'd nibbled on and released her hand.

Hermione sighed. "I hope Ron and I can get back to having fun sometime soon," she said, watching them enviously. She knew she'd created the problem with Ron herself. She'd just have to be patient and hope she could win him back at some point.

"When the time is right, you will," Ginny said assuredly.

"I hope you're right," Hermione replied wistfully.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Hooch, the flying instructor, called as he passed her in the corridor. "May I have a word?"

"Yeah, sure," he said.

"I was so impressed with your D.A. and how they handled the battles," Madam Hooch said earnestly. "And when I heard about the Weasley twins dropping bombs from their brooms. . . well, I had an idea."

"What is it?"

"I was wondering if you thought a flying squad would be a useful addition to D.A. A group that could drop bombs or whatever on the enemy while you lot fight on the ground? I know you and Professor Lupin have your hands full teaching the spells and so on. I'd like to help out with D.A. if you'd allow me to. I could train the flying squad, if you thought such a thing would be useful."

"That would be brilliant!" Harry replied, truly enthused. "I can't tell you how wonderful it was to look up and see the Weasleys at work harassing the enemy. Having a whole squad would be fantastic! I'll talk to Ron and the twins. You'll need to coordinate with them. Do you have any ideas on who you want on this squad?"

"You, Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley," she said with a grin, "but I realize that's not going to happen. I think you could open up D.A. membership to a few more people, those who are interested in being on the flying squad. They won't need to know the same hexes and jinxes the rest of you lot do, since they'll be flying and dropping bombs."

"You're right, they won't need the same kind of training. We've had to turn away a number of people because we have all the people we can manage. I hated to refuse them. This idea of yours will be helpful in a lot of ways. I'll tell Ron your idea and you, he and the twins can sort

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out what you need to do as far as training, battle strategies, and so on. What a great idea! Thanks a lot, Madam Hooch!"

"I've been trying to think of a way I could help the war effort, and this was what I came up with. I'm glad you like the idea," she said with a smile.

"Neville?" Hermione asked a few weeks later. "Are you all right?" He was sitting grim-faced at a table in the Common Room, his books laid out in front of him, but his eyes unfocused and sad.

He startled at the sound of her voice. "Huh? Oh, um, hi, Hermione."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied.

"I don't believe you," she said simply. "You look upset. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Erm. . .not here," he said, glancing around at the room full of active, talkative, playful people. He didn't feel a part of them at all.

"Would you like to go for a walk? I'm a good listener," she said. She couldn't sort out his expression. He looked sad and distant, a bit angry, perhaps? Certainly lonely.

He finally looked up at her. "A walk? Where?"

"It will be light for another hour or so. How about down by the lake?"

"OK," he said after a moment's thought.

"It's a bit chilly out. Give me a minute to get a sweater and put my books away, all right?"

"Sure," he agreed.

Ten minutes later, they were walking by the lake in companionable silence, Neville with his head down and his hands in his pockets, Hermione patiently waiting for him to decide if he was going to talk about what was bothering him or not.

Finally, Hermione had had enough silence. "How's Luna?" By his flinch, she knew she'd hit a nerve. "Is that what's bothering you? Have you two had a fight?"

"No, nothing like that. But yeah, that's what's bothering me," he admitted.

"What's wrong?"

"I've decided to break up with her. She keeps embarrassing my friends – and me, as well." He looked over at her for a moment. "Well, you heard her on the train. She's oblivious to how other people feel. I mean, she's really sweet and we have a lot in common and all that – she

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loves Herbology, for one thing – but I've just gotten tired of seeing her offend people without a clue that she's done it."

"I'm sorry, Neville," Hermione said sincerely.

"It's OK," he said with a shrug. "But she's my first girlfriend. I have no idea how to break up with her."

Hermione laughed bitterly, a sound more like a bark than a laugh. "I'm the queen of how not to break up with someone."

Neville stopped and looked at her seriously. "You still like Ron, don't you? I've seen how you look at him when he's with Susan."

"Yes. Actually, I love him," she admitted with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out for you," he said.

"I'm hoping that we can make up when he breaks up with Susan," she said sadly, "if he ever does."

"How did you break up with Viktor Krum? If I'm being too nosy, just say so."

"I told him that we'd grown apart. It's hard to keep up a long-distance relationship, and honestly, I've always loved Ron. He was just too thick to notice me then. I didn't tell Viktor that – I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I told him I hoped we could remain friends, and we have. That's one of the things that drives Ron mad, actually, that Viktor and I still write to each other."

Neville thought a moment. "So maybe I could tell Luna that we've grown apart?"

"I don't know, Neville. I've messed up so badly, I probably shouldn't give anyone romantic advice." They strolled in silence for a while, and then Hermione had an idea. "You know who's broken up with loads of people and stayed friendly with all of them?" Neville shook his head. "Ginny Weasley! And she knows Luna well, too. If anyone can give you advice about how to break up with her, it's Ginny."

Neville's face lit up. "You're right! She went out with several blokes before she and Harry got together, and they're all still friends with her. She even went to the first Yule Ball with me, and left me feeling as if I was the best dancer and escort she could have wanted. And when I asked her out again, she turned me down so nicely, it didn't hurt my feelings. I'll ask her to help me. Thanks, Hermione!" He looked considerably happier now.

"I'm glad I could help," Hermione said sincerely, "even if it was just to suggest you talk to someone else."

A few days later, Neville, having given up on ever finding Ginny actually alone, went to speak to her while she was sitting in the Common Room with Harry. She was sitting on the floor, leaning against his knees, Crookshanks in her lap.

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"Erm. . .hi," Neville said.

"Hi, Neville!" Ginny said, a friendly smile on her face.

"Hi, mate," Harry said, still concentrating on the plait he was making in Ginny's hair, his tongue held tightly between his teeth as he tried to make as neat a plait as she always did. He'd decided turnabout was fair play in the "messing up hair" department, and had taken to making little plaits all over her head when she sat still long enough. Ginny thought this was pretty funny, since he honestly couldn't make a plait that would stay together and he was always careful to never actually tangle her hair. The worst she wound up with was ruffled hair from the plaits, but that slight bit of curliness soon fell out once Harry gave up on his efforts.

"Erm. . .I was wondering," Neville said hesitantly.

"What?" Ginny replied when he didn't go on. Harry looked up from his work, the plait falling apart in his hand as soon as he stopped concentrating on what he was doing. He gave up on it and raked his fingers through her hair, straightening it out again.

"Uh. . .Ginny, I need some advice." Neville looked quite uncomfortable now.

"About what?"

Neville glanced at Harry, who was looking at him quizzically. "Could we go someplace less. . .public. . .to talk?" Neville asked Ginny. Looking at Harry again, he quickly added, "You're welcome to come too, Harry. Maybe you'll have some ideas that will help me."

"Sure, mate. Where?" Harry asked seriously.

"Um. . ." Neville glanced around the crowded Common Room. "D'you suppose Ron would let us use his room for a few minutes? It's a bit late to wander around the corridors looking for a quiet place."

"I don't think he'll mind," Harry said, sliding out from behind Ginny and getting to his feet. "Be right back."

"Is something wrong?" Ginny asked in concern. "Are you all right?"

Truthfully, Neville looked awful. His face was flushed and sweaty, his nerves giving him fits. "I'm fine. Nothing's wrong," he said too quickly.

"Ron says it's fine. Let's go," Harry said as he neared them. They followed him up to the top floor of the boys' dormitories, where the Head Boy Suite was. Ron had moved back in with his old roommates after only a few nights alone in the suite, but he and Harry did use it as a quiet place to study at times, and they shared the luxurious bathroom, as well.

Once they got to Ron's room, Ginny took a squashy armchair, Harry sat on the wide arm of her chair with his arm across the back, and Neville paced.

"What is it, Neville?" Ginny asked, worried about him.

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"It's Luna. I want to break up with her, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. I wouldn't mind staying friends with her, but I don't want to go out with her anymore," Neville said in a rush. "I asked Hermione, and she said you were the one to talk to."

"Why Ginny?" Harry said, looking at his girlfriend.

"Because she knows how to break up with guys and keep them as friends, not hurt their feelings," Neville said, looking at Harry nervously. He didn't know how Harry would take to Neville's prying into Ginny's private life.

"Well, that's true. All the blokes she's gone out with are still friends of hers," Harry agreed. "How *did* you do that?" he asked, grinning at her.

"I don't know. There's no set formula or anything," Ginny said with a shrug. "What did Hermione tell you to do?"

"Talk to you. She also mentioned that I could say I've outgrown Luna. Something like that, anyway," Neville said, his eyes brightening hopefully now that Ginny was actually discussing his problem with him.

"That's good advice, Neville. You can just tell her you really like her as a friend. I mean, she was your first real girlfriend, right?" He nodded. "So she'll always be special to you. But people change as they grow up – their interests change, their taste changes, stuff like that. And you're both young enough that you should be going out with loads of different people."

"Harry hasn't," Neville pointed out.

"Well, that's true, but we apparently were meant for each other," Ginny said, smiling down at Harry. He had moved from the arm of the chair to seat himself in front of her, leaned his back against her legs, his arms over her knees, his fingers tickling her calves when Neville wasn't looking. Now he turned his face up to look at her upside down, making her laugh.

"It's my animal magnetism," Harry said cheekily.

"Or something," Ginny teased, tugging gently on his hair. She looked back at Neville. "I can't tell you what's right and wrong for your relationships. I can only tell you that going out with those other boys while I was waiting for Harry to wake up," here she tugged on his hair again, "and notice me – "

"I notice you!" he whinged, acting hurt.

"I know, sweetie," she said, smoothing down the ruffled places she'd made in his hair. "As I was saying before I was so RUDELY interrupted," she said, leaning forward and looking significantly at Harry, who did his best to look innocent, "going out with other boys helped me understand what's important to me in a relationship. You and Luna have had some fun together, and now you're ready to broaden your experiences by going out with other girls, right?"

Neville nodded eagerly.

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"So work out a nice way to tell her that. Or don't tell her that, find some other way. But knowing Luna, she may be ready to move on now, as well. She doesn't stay interested in the same thing for very long unless it's some kind of animal the rest of us have never heard of."

"Yeah, you're right. You've given me a lot to think about. Thanks, Ginny," Neville said, looking a bit relieved.

"You're welcome. I wish I had a list of things to say that make it easy to break up with someone, but I just don't. Good luck, Neville."

"Thanks." He smiled at Harry and Ginny and left the suite.

"That's an interesting development," Ginny mused after he'd left.

"How so?" Harry said, leaning his head back into her lap to look at her upside down again.

"I can't say – I can't explain it. But it feels like an interesting development of some kind," she assured him. She leaned down and gave him an upside down kiss which evolved into a short-lived but much enjoyed snog before they heard Ron's heavy tread on the stairs. They grinned at each other and said "Saturday!" at the same time.

Ron and Harry were racing down the corridor, trying to get to Potions on time. They'd been slowed by Ron having to answer some questions from two of the new Prefects. As they rounded the last corner, Harry ran headlong into two little First Year boys, sending all three of them sprawling.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Harry said, smiling as he helped the boys to their feet. "I wasn't looking where I was. . ." He stopped because both boys were looking at him with stark terror on their faces. "What's wrong?"

The boys looked from his face to the multitude of battle ribbons and miniature medals on his robes, which all that had them were required to wear by Ministry edict, then back to his face. They trembled, their mouths agape, their eyes staring.

"Hey!" Ron said, taking one boy by the shoulders and looking into his eyes with concern. "Are you all right? What's up?"

"He. . .he. . .he's H-h-harry P-p-potter," the boy squeaked.

"Yeah, so?" Ron said, flummoxed.

The boy in front of Harry sidled over behind the one Ron still held by the shoulders. He leaned toward Ron and whispered, "He k-kills people, then e-e-eats them!"

A guffaw of laughter burst out of Ron, while Harry looked horrified.

"What?" Harry asked. "Where did you hear that?"

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"The Seventh Years told us," the boy said nervously, trying to get Ron's big body between him and Harry.

Ron and Harry exchanged a look. "Slytherins," Ron said succinctly.

"Zabini," Harry said. He looked at the frightened boys and squatted so he was closer to their height, and hopefully, less threatening. "Yes, I'm Harry Potter, but I don't eat people. That's disgusting! Someone was having you on."

"But you kill people," the first boy insisted.

Harry sighed. "We're at war, and I've been in several battles now. When you're in battle, people are trying to kill you. If you want to live, you fight back. Sometimes people die. That's why it's better to try to find peaceful ways to get along, but sometimes, you just have to fight. And sometimes, people die."

"If Harry hadn't killed those people, a lot of Hogwarts students would be dead now," Ron added seriously. "He saved the lives of loads of people, as well as his own. Harry's a hero, not a bad guy."

Harry gave Ron a grateful look.

"It's the truth," Ron said, gazing steadily at Harry. He squatted in front of the boys. "I'm Ron Weasley, the Head Boy. What are your names?"

Both boys trembled again, seeing the "HB" badge as well as a massive number of battle ribbons right at their eye level on Ron's robes.

"You aren't in any trouble," Ron insisted. "We just want to get to know you."

"We'd like to be friends," Harry added, offering his hand to shake. "Hi. I'm Harry. Who are you?"

"M-m-malcolm," the first boy said, fearfully shaking his hand. "Malcolm O'Reilly."

"It's nice to meet you, Malcolm. Do you play Quidditch?" Harry asked kindly.

"A bit."

"I do too. So does Ron. It's great fun, isn't it?" Harry said encouragingly. "Who's your favourite team?"

"The Chudley Cannons," Malcolm replied, acting a bit less nervous.

"The Cannons!" Ron said with an enthusiastic grin. "That's my team, as well! Have you been to any of their games?"

"No. Have you?" Malcolm was visibly relaxing now, at least with Ron.

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"No, but Harry and I did get to see the World Cup when it was in England a few years ago. It was brilliant!"

"What's your name?" Harry asked the second boy, who was still hanging back shyly.

"Eddie Profitt," he said quickly, just barely touching the tips of Harry's fingers before drawing his hand back, still too afraid of him to really shake hands.

"Eddie, it's very nice to meet you," Harry began, but then the class bell rang. "Rats, we're late. We'll see you again sometime, all right? And please don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you."

"You promise?" Eddie said timidly.

"If you don't try to hurt me, why would I ever want to hurt you?" Harry said reasonably.

"Here, I'll give you blokes a note so you won't get in trouble for being late," Ron said, writing quickly and handing Malcolm a bit of parchment. "Hurry off to class now. Have a good day."

"Yeah, guys, have a good one!" Harry added. He and Ron turned and pelted down the hall toward Potions. "Can you believe that?" Harry panted as they ran.

"They think you eat people. That's just gross," Ron agreed.

"You're *late*," Snape said as they skidded into the room and hurried to their work table.

"We had to deal with a problem with some students," Ron said honestly.

"Potter isn't Head Boy. There's no reason for him to be late," Snape snarled.

"Actually, there is. May we speak to you after class?" Harry asked quietly, willing the man to do Legilimency on him and see Harry's memory of those Slytherin First Years trembling because they thought Harry might eat them.

Snape stared into Harry's eyes a long moment, apparently getting the message. He looked startled for a moment, then turned away. "Yes, see me after class," he said as he stalked away.

Harry managed to magically speed up the process of the potion they were working on enough for them to finish when everyone else did. He and Ron looked at each other with satisfaction. Their potion work had improved considerably thanks to working for the twins. They were actually beginning to enjoy the process of making potions now, as long as Snape left them alone.

At the end of class, Harry and Ron approached Snape's desk.

"What is it, Potter?"

"I think you know. You did Legilimency on me, didn't you? I wanted you to see what happened," Harry replied.

"I did. But I don't understand it," Snape admitted.

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Harry and Ron told Snape the whole story, after which Snape got up and began pacing. "It must have been a prank," he said finally.

"But it's having bad repercussions," Harry insisted. "Those boys were terrified of me. Once they learn a bit more magic, they might attack me for no reason other than fear. If these blokes keep making up stories like that, they'll probably include Ron, Ginny and Hermione in the stories, and they'll be in danger as well."

Snape stopped pacing and studied Harry's face thoroughly. He could find no deceit in the boy at all, even with his Legilimency. "All right. I'll take care of it. Thank you for bringing it to my attention."

"No problem," Harry said.

"It's scary enough for kids starting here, without thinking the older kids are likely to kill and eat you," Ron said seriously. "I hope you can set their minds at rest."

Snape found this seriousness and maturity from both Potter and Weasley a bit unnerving. "I'll do my best," he said quietly. "If that's all, you may go."

"That's all. Thanks, Professor," Harry said as he and Ron turned to go.

"Mr. Potter. Mr. Weasley," Snape called after them. The boys turned to look at him again. "You handled the problem well. Ten points each to Gryffindor."

Both boys smiled. "Thanks!" Harry said, opening the door.

"Yeah, thanks, Professor!" Ron agreed as he followed Harry out of the room.

That evening, Snape called a meeting in the Slytherin Common Room. Once all the members of his House were settled comfortably, he began.

"It has come to my attention that some Seventh Year students have been terrorizing the First Years by telling them lies about Harry Potter," he said with restrained anger, staring around at the older students with stern dark eyes. Sudden motion among the First Years drew his eyes. They all had looks of stark terror on their faces. He sighed, then pushed his greasy black hair out of his face and looked down his long, hooked nose at the older students. "This is completely unacceptable behaviour. For the benefit of you younger students, the truth of the matter is, Harry Potter has killed people in battle, yes, but he most certainly does not *eat* them," he said, his nose twisted in disgust at the idea. "For you older students who started and perpetuated this grotesque means of tormenting younger students, I have a word of advice for you. Do NOT cross Harry Potter. No matter how angry you are with him, no matter what you think he's done to your families, you need to understand something. He is a very powerful wizard. He has survived numerous direct battles with *the Dark Lord himself*. He has bested many fully-qualified adult wizards in combat. And some of you think you can harm him?" He laughed derisively. "Look around. The best student Slytherin has seen in years was Draco Malfoy. Where did he wind up? In Azkaban, because he insisted on attacking Potter repeatedly. He was beaten every time, and is paying the price for his arrogance in prison. Don't be like him."

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"Sir?" a sneering voice called from the back of the room.

"What is it, Zabini?"

"Are you afraid of Potter, then?"

"No. But if I were still a boy with some kind of schoolyard vengeance on my mind, which must be what's going through the minds of those of you who are creating and perpetuating these lies, I hope I would have enough sense not to attack him, either directly or by ambush. He survives every kind of attack, and those who try to hurt him wind up injured, jailed or dead. I have no interest in experiencing any of those options, nor should you." He looked around the room at the ambitious, crafty faces before him. "I know you think you're a clever lot, and many of you are quite clever, but I'm trying to help you here. Leave Potter and his friends alone. And don't tell lies about him to the younger students. If I hear any more such stories, there will be *consequences*." He looked at the First Years again. "Do you have any questions?"

"Does. . .does he drink their blood?" one tiny girl asked timidly.

"Of course not. Harry Potter, whether you or I like him or not, would no more drink someone's blood than he would resort to cannibalism. If that's all?" he asked, scanning the room. Seeing no responses, he turned on his heel and left.

"What the bloody hell was that all about?" Baddock snarled.

"I don't know, but if he thinks he's going to stop me. . . ." Zabini said, an evil sneer on his face.

"What are you going to do, Blaise?" Daphne said, leaning her breast quite deliberately against his arm and looking up at him adoringly.

"What Draco Malfoy should have done in the first place. Kill Harry Potter," Zabini declared.

"How? You heard what Professor Snape said," she replied.

"I'll find a way," he said confidently.

Saturday dawned bright and beautiful, a simply spectacular autumn day. Harry and Ginny snuck down to the kitchens and got enough food for a picnic lunch, then got under the Invisibility Cloak and hurried across the grounds to the Whomping Willow, doing their best to stifle their laughter. Harry changed into the black cat and ran under the waving branches, pushing the knot that stilled the tree's action with a paw. Ginny hurried after him as soon as the branches stilled, scooped up the cat and dashed into the entrance of the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. After Harry changed back into himself, they walked down the tunnel hand in hand, happy at the prospect of a lovely long day alone in the Shack, with plenty of food and no one to disturb them.

When they opened the trap door, Harry scanned around to be certain they were alone, then climbed out, helping Ginny up the last two rungs of the ladder. Harry had his foot poised over the first step to the second floor when he heard it.

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"Somebody's upstairs," he whispered cautiously.

"Ron and Susan aren't. . .are they?" Ginny replied in shock.

"Dunno," he said, backing toward the trap door. The sound of a woman's laughter above them stilled their motion. They looked at each other in surprise.

"That's Tonks!" Ginny whispered.

"Let's go. This was Remus's house first," Harry said, grinning a bit despite his disappointment.

"Is that you, Harry?" a voice called from above.

Harry's face flamed red. "Uh. . .yes, Remus, it is."

Remus came to the landing above them, his hair ruffled and his shirt unbuttoned. He was blushing too. "It seems great minds think alike," he chuckled, blushing a bit as he self-consciously did up his buttons.

"Uh. . .yeah, I guess," Harry said uncomfortably. He wanted to laugh, he wanted to run, he wished he'd thought of anyplace else to go other than here – but this was their place, his and Ginny's. They had worked hard to clean it up and make it nice enough to enjoy once in a while. But in reality, it was Remus's house, and he'd just have to accept that.

"I suppose I have you and Ginny to thank for cleaning the place up and setting things to rights?" Remus said, sounding amused. "I remember it being much grottier."

"Yeah." Harry looked at Ginny, who was wide-eyed and apparently as torn between wanting to leave and wanting to laugh out loud as he was. If he looked at her too long, he'd burst into embarrassed laughter, so he turned his eyes up to his godfather instead.

"You've done a lovely job. I suppose we'll have to schedule the use of it, eh?" Remus teased.

"Remus, stop being so hard on them," Tonks said as she moved to stand beside him, her arm around his waist. "Hi, kids!"

"Erm. . .hi," Harry said. Ginny waved.

"What's in the bag?" Tonks said, cheerful as always.

"We brought some food for a picnic," Ginny replied, smiling up at the young woman holding on to Harry's godfather so possessively. "We have plenty. Do you want some?"

"No, thanks," Remus replied. "That's very kind of you."

"It's a great day for a picnic!" Tonks enthused.

"Yeah. Well. . .we'll just go and. . ." Harry said, turning to the trap door. "You two have fun."

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"Oh, no! You don't have to leave. I only asked Remus to show me the place. He didn't really want to come. Bad memories, you know."

"Yeah, I've heard," Harry replied, then prodded Ginny in the back. "Let's go," he muttered. She moved to the trap door and started down the ladder.

"We honestly were just on a sight-seeing tour, Harry. I'm sorry we imposed on your space," Remus said uncomfortably.

"It's your house, Remus," Harry said reasonably. "We can have our picnic someplace else."

"If you're sure, then," Remus said, still a bit uncertain.

"I'm sure," Harry said, smiling at his godfather. It really was wonderful to see the man as happy as he was with Tonks.

"Right, then. See you later," Remus said. Tonks stood on tiptoe behind him and nuzzled his neck.

"Yeah," Harry replied awkwardly, waving as he descended the ladder. Could his ears be any brighter red? He knew he was blushing so badly, his ears had to be flaming. Ginny was chuckling.

"What's so funny?"

"You. Them. This whole situation," she said, finally letting go and laughing out loud.

"How is it funny?"

"I don't know, it just is!" She laughed so hard, the walls of the tunnel were echoing with her laughter.

"Shush," Harry warned, grinning as he did so. Her laughter was infectious and he was having a hard time keeping a straight face himself. "Someone outside might hear us."

"OK," she said, doing her best to stop laughing. She tried holding her breath, but wound up snorting with laughter anyway. She tried clamping her mouth shut, holding her lips with her hand, but a guffaw escaped despite her best efforts.

Harry was chuckling along with her by this time. "I know how to quiet you, you silly witch," he said, pulling her to him. He locked his lips to hers, kissing her deeply, then pulling back when her laughter bubbled over again.

"What is wrong with you?" he said, grinning at her. She was so beautiful when she laughed. Her brown eyes were twinkling in the dim light from their wands. Tears of mirth ran down her cheeks, which were flushed a beautiful rosy pink. Her lips were red and juicy looking and he couldn't resist them, leaning down to kiss her more seriously, and finally, at long last, stilling her laughter. Their kiss deepened and she moaned against his mouth, their tongues dancing around each other in delight. Finally breathless, they broke apart.

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Ginny leaned back against his arms behind her back. "I guess you've never walked in on your godparents before, have you," she said, giggling all over again.

"Well. . .no," he admitted. "At least they had clothes on! And we didn't actually walk in on them. We were more, erm, approaching . . ."

"Yeah, whatever. Honeyduke's tunnel, then?" she suggested.

"Ron might want to sneak out to Honeyduke's," Harry said cautiously.

"So hang a sock on the entrance," she suggested.

"Huh?"

"It's something I heard Fred and George talking about one time. If one of them wants private time with a girl, they hang a sock or a hat or a necktie on a door knob, or wherever they could, to let the other one know the room was in use," she explained.

"Does Ron know this system?"

"Yeah, he's heard about it," she said, her eyes twinkling. "They use it in their apartment. Ron heard them arguing one day because the sock fell to the floor and Fred didn't notice, and. . .well. . . ." She was laughing out loud by now.

Harry laughed along with her. "Right then," he said, still chuckling. "Honeydukes it is!" he said, taking her hand and leading her back up the tunnel toward the Whomping Willow.

Once inside the castle, they hurried to the statue of the hump-backed witch, where Harry said "*Dissendium*," and slid inside landing in a heap at the bottom of the entrance. He turned around just in time to steady Ginny as she landed. She straightened up, turned around and dusted off her jeans, then Harry's, amid much quiet laughter.

"OK, let's go down the tunnel a bit to that wide spot where it bends," Harry said, taking her hand, picking up the picnic bag and leading the way.

"Wait!" Ginny said suddenly.

"What is it?" he asked, then followed her pointing arm and saw a sock hanging from an outcropping on the wall. He chuckled and pulled up the leg of his jeans, showing a bare ankle above his trainer. "I just put that there while you were cleaning your jeans," he told her with a smug grin.

"You did? Thank goodness! I was afraid Ron had brought Susan down here!" she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him soundly. "Let's go!"

When they got to the wide part of the tunnel, they set down their picnic lunch with a sigh of relief.

"If I'd known we'd have to carry it so far, I wouldn't have gotten so much food," Harry said with a chuckle.

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"Do you want to eat now?" Ginny asked.

"Nope," he said, doing a Cushioning Charm on the floor and pulling her into his arms. "I want you first."

"Oh really?" she said, teasing him.

"Mmm-hmm," he murmured as he nibbled her neck. While his mouth was busily teasing her with kisses, licks and nibbles on her neck, ear, along the line of her jaw and her lips, his hands were busy divesting her of clothes. When his hand touched her bare breast, he felt Ginny go suddenly tense. "What's wrong?" he said, sitting up and looking at her.

Ginny had tears in her eyes. "Nothing. I'm sorry. Go on," she said, but her body remained taut and nervous under his hand.

"Too fast?" he said, trying to sort out what he needed to do to make her comfortable. He moved his hand from her breast to her waist, trying to give her time to relax.

"No," she said, taking his hand in hers and determinedly putting it back on her breast. She held it there, but her body was as tight as a bowstring.

"Please tell me what's wrong," Harry asked softly, gazing into her eyes.

"Nothing," she said, swallowing hard and blinking away her tears.

"It's Malfoy, isn't it?" he said with sudden understanding. "I'm sorry, baby. What can I do to make you feel better?"

Ginny burst into tears. "Just hold me, all right? I'll be better in a few minutes."

"OK, whatever you want," he said, lying down and lifting his arm so she could snuggle in next to him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead. "We'll only do what you want to do."

"Damn Malfoy anyway!" Ginny snarled fiercely after a few minutes. "He will not do this to me! To us!" She raised up, leaned on her elbow and bent over Harry, kissing him soundly and moving to lie on top of him as the kiss deepened. Her determination didn't last long. As soon as he touched her breast again, she shuddered and pushed away from him. She sat up, her arms wrapped tightly around her legs, her bowed head resting on her knees, her hair a rich scarlet curtain covering her nearly completely.

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't know it was still so bad for you," Harry said quietly. "I wish you'd told me. I didn't mean to rush you." He sat behind her, putting a leg on each side of her body and wrapping her in his arms. He leaned his head on hers for a few moments, then kissed the back of her neck where her hair had parted and revealed a bit of skin.

"That feels good," Ginny murmured. "Do it again."

"OK," Harry said softly.

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"More," she sighed.

"As you wish, m'lady." He carefully kissed that tiny bit of skin again, then burrowed under her hair to find a bit more skin to tease ever so gently with his lips and tongue. When she relaxed enough to enjoy those kisses, he pulled her hair away from her face and teased her ear with his tongue.

"That tickles," she said, giggling a bit.

"But does it feel good?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed as he continued. "Very good."

Harry rubbed her arms lightly while he continued his soft kisses, then slowly slipped his hands under her arms and found her breasts again. Ever so gently, he cupped their weight in his hands, just resting them there in the warmth of his palms. She tensed at his touch and his hands retreated.

"I'm sorry, baby," he murmured, kissing the side of her neck again. "I won't—"

"Yes, you will," she said bravely, taking his hands and placing them on her breasts again. She was tense but forced herself to take some slow, calming breaths. "Please, Harry," she said, holding his hands in place when he would have removed them. "Only you can heal this for me."

He began to move his hands delicately, caressing her breasts as softly as he could. Ginny finally began to relax under his tender touches. Before long, her breathing had increased and she was leaning into his still-gentle hands, seeking firmer contact. She turned her face to his and kissed him, sighing finally as she leaned back against him, giving him unrestricted access to her body.

Harry worked slowly, gently, paying close attention to her reactions, never pushing her beyond what she could accept. Finally, she turned sideways in his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him fully, then dropping her head back and sighing happily, a smile on her face.

"You're so good to me," she murmured as he continued his slow, soft caresses.

"I love you, Ginny. I want you to be happy," he said simply.

"You make me happy," she said, smiling as she looked up at him through languid eyes. "Thank you for this."

"For having my way with you?" he teased. "Any time."

"For taking such good care of me," she said. "I love you, Harry."

Harry smiled and bent to kiss her, his hands bringing her comfort, joy and healing as they tenderly caressed her.

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Finally, she gasped and held him close, tears filling her eyes again.

"Did I hurt you?" he said in concern.

"No! No, baby, you've healed me," she said, cuddling into his arms and sighing happily.

"Oh, good. That's what I was hoping for," Harry said, relieved. He held her tenderly, letting her be the one to decide what happened next.

When she'd rested a while, Ginny straightened up a bit and began gnawing playfully on Harry's neck.

"What's that for?" he whinged plaintively, glad she was feeling silly again.

"It needs to be done!" she teased. "Don't interrupt!"

"OK," he said, sounding resigned, but grinning. Ginny's strong spirit was re-emerging at last.

Harry was still fully dressed, having spent the entire time they'd been together trying to comfort Ginny. She started trying to undress him but was having problems – his pullover top was hard for her to manage if he didn't cooperate, and he was currently enjoying being mischievously uncooperative. She stood up to get a better grip on it, and he stood up ramrod straight in front of her, refusing to bend in any way, deliberately frustrating her.

"Harry!" she finally said in exasperation. "Do you want your clothes off or not? You're too tall for me to manage this!"

"Oh, poor baby," he teased, then yelped as she put her leg behind his and shoved him down onto the Cushioned floor.

"Gotcha!" she said triumphantly. She ignored his "Oof" as she straddled his chest and got him thoroughly bound up with his shirt halfway up his arms and his head buried somewhere within.

"So it's bondage you want, eh?" he muttered through a mouthful of cloth.

Ginny giggled. "Maybe." She shoved his shirt up far enough to free his mouth and kissed him quite thoroughly. "There. That's better," she said with satisfaction. "Comfy?"

"Oh, yeah," he said with a cheeky grin. "Never better."

Ginny laughed. She knew he could easily free himself, but he seemed to be going along with her game willingly enough. She leaned down and gave the middle of his chest a resounding raspberry, making him giggle.

"That tickles!" he cried, wriggling under her.

"I've got you now, matey," she said in her best possible pirate imitation. "You'll not get away from me!" She gave him a lingering, tantalizing kiss, then proceeded to kiss all along his jawline, down the sharply carved lines of his throat, nuzzling the sensitive spot where his neck

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and shoulder joined, then out to the edge of each heavily muscled shoulder, throwing in nibbles and licks every so often to keep things interesting.

"Are you going to keep me tied up forever?" Harry whinged.

"Maybe," she said, giggling when he shivered deliciously as her hair slid across his chest.

"You're driving me mad, you know," he said in a husky voice. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"We'll just have to test your stamina, then, sir," she said brightly. "It's all in the name of science! Don't interrupt my research!" He groaned plaintively in response, making her giggle, but he stayed as she'd put him patiently enough.

"You're having too much fun. Can't I at least watch?" he complained.

"Oh, all right, spoilsport!" she said, freeing his head from his confining shirt. "You're such a baby sometimes!"

"Now I've got ya!" he said, bringing his bound hands down around her back, holding her close and flipping her onto her back. "Thought you could get away from me, did you, my fine beauty?"

"Pirates again?" she teased. "We need to find some new material!" She would have added some other pithy comment, but she'd been reduced to giggles by him snarling and gnawing loudly on the side of her ribcage. "That tickles! Stop!"

He stopped instantly and loomed over her, studying her mouth seriously. "May I have the use of my hands now? You have parts that need proper exploration, m'lady."

"Yes, you may," she replied with a happy smile, and laughed when he easily pulled his hands out of the confines of his rumpled up shirt.

"That's better," he said just before he kissed her, supporting his weight on one elbow, his hand cupping her head, the other hand gliding down her skin tantalizingly.

"Mmmmm, much better," she murmured, pulling him down for a deeper kiss.

After a blissful time together, they were sitting up and feeding each other from their lunch bag when they heard a noise in the tunnel coming from the direction of Honeyduke's.

"Get dressed!" Harry warned, tossing Ginny's clothes to her. He pulled his jeans and shirt on roughly, then picked up his wand and said, "*Lumos Solem*." The wand flooded the tunnel with light as bright as the sun. Someone at the other end put a hand in front of his face, shielding his eyes from the light. "Who's there?" Harry demanded in a snarl.

"It's me," Ron replied. "Sorry. I didn't know you were down here. Can you dim that light?"

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"Yeah, sorry, mate," Harry replied, lowering his wand and dimming it at the same time. "How did you get to Honeyduke's? We would've noticed you passing by. Or have you been there all day?"

"You should've seen the sock and known not to come in here anyway," Ginny added.

"I've only been out a couple of hours. I changed into the collie and took the path around the forest to Hogsmeade," Ron explained, sitting down and helping himself to some food. "I just decided to take the tunnel back. It's a long way round if you follow that path."

"It's not a Hogsmeade weekend," Ginny said, looking at her brother curiously. "Why'd you go?"

"Bored. Nothing else to do. You two were off somewhere. . .well, here, I suppose. . .and why aren't you in the Shack?"

"Remus and Tonks were there when we got there," Harry said, blushing at the memory.

"You didn't walk in on them, did you?" Ron said, aghast.

"No. If we'd been a bit later, we might have done," Harry replied, a sheepish grin on his face. "You and Ginny have both said something about walking in on people. Have you done it then?"

"Well. . .yeah," Ron admitted. "When I was little. There was a thunderstorm and it scared me and I ran into their room, and. . .well. . ."

"Same thing happened to me," Ginny agreed. "Only mine was a nightmare."

Harry grinned at his friends. "What did your parents say?"

"They were rather matter-of-fact about it, I guess. Just pulled their jammies back on and took care of me," Ron said with a shrug.

"Same here. I suspect all of us walked in on them at one time or another. After so many kids, they probably just expected us to wander in at the wrong time," Ginny said with a smile.

"Have your parents ever heard of locks on the doors?" Harry said, chuckling.

"I don't know why they never did lock their door. They still don't. Not even a Colloportus Charm," Ron said, shrugging. "Did you ever walk in on your aunt and uncle?"

Harry's smile faded. "I was locked in a cupboard under the stairs for most of my life, so I never had the chance to walk in on them, not that I would've wanted to. I think Dudley did one time. I remember hearing noises from their room, and then Dudley trying the door and then everyone yelling. That was one of the few times something happened they couldn't blame on me at all." He was quiet a moment, then smiled again. "Is that why you two thought of the Colloportus Charm for the doors when you did that Weasley Plot on Hermione and me, then?"

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"Yup!" Ginny agreed. "I didn't want to be walked in on! That's an experience I could do without!"

"Me, too!" Harry agreed.

"And here I nearly walked in on you two," Ron teased. "We need to work out a signal or something."

"I hung a sock at the entrance to the tunnel," Harry protested. "How was I to know you'd come from the Honeyduke's side?"

"All's well that ends well," Ginny said philosophically, "and we've learned a lesson – hang a sock at both ends of the tunnel next time!"

"So is Remus going to be using the Shack from now on?" Ron asked. "I mean, he's an adult. He has quarters here, she has a flat in London, they could use Grimmauld Place – why use the Shrieking Shack?"

"She said she wanted the tour," Harry said with a shrug. "I don't know what's going to happen. They did thank us for cleaning it up, though."

"Too bad that spell's on my suite," Ron commented, "or you could use that."

"What spell?" Ginny asked.

"Each Head Boy Suite is enchanted so girls can come up for meetings, but doing anything beyond a little snogging will set off alarms," he said with a shrug.

"What do you mean, 'each' Head Boy Suite," Ginny interrupted.

"Each house has a suite for a Head Boy and a Head Girl, but the suites only appear when the Head Boy or Girl is from that house," he explained. "The Head Girl's suites can't be used for meetings because the stairs turn into a slide if a boy goes up the girls' staircase, so they set up the Head Boy's Suites that way, but they were smart enough to build in snog detectors of some kind."

"Have you tried it yet?" Ginny asked curiously.

"No. No need," he said with a sigh. "Well, it's getting late. I'm going to head back, get some dinner and hit the books again."

"We'll come with you," Harry said, standing and offering his hand to Ginny. "I hadn't realized how late it was. N.E.W.T.s wait for no wizard!" As they walked up the tunnel, he wished Ron's friendship with Hermione hadn't been so badly damaged. They could certainly use her help in revising for those awful tests. He sighed, hefted the bag of leftover picnic goodies onto his back and climbed out of the humpbacked witch statue, glad he'd had such a nice break from studying, and wondering how many weeks it would be before he and Ginny could steal an afternoon together again.

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Chapter 11 – Resolutions

"Well, *that* was fun!" Tonks chuckled as she led Remus back into the bedroom Harry and Ginny had so carefully cleaned the previous school term. She kicked off her shoes and turned to Remus, grabbing the front of his shirt, pulling him toward the bed. "They've given us custody of this house. We should enjoy it while we can!"

"I feel a bit awkward about this," Remus said, looking around the room. "They've made a little nest for themselves." Although the Shack hadn't been a trysting place for Harry and his friends since last term, the bed linens were still clean due to an Everlasting Cleansing Charm Ginny had put on them. There was a small flagon full of dead wildflowers on the bedside table, apparently a leftover from someone's last visit there. Two small apples lay dried up and forgotten on the table by the boarded up window. The broken furniture had been repaired as well as teenagers with very little knowledge of construction could manage.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Shall we go, then?" she said, her normally merry eyes looking seriously into his.

"If you don't mind," he said apologetically. "This place has a lot of bad memories for me, but many good ones as well. James, Sirius, Peter and I spent a lot of time here when we weren't out running in the grounds." He sighed. "Hard to believe I'm the only one left."

"Surely you're not mourning Wormtail," she said, astonished. "He was about to murder you when Harry killed him!"

Remus shook his head slowly. "No, I'm not mourning him. It just saddens me that our friendship, the friendship among the four of us, ended the way it did. James murdered, Sirius unfairly jailed for twelve years, Peter turning traitor. . . and then when Sirius got out of jail, he had so little freedom, he fought the constraints on him constantly. For him to die the way he did, and in front of Harry. . . . But he and Harry loved each other. It was so good that they had some time together."

"You love Harry too," she reminded him. "And he loves you, Remus."

Remus smiled. "That's a blessing I'd never expected to have." He looked at her, his eyes crinkling in a smile. "As are you." He pulled her into his arms and held her close, then leaned down and kissed her. He chuckled as her tongue tickled his lips in a warm invitation he gladly accepted. Tonks was moaning by the time they came up for air.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay here?" she said huskily.

Remus bent to kiss her again, taking her breath away quite thoroughly once more. "Now, Miss Tonks, it's time we Apparated to your flat," he said in a husky voice. "This place holds happy memories for Harry now, and I won't impose on that."

"OK," she said with a grin. "Just checking." They stepped a few inches apart and disappeared from the Shrieking Shack, a place Remus never wanted to visit again, and never would.

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At breakfast a few days later, Ron left his place by Harry and Ginny to move to the Hufflepuff table when he saw Hermione come into the Great Hall. Harry and Ginny just shook their heads, sighed, and began eating as Ron settled into a seat by Susan and served himself his usual huge breakfast. Susan's eyes widened in surprise as she watched him eat, but she seemed glad to see him.

Hermione glanced over at Ron as she joined Harry and Ginny at the Gryffindor table. "Do you suppose he'll ever stop being angry with me?" she said sadly.

"Give him time, Hermione," Harry said bracingly.

"Yeah, he's a stubborn git," Ginny said casually, passing the bacon to Hermione.

"He can't help himself. He's a Weasley – stubbornness is part of their nature," Harry said, smirking in anticipation of Ginny's explosion.

"I am not stubborn!" she snapped, then saw the laughter in his eyes. "Well, yeah, I am, actually."

"And it's a good thing you are," he said, wrapping a long arm around her shoulders and giving her a little squeeze, "or you wouldn't have waited so long for me to stop being an idiot and finally ask you out!"

"You're not an idiot," she said primly, "merely a bit thick sometimes."

"Ah," he said, grinning at her. "Glad we cleared that up!"

Hermione smiled at them being so silly together and sighed, wishing Ron was there being silly with her.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione put seven knuts in the leg pouch of the owl delivering her copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Harry had given up his subscription again. He thought it was easier to just ask Hermione what the Death Eaters had been up to recently than to read all the bad news himself. He removed a letter from Hedwig's leg, skimmed it and smiled, then looked up when Hermione opened the paper, apparently finished with the first page.

"Well? Any news?" he said quietly.

"The Death Eaters killed two Muggle families in Dorset," she said, glancing at an article. "They seem to be killing people randomly these days, Muggles as often as wizards. That doesn't make any sense."

"Nor does it make any sense that Voldemort's been so quiet," Harry said ominously.

"But Harry," Ginny began, "he's blind! And he can't have magical eyes – you learned that this summer when Mr. Verre was killed. That's probably why he's not in the news. He can't aim spells properly if he can't see."

"He's probably busy working on some other way to regain his sight," Harry sighed. "I mean, if he could regenerate his entire body, there's no reason he couldn't regenerate eyes, is there?"

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He looked curiously at Hermione, who read so many different things all the time that she might actually know the answer to his question.

"I don't know, Harry," she replied. "I imagine it's possible, since he did make a new body and managed to stay alive for so long without one. He must be the best potions master ever."

"And he has Snape to help him," Ginny whispered, leaning closer to her friends and glancing toward the Head Table.

"Yeah, but Snape's been acting oddly lately, haven't you noticed?" Harry murmured, leaning toward the girls. "I mean, he gave Ron and me points for how we dealt with those ickle firsties!"

"Yeah, that was odd – for him. But any other teacher would have given you those points. Maybe Dumbledore has told him to be more fair to you – or maybe Remus has talked with him about it," Hermione suggested.

"I doubt it. Something's up with him, but I don't know what," Harry said darkly.

"I suppose we'll just have to wait and see what it is," Ginny said philosophically as she grabbed a last piece of toast.

"Yeah, and I'll just have to watch my back," Harry grumbled.

"As if you'd stopped," Ginny said, smiling up at him. "Besides, you have Hermione and me to help you watch your back. And a very fine back it is! Matches the rest of you rather well, actually."

"Have you been checking out my bum again?" he asked, acting insulted.

"Oh yeah!" Ginny said coquettishly. "Nicest arse I've ever seen riding a broom, sir."

"I could argue that point, you know," he said, bending down until their foreheads touched. "Some little redhead I know. . ."

"So who was your letter from?" Ginny asked him, suddenly remembering he'd gotten one. "Do you have a secret admirer?"

"Yup!" he said cheekily.

"Right. Who is it this time, Mrs. Figg?" she teased him.

"Nope!" He sat there with a grin on his face, watching curiosity and frustration chase each other across her pretty face. Finally, she sighed.

"All right, if that's how you want to be—"

"It's from Marcus Pomfrey, Miss Nosy," he said, tweaking her nose gently. "He said he really enjoyed our Quidditch game and hopes we can do it again sometime. He was away at a

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conference or he would have written sooner. Here, you can read it if you want. He said he wrote your parents too, to thank them for dinner."

"Oh, that was nice of him," she said as she read the letter. "He's such a sweet man. I'm surprised he isn't married."

"You're not going to start matchmaking for him, now, are you?" Harry said warily.

"Nope. I don't know any women the right age for him, now that Tonks is taken," Ginny said, looking thoughtful.

"Well, there's always Healer Greener," Harry said, referring to the pretty young woman who'd helped heal his scars early in the summer.

"Yeah, she'd be okay," Ginny said, smiling up at him. "You might make a good matchmaker yourself, sweetie!"

Harry held his hands up in surrender. "Nope! Not me! Leave me out of it!"

"You're so silly," she said, smiling at him.

"I live to make you smile," he said tenderly, his eyes soft and warm as he gazed at her.

Hermione sighed sadly, glanced at her watch and got to her feet. "You two have fun. I'm off to class."

"Hang on, Hermione, I'll be right there," Harry said, kissing Ginny quickly on the nose and grinning at you. "Later, sweets."

"Same to you," she said, grabbing her bag and turning to wait for Colin, who'd called to her to wait up. "Have a good day, Harry."

"You, too," he said over his shoulder as he jogged to the end of the hall to catch up with Hermione. They saw Ron trudging along ahead of them. When Ron glanced back and saw Harry was walking with Hermione, he frowned and walked faster.

"Hermione," Harry said as they followed their classmates toward their first class of the day, "do you have any idea how Voldemort could restore his eyes?"

"No, I don't," she replied. "I imagine it would be similar to whatever he did to restore his body, though."

"So he needs more of my blood for another potion?" Harry gasped, horrified at the thought.

"No!" Hermione said quickly. "I doubt that. For that potion to work, there would have to be variations of some kind so it will be specifically for eyes, you know? Or maybe he's working on a spell to conjure eyes. That would probably work, actually. Hmmm," she said, the gears in her brain quite obviously clicking into motion. "That sounds like a better possibility, quite honestly. Don't you think so?"

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He nodded. "Yeah, I imagine it would be easier to conjure them, or transfigure something else into them, maybe. What do you think?"

"Yes, transfiguring something is another good possibility. You've given me some things to think about. I'll start researching this afternoon."

"Thanks," Harry said gratefully. "I'd like to have an idea what he's up to so I can be better prepared next time we meet."

"I understand," she replied. "I have a lot to do for class, so it may take me a while, but I'll let you know what I find out."

A few weeks later, the Third Year and older students stood in line excitedly, waiting to be released for their first Hogsmeade weekend. Harry and Ginny were chatting with Ron and Susan, while privately wondering where Hermione was.

Back in the Common Room, Hermione sat in her corner surrounded by books, as usual. Neville walked over and sat next to her.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Hi, Neville," she said with a distracted smile.

"Not going to Hogsmeade?"

"I didn't feel like going," she said with a shrug.

"Me neither," he replied.

She turned and looked squarely at him. "Why not?"

"I broke up with Luna yesterday." He saw her look of concern and hurried on. "It went quite well, actually. Ginny was right, Luna was ready to move on, too. So we're still friends. I just don't feel like going to Hogsmeade alone. Everyone our age goes as couples, you know."

Hermione sighed, turning back to her books. "Yeah, I know."

Neville was quiet a moment. "That's why you're not going, isn't it? Because you'd have to go alone?"

She turned and studied his sweet, sincere face. "Yes. That's it exactly."

"So would you like to go with me?" he said hesitantly. "Not as a date or anything – I know you're waiting for Ron to wake up," he chuckled, "but as friends?"

Hermione smiled. "You're so sweet, Neville. Are you sure you want to go with me?"

"Yes. I'd enjoy that, if you wouldn't mind going with me," he said shyly.

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She sat looking at him for a moment longer, then closed her book decisively. "I'd love to go with you, Neville. Thanks for asking. Just let me put my things away."

A short time later, they were following the crowd of happily chattering students on their way to a fun afternoon in the village.

"Well, would you look at that?" Ginny murmured, tugging at Harry's sleeve. "Look who's here together," she whispered as he bent his ear to her.

Harry followed her gaze and saw Hermione and Neville walking together perusing the display in Dervish & Banges window.

"Good for them," he said with a smile. "I didn't like the idea of Hermione staying at school, but she simply refused to come when I asked her."

"Same here," Ginny confirmed. "You don't suppose they like each other, do you?"

"Dunno." He gazed down at his girlfriend, amusement lighting his eyes. "Are they messing up your matchmaking plans?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "No, I don't think so. They're all old enough to be able to work these things out for themselves. We'll just have to hope they work them out the right way."

As their paths crossed, Harry said, "Oy, Neville, Hermione! Having fun?"

Hermione smiled at them, but her smile didn't reach her sad brown eyes. *Nope, she's still in love with Ron*, Ginny thought as she noticed this.

"What are you two up to today?" Hermione asked.

"Just wandering through town," Ginny said. "Nothing special in mind. But we're going to the Three Broomsticks at three o'clock. D'you want to meet us there?"

"What's at three o'clock?" Neville said.

"That's when Ron and Susan asked us to meet them," Harry said honestly, not wanting Neville to be caught by surprise.

Neville's eyes lit up. "Susan's really nice," he said. "She likes Herbology a lot. We've studied together in the library before."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, finding this statement of Neville's to be another "interesting development."

"You're welcome to join us if you want to," Harry said warmly.

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Ginny could see Hermione hesitating. "Hermione, you and Ron are going to have to work out how to be friends again anyway. Why not join us? Come a bit after three so we'll all be there already. We'll make sure we get a big table. OK?"

"OK," Hermione said carefully. "If you're sure you don't mind."

"You're our best friend," Ginny insisted, "and we enjoy your company too, Neville. We'd love to have you."

Hermione glanced from Ginny's face to Harry's. He was giving Ginny a completely besotted look at the moment. Hermione smiled sadly, remembering when Ron had looked at her that way, as if she were the most beautiful girl in the world and could do absolutely no wrong in his eyes. Would he ever look at her that way again? She was beginning to lose hope, but Ginny and Harry were offering her a chance to meet Ron on neutral ground. "OK. See you then. Thanks," she said finally.

"Oh, Hermione," Ginny said suddenly, "have you seen this new shop? They have the sweetest things." She grabbed her friend's hand and pulled her into a shop nearby, glancing over her shoulder at the boys. "You don't mind, do you, Harry? Neville?"

"We'll be happy to wait for you out here," Harry said, knowing from the frilly pink exterior of the shop that he'd be quite uncomfortable in there.

"Yeah, that's fine," Neville added.

"We might be a while," Ginny warned, giving her boyfriend a cheeky grin.

"In that case, we'll be in the Quidditch shop," Harry said waving to the girls. "Come and find us there when you're finished, all right?" He grinned at them as they went into the shop, Ginny with a devilish "I have a plan" look on her face, Hermione being dragged along not completely unwillingly.

"C'mon, Neville. Let's go and do manly stuff," Harry said with a grin.

Neville gazed at the shop the girls had entered, a look of relief on his face. "Yeah! I was afraid they were going to drag us in there with them!" he said with a chuckle.

Half an hour later, the girls rejoined them, both of them smiling. Hermione had her hair in a new style with one side of her curly mane gathered above her ear with a beautiful hair clip. Ginny sported a new ribbon in her hair, which she was wearing as a headband.

"Don't you look pretty," Harry said appreciatively, "both of you!"

"Yeah," Neville said, smiling at the girls. "That's a pretty clip, Hermione. I like your hair like that."

Hermione blushed. "Thanks," she said quietly.

Ginny wrapped her arms around Harry's slim waist and looked up at him, looking quite pleased with herself, her eyes sparkling. "Thank you, Mr. Potter, sir!"

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Harry embraced her and leaned his cheek on her hair for a moment, then straightened abruptly. "What a minute. What's that scent? Please don't tell me you've put on more girly potions that will poison me!" he said cautiously.

"That scent, sir, is my new shampoo Mum sent me. Nothing from any shop here. We were careful to stay away from potions," she assured him.

"Oh, OK. I like it," he said, smiling at her, relieved she and Hermione were being more careful than they'd been last term. Wearing a Glamour Charm to conceal her identity, Bellatrix Lestrange had run The Ladies' Shop last year; several potions the girls had purchased from her had been poisons and had nearly killed Harry several times last term.

"I need to go to the stationers," Hermione told Ginny and Harry. "Do you want to come?"

"No, that's OK. We'll catch you up later," Harry said, gently tugging on Ginny's hair so she wouldn't agree right away. "We have other things to do."

"All right, then. See you a bit after three," Hermione said, waving as she and Neville walked down the street.

"What other things do we have to do?" Ginny said, looking up at him expectantly.

"We have some snogging to do, that's what. Come on," he said, grinning at her as she gladly took his hand and followed him down the street and out of town. He led her to the stile where Sirius had met them in the past, then up the hill to the entrance of the cave. He'd told Ginny about this place but had never taken her there. As they neared the entrance, they lit their wands and looked around.

"Uh-oh," Harry said when he saw lots of eyes reflecting the light of their wands. "Back away, Gin."

"What are they?" she asked nervously.

"Some kind of animal – I can only see the glow of their eyes. They must have made this cave their den," he said as he pulled her away.

"Are there babies in there? I want to see!" she said, leaning around the outcropping of rock for one last glimpse of numerous bright eyes staring back at her.

"Come on, we don't need to bother them," Harry said, pulling a reluctant Ginny away.

"I wish we could have seen what they were. Maybe they were foxes! I just love foxes – as long as they stay away from our chickens!" she said, skipping along happily beside him. "Thanks for showing me the cave, Harry!"

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said, grinning at her irrepressible spirit.

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"It's so pretty out here," she said, enjoying the rolling hills and the nearby forest still cloaked in multicoloured leaves. They were nearly at the stile now, the village in view just down the hill a bit.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I take you to all the best places, don't I?" he said with a chuckle, wishing she could Apparate so he really could take her to special places.

"You do, sir, you most certainly do," she said, turning to face him and sliding her arms up around his neck. She pulled him down into a playful kiss, and before long, they were lying in the sun-drenched meadow, rolling down the hill just for the fun of it, teasing and tickling each other like little children.

"You are so silly," Harry told her, flipping her onto her back and gnawing on the upturned tip of her freckled nose.

Ginny laughed and nipped his chin. "Got your dimple, sir."

"And you can have it, fair lady, and anything else you want," he said, suddenly serious. He leaned down and brushed her lips ever so lightly again and again, then finally pressed his lips to hers seriously, his tongue happily sliding into her welcoming mouth. They kissed until both of them were moaning. Harry sat up reluctantly, earning a frown and a groan from Ginny.

"What?" she asked, pouting prettily.

He grinned at her. "You're incorrigible, you are," he said, pulling her to her feet.

"Why do you say that?"

"You'd be willing to have your wicked way with me out here on the side of the hill? Need I remind you we can be seen from the village?" he said with a chuckle, nodding toward Hogsmeade.

Ginny blushed royally. "I hadn't realized," she said, giggling.

"That's what I thought," he said, picking bits of grass out of her hair and brushing off her cloak. "A roll in the grass is one thing, but we were, um—"

"Yeah," she said with a huge grin. "We were! We'll just have to save it for some other time and place."

"Yeah," he said, leaning his forehead against hers. "I love you, you know."

"I knew that, but it's good of you to remind me," she teased. "I love you too, Harry."

Hand in hand, they headed back to the village, wandering from shop to shop until it was nearly three o'clock. They went to the Three Broomsticks and sat at a big round table, waiting for their friends to arrive.

Ron and Susan entered in a few minutes. "Oy, Harry! You think this table is big enough?" Ron teased.

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"It was empty," Harry said with a shrug. "I'll go and get our butterbeers." He soon returned with four bottles in hand.

"What have you two been up to this afternoon?" Ginny asked.

Susan responded, "We spent a good bit of time in the Quidditch shop, actually." She looked tolerantly at Ron. "Then we went to Dervish and Banges for a little while, then on to Zonko's, Honeydukes and, of course, the twins' shop."

Harry looked at Ron, wondering if Susan had actually enjoyed going to Ron's favourite places or not. Ron looked happy enough. Susan just looked. . .patient? He glanced at Ginny, wishing he could read her mind just now. He'd love to know what she was thinking.

Ron took her to all his favourite places, but Dervish and Banges isn't on his list of favourites. That must have been her idea, Ginny thought, studying the faces of the couple across from her. "Did you buy anything interesting?"

Ron picked up two big bags he'd dropped by his feet. "The twins are selling some of the stuff we were developing this summer, Harry," he said excitedly. "I got a load of samples. I'm going to take orders at school."

"Cool! Which ones?" Harry said, glad to see Ron so happy.

"Well, the Butterfly Bonbons, of course, and the Never-ending Whoopie Cushions, the Fantastic Fart Machines, the Fake Dragon Poo, Everlasting Mud, the Blast-Ended Whistles, and Duck Tape," Ron said. "Zonko's has some new things as well, but nothing as wild as the twins are making. Their shop was packed!"

"Having two shops is good for business, then?" Harry said with a grin. "Are they making things here as well, or just selling? We haven't made it to their shop yet."

"Oh yeah, it's great for business. George is here today, and he was telling me about it. They've got a good-sized sales staff here, but they're still doing all the manufacturing at their workshop in Diagon Alley. Sales are good in both locations."

"I'm glad to hear that," Harry said, sincerely.

"Hi, guys!" Neville said, approaching their table from behind Ron, walking ahead of Hermione. "Mind if we join you?"

"Nah, come on!" Harry said with a grin. "Having a good time today?"

"Yeah, brilliant," Neville said, helping Hermione into her chair, then sitting close beside her and resting his arm on the back of her chair.

Harry glanced at Ron, whose ears had suddenly turned pink.

"We were just in the twins' shop," Hermione said cheerfully. "The things they're selling now! Amazing."

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"Ron and I helped develop some of the new stuff," Harry said with a grin. "It was a blast working for them, sometimes quite literally! When we were creating those Blast-Ended Whistles," he turned to Ron, laughing, and prodded him with his elbow, "remember? We nearly blew up the whole shop that time!"

Ron's whole face turned red. "Well, yeah. I added the ingredients in the wrong order and when Harry tried to cap it—"

"I was lucky it didn't blow my hand off," Harry said with a smirk. "That was when we'd first started working for them, and hadn't sorted out the best way to do things." He and Ron exchanged a glance and then both of them laughed out loud.

"What?" Ginny prompted. "We'd like to laugh too, you know!"

"The twins let us make a few mistakes – well, actually, they tested things on us without warning at first," Harry said, "so once my hair ended up a nice shade of purple. They left me like that for a couple of hours before they gave me the antidote. Ron and I hexed them just a little bit so they left off playing practical jokes on us after that."

The conversation rolled on fitfully, Ron not talking much and spending far too much time staring at Neville's arm behind Hermione's back. When Neville put his hand on Hermione's shoulder, she jumped a bit in surprise, but turned and smiled at him. Ron's face reddened at the sight.

"What's wrong, Ron?" Susan asked him, studying his face curiously. "You look upset."

"Nothing," he growled, starting to get up. "Let's go."

"I haven't finished my butterbeer," she protested. "And I'm enjoying being with your friends. Can't we stay?"

Ron ground his teeth but sat back down.

Remus and Tonks came into the pub hand in hand, and strolled over to their table.

"Hi!" Tonks said cheerfully, pulling up a chair between Ginny and Hermione. "Having a good time today?"

"Yeah!" Ginny said, smiling at the young woman.

"Pull up a chair, Remus," Harry said, pulling his and Ginny's chairs over to make room for his godfather.

"We don't want to gatecrash," Remus said with a smile.

"Yes, we do!" Tonks said cheekily.

"All right, then, I suppose we do," Remus said, chuckling as he pulled a chair up between Ginny and Tonks.

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"What are you two up to?" Hermione asked.

Tonks held out her left hand. "Remus bought me a present," she said, her eyes dancing. Remus ducked his head, trying to hide his blush.

"Let's see!" the girls all said, leaning over to look at Tonks's engagement ring.

"Took you long enough," Harry teased his godfather.

"I picked out several and let her choose which one she liked best," Remus confided. "I wanted to be sure she liked it."

"That sounds like a good idea," Harry said, knowing Tonks and Remus had much different taste in many things.

"OOoooooo, it's beautiful!" Ginny said, pulling Tonks's hand over so Harry and Ron could see the ring as well. It was a pretty thing, a ruby with a small diamond on each side, in a lacy gold setting.

"That is pretty," Harry agreed, then turned to his godfather and murmured, "She picked that one out?"

"Yes."

"I would never have guessed she'd want such a . . . a . . ." Harry was at a loss for words.

"A girly one?" Remus said, understanding exactly what Harry meant.

"Yeah! I thought she'd want something more. . . unusual. It's beautiful," Harry said, smiling at his godfather.

"I went to your jeweller friend, Mr. Joyero. He's very nice, gave me a good price on it and put some protections on it for me, as well," Remus said. "Thanks for telling me about him."

"He's great, isn't he?" Harry agreed. He glanced around the table. The girls were all busily chatting about Tonks's ring and the wedding plans. The guys were all leaning back in their chairs, watching the girls in amusement. All but Ron. He kept watching Hermione, who looked very pretty with her hair held back in that clip and her cheeks pink with excitement. When the girls' chatter settled down, they all sat back in their chairs again. Harry kept watching Ron and noticed the tension in his eyes and mouth as Neville's arm came around Hermione's shoulders once more.

Apparently, Susan noticed the same thing, as well as Ron's reaction to it. She pushed her chair back and said, "I'm ready to go now."

"I thought you wanted to stay?" Ron said in surprise.

"We've stayed long enough," she said, waving at the group as she started toward the door.

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"I guess we'll see you later," Ron told Harry and Ginny with a shrug. "Bye Remus, Tonks," he added, then glanced at Hermione and Neville and grunted, "See ya," as he turned away.

Hermione and Ginny stared at each other as Ron left the pub, and then Hermione burst into giggles, leaning into Neville and smiling up at him appreciatively.

"You're great, Neville," she said. She sat back and looked into his eyes seriously. "That was part of the plan, right?"

Neville grinned. "Yeah," he admitted shyly. "Looks like it worked, too."

"Anyone care to let me in on this plan?" Harry said, his eyebrows raised in question.

"Neville acted as if he and I are a couple to see if Ron still cared about me," Hermione explained. "It looks as if he does!"

"Yeah, and Susan wasn't too happy about it," Harry said, sorry the girl's feelings were being hurt.

"She comes and sits with me in the library a lot," Neville said, blushing madly. "I like her. I think she likes me a bit, as well."

"Really? Well, that might solve all kinds of problems," Harry said with a smile. "If we can get Ron to get past his anger, maybe everyone can be friends again."

"Yeah, but how do we do that?" Ginny said, sighing in frustration.

"No idea," Harry said sadly.

During their break after lunch early the next week, Harry went looking for Ron so they could study together. He finally found him sitting on the stairs up to the Head Boy Suite, his elbows on his knees, his chin on his crossed wrists, his face glum.

"What's up, mate?" Harry asked, sitting next to him.

"Susan's decided we've seen enough of each other," Ron replied.

"She broke up with you?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry," Harry said sincerely. Ron had just started looking happier, and here he was in a deep blue funk again.

"Yeah." They sat quietly for a while, then Ron asked, "How long have Hermione and Neville been together?"

"Dunno," Harry replied. "I think Saturday was the first time they actually went out together."

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"I like Neville. I should warn him about her."

Harry was amazed. "Warn him? Why?"

"She'll just break his heart. It's what she does," Ron said bitterly.

"She's not really like that, mate. You've just never talked to her about what happened," Harry said, trying to smooth things over between his friends.

"I have no interest in talking to her," Ron snarled.

Harry snorted. "You could have fooled me, mate. You were looking daggers at her the other day. You don't do that to someone you don't care about."

Ron just growled in reply.

"Why don't you at least try talking to her?" Harry prompted.

"No. I'll talk to her about Head Boy stuff, but that's all," Ron snapped.

Harry shrugged. "OK, if that's the way you want it." He patted Ron on the shoulder and left him to sulk alone, since that's what he apparently wanted to do.

"Harry?" Hermione said as she came into the Common Room late in the evening a few days later. When Ron saw her coming, he slammed his book closed, gathered up his things and left the table.

"You don't have to—" Hermione began.

"Ron, wait—" Harry said at the same moment.

"I'll be in the suite when you want to get back to working on this," Ron told Harry darkly, then disappeared up the stairs.

Hermione watched him go, her heart in her eyes. Finally, she turned back to Harry. "I'm sorry," she said glumly.

"It isn't your fault, not anymore," Harry said. "He's just being a stubborn git. He needs to get over what happened and at least try to be friends again."

"He doesn't want to," she sighed, looking despondently at the boys' staircase.

Harry decided ignoring the problem of Ron and Hermione was the best thing to do at the moment. "Come on, sit down. You're late coming in. Where've you been?" he asked, being determinedly cheerful as he pulled out the chair next to him for her.

"Thanks," she said, sitting down and opening her bag, pulling out a huge sheaf of notes. She offered it to Harry. "I've been in the library again. These are my notes on what I found, but I don't think they'll be any help to you. I've researched everything I can think of. I've even

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talked with Professor McGonagall about the transfiguration idea. I haven't found any way Voldemort could make himself new eyes that would actually work."

"Really? Huh. Then I wonder what he's doing?" Harry said, leafing through her notes as his mind went over every idea he'd had about how Voldemort could regain his sight. "I can't imagine him giving up on regaining his sight. He's too stubborn, too cocky, too confident that he's the greatest wizard of all time and can do whatever he damned well pleases. He won't quit until he's succeeded. I think that's why he's been so quiet and the Death Eaters are just attacking randomly, rather than with some kind of plan. He's concentrating on other things than the Death Eaters right now, and what else would he concentrate on, given his condition, but his sight?"

She shook her head, having no more answers than Harry did.

"I've been trying to think of ways he could do it other than transfiguration, conjuring or a potion, but I'm completely stumped," Harry said, raking his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"Yeah, me too," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Thanks for trying," he said sincerely.

Late in the week, Neville set his things on the table in Greenhouse Three where Susan was unpacking her bag. "Want to work together today?" he asked timidly. He, like everyone else in Gryffindor, knew Ron and Susan were no longer together.

Susan smiled at him brightly. "Yeah. I'd like that," she said.

Neville grinned and began unpacking his bag to get ready for class. "Professor Sprout told me we were going to start working with Spitting Daisies today."

"Really? Cool. What do you know about them?" Susan said, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at the gangly boy with the sweet eyes and shy smile.

Hermione came into the greenhouse and saw Neville was sharing a work table with Susan. Harry was with Ron, Parvati and Lavender were sharing, Dean was with a girl from Hufflepuff, all the other Hufflepuffs were paired up as well. She looked a bit lost standing in the doorway.

"Ron? I'm going to invite Hermione to work with us," Harry said.

Ron looked a bit rebellious, then shrugged. "Whatever."

"Hermione! Over here," Harry called.

She hesitated until Harry waved at her madly, then slowly walked to their work station. "Do you mind, Ron?"

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"No. Professor Sprout says we need partners to do this work, so you can't work alone," he admitted.

"Thanks," she said, setting her things much closer to Harry than to Ron.

"All right, class, let's pay attention, please!" Professor Sprout began. "You will need your full face shields, dragon hide lab robes and your dragon hide gloves. Spitting Daisies can spit up to three feet. The juice they spit can burn you, which is why you're wearing face shields, lab robes and gloves. The Spitting Daisy's leaves are good for poultices used to treat lung disorders. The poultice generates heat that is comforting to the patient, as well as fumes that open the lungs and airways. We'll be re-potting these plants today. Here's the procedure." She gave directions as she and two students passed out plants to each work station. "You must work with at least one partner. One person must hold the plant while the other removes the pot and trims the roots. In the case of the larger plants, it may take two people to pull the pot off of the roots, so Potter, Weasley, Granger, since there are three at your table, you will work with the larger plants. It would be best if you boys hold the plant once the pot is removed, one the top of the plant, the other each root as Miss Granger tries to trim the roots. The plants will fight you, even the smallest ones, trying to stay in their pots and to avoid being pruned. Do your best not to damage the leaves of the plant, nor the flowers. The flowers also have medicinal purposes which we'll get into in our next lesson."

The three of them managed to work well together after some initial tension. Harry made it a point to talk to Ron and Hermione equally, to try to say silly things, to try to engage them in conversation. He managed better than he'd hoped, with Ron actually joining in the conversation almost naturally every so often, which was a huge improvement over his behaviour to this point this term. Dealing with the plants led to some laughter among them as well, especially when one plant waved a thick leaf hard enough to flip up Harry's face shield and smack him on the nose.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing his nose with his gloved hand as he pushed his shield back down. "That hurt!"

"Oh dear, Harry – don't rub it! It got some juice on you!" Hermione said, sounding worried.

"Not that spit juice!" Harry said, horrified.

Ron was trying not to laugh. "Looks like it, mate. Your nose is starting to look like Winky's."

Sure enough, Harry's nose was swelling to tomato-like proportions, much like Winky's. In seconds, it was so large, it was pushing the face shield away from his face.

"Hurry and finish, Hermione, so we can let go of it," Harry urged.

"Professor!" Hermione called, trimming roots as quickly as she could, "Harry's got some of that sap on his nose."

"Oh, bad show, Potter, bad show, that," Professor Sprout said, tutting as she looked at his nose which was now huge, round, red with yellow blotches. "Hospital wing as soon as that plant's finished, Potter. You can't let go of it until it's done. Don't worry, it won't kill you. It will just be uncomfortable until you get it treated."

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Harry sighed. "Yes, Professor."

Ron looked at Harry and grinned madly.

"What?" Harry said, his voice sounding oddly hollow with his nose so swollen.

"You look like a poisonous mushroom now, all red with polka dots," Ron sniggered, then laughed out loud. "Sorry!"

"Thanks, Ron," Harry replied acerbically, then laughed himself when he saw his reflection in the greenhouse walls. "I hope Madam Pomfrey can cure this quickly."

"She'll have you fixed up in a trice," Professor Sprout assured him, having overheard his comment.

"Great. What's a 'trice?'" Harry said, acting grumpy, but grinning. Ron hadn't laughed so hard in months. It was worth a painfully burned nose if it made his friend guffaw like that.

"OK, all done," Hermione announced. "Stuff it in the pot."

The boys and Hermione finished re-potting the ill-tempered plant and then Hermione cleaned up their station with a quick cleansing charm.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said, packing his bag and heading for the door.

"Granger, Weasley, go with him," Professor Sprout called across the greenhouse. "Make sure he goes straight to the hospital wing and gets his treatment."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said, putting her arm through Harry's and hurrying him along.

"Yeah, c'mon, mate, let's get you taken care of before someone sees you like that," Ron said, chuckling again as he grabbed Harry's other arm and practically dragged him into the castle. They were all laughing by the time they got to the castle door, although Harry winced whenever he laughed too much.

A short time later, Harry was standing in front of a mirror, happy to see his own thin, slightly arched nose on his face again. Ron and Hermione stood smiling behind him. It almost seemed like old times, the three of them sharing laughter and fun. He turned to face them. "Well, that's an experience I don't want to repeat," he chuckled.

"Yeah, you've got to watch out for plants that want to fight back," Ron sniggered. He heard Hermione chuckle and looked at her for a moment with an open, friendly smile, but it soon faded and was replaced by the guarded, tense expression he normally wore around her now.

Harry sighed, seeing the happy light go out of Hermione's face and her shoulders sag as she turned to pick up her bag.

"See you later," she said, walking toward the door.

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"Thanks, Hermione," Harry called after her. *This has gone on long enough*, he thought, and decided tonight was the time to put his plan into action.

At dinner that evening, Harry leaned over and whispered in Ginny's ear, "Tonight's the night."

She looked up at him, startled. "Are you sure?"

"Now or never," he said seriously. "Is it ready?"

"Yes," she murmured. "I hope it works."

"Me too."

When they got back to the Common Room, Ginny ran up to her room for a few minutes, then came back down with her hand in her pocket. She sidled over to Harry, who was standing at the window watching bats chasing bugs in the evening light, and slipped her hand into his. He smiled down at her and closed his hand around the two small, sealed vials she was passing him, then put them in his pocket.

"You are both beautiful and brilliant," he murmured, leaning down to kiss her briefly.

"Where's Hermione?"

"She went to her suite to study," Ginny replied.

"OK. The game's afoot!" he said softly, giving her shoulder an affectionate squeeze before walking toward his best mate and calling, "Oy, Ron? Can we work in your room? I'm having trouble with the star chart and need to spread some stuff out."

"Yeah, go ahead, Harry," Ron said absently, having just opened a book to begin his homework.

"Erm. . .can you come help me?" Harry asked hopefully.

"OK, sure," Ron said, packing his books up and following Harry up the stairs. "I think you just like the suite," he teased.

"Yeah, that's a big part of it," Harry agreed, laughing as he ran up the stairs.

When they got to the suite, Ron cleared off his worktable and he and Harry spread out the star charts they were making for Astronomy. They were supposed to be projecting the location of the various planets and stars five, twelve and eighteen years in the future, to make sure they had a thorough grounding in their calculations of astral movements.

"So where's the problem, Harry?" Ron asked as they bent over the chart.

"This area. I keep getting Neptune's moons messed up in my projections," Harry said. He actually understood what he was supposed to be doing, but it was the first "help me with my homework" thing he could think of at the moment.

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Just then, there was a knock on the door. "I'll get it," Harry offered. He opened the door to find Hermione standing there uncertainly. "Hi. Come in," he invited.

Ron turned to see who it was, his welcoming face hardening when he saw it was Hermione. "What do you want?"

"Ginny told me you needed to see me," Hermione said, confused.

"I never. . . ." He turned to his best mate and snarled, "What are you up to, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath. He'd thought a lot about what he would say when this time came. He crossed his fingers, hoping that what he was about to do wouldn't make matters worse.

"I'm tired of us not getting on. You two need to clear the air for us to be friends. If you don't want to be boyfriend and girlfriend anymore, that's fine, but a lot of friendships have been damaged by you two not speaking to each other."

"Nothing she has to say interests me," Ron snapped.

Hermione stood silent and big-eyed, not knowing what to do next.

"Here's what we're going to do. I've brought a dose of the Draught of Peace for each of you. Once you've taken it, you won't lose your tempers for a while and will be able to talk sensibly. It also has a little bit of Veritaserum in it so you have to be honest with each other. I'm going to do a strong Cheering Charm on each of you—"

"Like hell you will," Ron snarled, his face flaming red with temper.

"Don't make me Stun you, Ron. This has to be done or we'll be miserable the whole term. I don't care if you become boyfriend and girlfriend again or not – well, I do care, but it's not my choice, it's yours. But you have to clear the air," Harry insisted.

"As I was saying before you so very rudely interrupted me, I'll give you this potion, and then, once I'm sure you won't kill each other – oh, by the way, *Accio wands*," he said, catching their wands neatly when they flew to him.

Both of his friends started to object, but Harry spoke over their objections. "WHEN I'M SURE YOU WON'T KILL EACH OTHER," he repeated, shouting until they quietened down, "I'll leave you alone to sort out your differences. Ron, Hermione needs to tell you what happened this summer. You need to listen. You two need to discuss how you really feel about each other. And hopefully, you need to at least become friends again – if that's possible."

He did a Cheering Charm on each of them despite Ron's protests, then handed each of them a flagon. "The potion is a good one – Ginny made it." He waited for a moment, glaring at Ron's more cheerful but still rebellious face, then snapped, "Drink it!" Once they took the potion, he stood there waiting a few minutes to let it take effect. When Ron's face visibly softened, Harry said, "All right. I'm going to leave you two alone. Try your best to work out your differences, all right?"

"K," Ron said amiably, looking relaxed and happy.

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"All right," Hermione said, a dreamy look on her face as she gazed at Ron.

His fingers tightly crossed, Harry left the suite and closed the door behind him. Just outside the door, Ginny stood with an Extendable Ear in her outstretched hand, the other already installed in her ear.

"You think of everything, don't you?" he said in admiration, sitting beside her on the top step and shoving the ends of the Extendable Ears under the door.

"I learned a lot from the twins," she said with a smile. She scooted over next to Harry and leaned her head comfortably on his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her back.

"And now we wait," he said with a sigh.

"And now we wait," she agreed, giving him a hopeful smile and showing him her crossed fingers.

Inside the Head Boy Suite, Ron and Hermione stood looking at each other, neither knowing quite what to say. Finally, Hermione broke the silence.

"I had no idea Harry was that devious," she said, a smile tickling the corners of her mouth. "It must be Ginny's influence."

"Devious?"

"Tricking us into being together and having potions ready to keep us from arguing," she said, her smile actually breaking free now.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah. I didn't know he had it in him," he agreed. He smiled at her. "Would you like to sit down?" he said, offering her his best armchair.

"Thanks," she said, smiling at him sweetly.

"All right. Harry says you have something to tell me," Ron said, giving her all his attention.

"Yes, I do," she said quietly. "I love you, Ron. I always have. I always will. I messed up badly this summer, and I want to explain that to you as well as I can. But I want you to know I love you. I've missed you so much."

Ron seemed to be struggling with himself a bit, but the mild dose of Veritaserum kicked in despite his objections. "I love you too. It nearly killed me when I got your letter. I went out and got drunk. Scared Harry to death. He called my dad to come look after me."

"You got drunk?"

"Yup. First and last time I'll drink Ogden's Old Firewhisky," he replied seriously. "I swore off hard alcohol and girls both when I woke up, but then I decided swearing off girls wasn't in my best interests, so I started trying to find girls to go out with. I was a real prat for a long time. Harry could tell you. I was so numb, I didn't really know what I was doing half the time. He had to keep covering up for me at work. I was messing up everything I did, especially when it

came to girls. I think I made every girl on Diagon Alley angry with me at some point during the summer."

"I'm glad you swore off the firewhisky, anyway," she said sincerely. "I'm so sorry for what I did, all the things I said in that letter." She shook her head sadly. "It all started when my parents decided it wasn't safe for me to be part of the wizarding world anymore. . . ." She went on to tell him about the many fights she'd had with her parents, how they'd pushed her and Lorenzo together, knowing Lorenzo had many qualities that would appeal to her, as well as being a handsome young man with tremendous charm.

"Hermione, I honestly don't want to hear how handsome and charming he is," Ron said uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry. This Veritaserum is making me say more than I normally would," she said softly. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You already did," he said soberly. "I thought I was going to die."

"Veritaserum?"

"Yes. I wasn't going to say that," he admitted. He leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. He didn't want to look at her anymore.

She reached toward him, laying her hand on the back of his head, stroking his hair softly. "I've missed you so much," she murmured. "I didn't love Lorenzo. I think I needed to grow up a bit before getting so serious with you, and I did that this summer. And I'm ready to be serious with you now, if you'll have me back."

"How serious?" he said, lifting his head and eyeing her suspiciously. The Draught of Peace was beginning to wear off.

"As serious as you want, Ron," she said simply. "I love you." She sat back in her chair again. "I haven't finished explaining things to you. I should finish so it's all out in the open."

He sat up, his face stoic, braced to hear the worst. "Go on."

"Do you remember how you felt when you saw Fleur Delacour the first time?"

He made a disgusted sound, embarrassed by the memory. "She's part Veela. Are you saying this bloke is part Veela?" He looked sceptical.

"No. He's a Muggle, actually. But he had that effect on me. It shocked me – a grown man thought I was pretty, interesting, all that. He swept me off my feet at first. I'd never known anyone like him. He was like one of those men in the romance novels the girls pass around the dormitories." Hermione shook her head, shocked at her own behaviour.

"I don't think I want to hear that either," he grumbled. "And you are pretty. I've told you that often enough, haven't I?"

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"Please, Ron, please just let me explain," she begged. She waited for him to respond, but he remained quiet. "Ginny should've made stronger doses of the potion," she muttered, gazing at his increasingly stubborn face.

"I can bring in another dose if you need it," Ginny called through the door, evoking a startled laugh out of Hermione and a growl from Ron.

"Are you going to listen to me, or is Ginny going to have to dose you again?" Hermione asked with a sad smile.

Ron sighed and sat back in his chair again. "Go on."

"My parents were pressuring me to go to a Muggle school, to go out with Muggle guys. I told them my school credits wouldn't transfer from a magical school to a Muggle one, but they didn't care. Going out with Lorenzo was one way to get them to give me some space," she admitted. "But – the Veritaserum is still working a bit for me. Is it for you?"

"A bit."

"So believe what I'm saying is the truth, Ron. I was . . . erm. . . a bit frightened of how serious you and I were getting. I want an education. I want to travel. And suddenly I was afraid I'd be locked in a house full of redheaded babies the rest of my life." Tears streamed down her face. "Not that I have anything at all against redheaded babies – I love babies, and want to have them eventually, but I'm too young to think about things like that. It scared me. I love you, Ron, I really do, but I was afraid of where we were going. I wanted to experience life. . . I'm not explaining this well."

"You thought you were going to be tied to a sink and kept pregnant all the time?" he snapped. "You should know me better than that. I know you want an education, a career, and to travel. I wouldn't stop you from any of those things. I would've helped you, gone with you. . . ." His voice faded and his face, which had become soft and vulnerable for a moment while he was speaking, hardened defensively again.

"Yes, you're right," she said miserably. "I do know you better than that, really, I do. I just. . . ."

"You wanted to go out with more guys than just me and Viktor Krum, is that it?"

She looked at him, her eyes bleak. "Something like that, yes. And you'd never gone out with anyone but me. I was afraid that one day you'd regret not going out with more girls, that you wouldn't be satisfied with me anymore. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I've gone out with loads of girls now," he said, his eyes sad. "Most of them think I'm a complete prat. Susan was the first one who went out with me more than once, the only one who made me smile at all since I got your letter."

"I know. I was glad to see you smile again, Ron, I really was. I was sorry that I wasn't the one making you smile, but I was glad to see you looking happy again." She sniffled. "And I don't think you're a prat."

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"I need to know something. . .I think," he said uneasily.

"What?" she said, equally nervous.

"Did you. . .erm. . .did you two. . .um." He stopped, unable to continue, blushing furiously and looking angry with himself.

"You want to know how far we went?" she asked. He nodded. "He never did more than kiss me goodnight, and even that wasn't passionate," she said quietly. "I thought he was being a gentleman, just taking things slowly, but he really just wanted to be friends, I guess."

"For the record, Susan and I didn't do much more than that either. There was some snogging, but nothing else," he admitted. She nodded and gave him a grateful look. Ron nodded, then dropped his eyes and sat studying his hands for several long, quiet minutes, before saying, "Are you still scared of being serious with me?"

She gazed at him with hope in her eyes for the first time in ages. "No. I know my own heart now."

"And what does it say?" he said cautiously.

"That I was a complete fool for throwing away the best thing that ever happened to me," she said quietly.

"So you're sorry you went out with this bloke?" he asked slowly.

"Well, yes and no."

He frowned at her, confused. "What does that mean?"

"It means that going out with him showed me how much I care about you," she said simply. "I was infatuated with him for a little while, yes, but then I woke up and realized he wasn't what I really wanted. I was always comparing him with you in my mind, and he kept coming off second best. You're the one I love. You're the one I dream about. You're the one who makes me laugh. You're the one I wish was there to comfort me when I have bad dreams. You're the one whose voice I listen for in the corridors, in the Great Hall, in the Common Room. I love the sound of your voice. I love the colour of your hair, and your beautiful blue eyes. I love your loyalty, your honesty, your courage, your impulsive nature." She reached out gingerly and took his big hands in her small ones, turning them over and caressing the callused palms with her thumbs. "I love your Quidditch calluses. I love your broad shoulders, how tall you are, how you make me feel so dainty and small and protected. I love your freckles. I love the way you make me feel when you hold me. I love when you take my breath away, when you make me dizzy with kisses." She knelt in front of him, looking up into his eyes. "I cannot tell you how many ways I love you, Ron." She swallowed hard, then continued. "We made vows to each other last year. Do you remember?" He nodded. "I said, '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.' I'll go up to the Owlry right now and crawl through the droppings there if it will help. I can't tell you how terribly sorry I am that I hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?"

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Ron was silent for several minutes before replying. "Do you need to go out with more blokes? Or can you be satisfied with me?"

"I only want you, Ron," she said, rising on her knees so they were face to face. "Please, please forgive me."

He sat gazing into her serious brown eyes a long time, then studied her face. She had an ink smudge on the side of her nose, as usual. Her curls were rioting around her face, cascading in an unruly mass down her back, one side held back by the pretty clip she'd bought in Hogsmeade. He reached out with a gentle finger and let one tendril curl around his finger almost of its own accord.

Hermione sat there holding her breath, wondering what he would do next. Her eyes trailed over the dark circles under his eyes, the sad droop of his shoulders. Even his hair seemed a duller red since he'd been so depressed. She lifted a hand and gently pushed his hair back out of his face, cupping his cheek in her hand as she did so.

Ron spent a lot of time lost in serious thought, winding that strand of her hair around his finger over and over. When she cupped his cheek in her dainty hand, he nearly lost control, but he was going to think this through before reacting. He didn't want to be hurt like that ever again.

When he didn't react to her hand on his cheek, Hermione dropped her hand and sat back, beginning to pull away from him.

"Where are you going?" he said gruffly, not letting go of her hair.

"I . . . um. . ." she said uncertainly.

He sighed, then took both of her hands in his. "You're sure this time? You really want *me*? Not some ideal bloke from your dreams? You're not going to change your mind?"

"I'm sure."

"Are you ready for a real commitment, or is this just for the rest of school?"

"Whatever you want," she said humbly.

"Really?" he said in a small, surprised voice.

"Yes. I'm yours for as long as you'll have me."

He put his big hands under her arms and lifted her easily into his lap. "You're sure this time? You're not going to change your mind?"

"No," she said with certainty, sitting nervously on the edge of his lap.

Ron pulled her to him, holding her close. "You know what this means, don't you?"

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Hermione sighed contentedly, relaxing her head against his shoulder. "What does it mean? And by the way, this feels wonderful."

"It means I'm never allowing you to go on holiday alone with your parents ever again," he vowed.

"That's fine with me," she said, lifting her face to his. "I don't ever want to be apart from you again. Do you want me to crawl through the owl droppings now?"

"No, I think we can skip that part. I have something else in mind," he said, lowering his lips to hers.

Outside the suite door, Ginny turned shining eyes to Harry as they listened to smooching sounds and blissful sighs on the Extendable Ears. "I just love happy endings!"

"Me too," he agreed wholeheartedly, pulling her into a kiss. "We're brilliant, you know. I love it when a plan actually works!"

Just then, an alarm went off over their heads.

"Uh-oh," Harry said, then pointed his wand straight up and cried, "*Silencio!*" When that didn't work, he sent an Adfero to Dumbledore, and the alarm instantly quieted.

"Who'd you Adfero?" Ginny said, taking her hands down from her ears.

"Dumbledore. I told him we'd just gotten Ron and Hermione back together and his alarm was messing up all our hard work!" Harry replied with a laugh. "He Adferoed back that he likes happy endings too, but that we'd need to interrupt them soon."

"OK," Ginny said, putting the Extendable Ear back in her ear. "They're laughing now. It should be safe to go in."

They stood and knocked loudly on the door, then opened it cautiously when they heard Ron's bellow "Come in!"

"You bellowed, Ron?" Harry said with an impish grin.

"I can barely hear!" Ron said loudly. "That alarm went off right over our heads!" He and Hermione were still in the armchair, their faces pink from both blushes and laughter.

"And did you two work out your differences?" Ginny asked cheekily, unashamedly rolling up the Extendable Ears where her brother and best friend could see them.

"You probably know everything that went on in here," Hermione said, her cheeks pinkening up again quite prettily.

"Well, not *everything*," Ginny admitted, smiling slyly, pleased that the plan had worked so well. "You'll have to tell us exactly what set off the alarm."

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Both Ron and Hermione blushed madly, exchanging a look that made them laugh. "Not today," Ron said. "And Harry? Ginny? Thanks. I mean that."

"No problem!" Harry said. "I'm just glad everything worked out."

"Are those tiny little Cupid wings coming out of your back, Mr. Potter?" Hermione teased.

"Just another Animagus form," he assured her with a cheeky grin.

"Pink's just not your colour, Potter," Ginny teased him.

"Pink?" he said, twisting around to try to see his own back, where, of course, no wings existed. Everyone laughed at him being so silly.

"I don't know about you lot, but I have homework to finish," Harry said, gathering up his books from Ron's floor.

"Let's study up here," Ron said, pulling another chair up to the table for Harry.

"I promised Colin I'd help him with his Potions homework," Ginny said, heading for the door. "I'd better get to work before it gets too late."

Hermione ran down the stairs after Ginny to get her books so she could study with her boyfriend and best friend as they had so many times before. Ron and Harry grinned at each other across the table as they waited for her to return.

"So everything's OK now?" Harry asked seriously.

"It may take me a while to trust her completely again," Ron admitted, "but I'm willing to give it a try. Thanks for not giving up on us," he said sincerely. "I needed a good swift kick up the backside. That was a great plan."

"I may patent it," Harry said cheekily. "I'll cut you in on the royalties, since you and Hermione were the test subjects."

"We're all going to be filthy rich from it, mate," Ron said with a grin.

Hermione returned and sat between her two favourite men, spreading out her notes and getting their homework organized, much to the boys' relief.

Chapter 12 – All Kinds of Learning

Harry, Ron and Hermione were walking down the hall toward Transfiguration when they heard a rumpus ahead.

"What's going on?" Hermione said asked passing students. "What's wrong up there?"

"It's Peeves," a Second Year Ravenclaw girl said. "He's pelting us with ink bottles so we can't get to our classes."

"Bloody hell," Ron grumbled, shoving his way through the crowd quickly, Harry and Hermione in his wake. "Peeves! Stop that or I'll tell the Bloody Baron!"

"Don't care! Nasty Wheezy can't harm old Peevesy!" the poltergeist said in his sing-song voice.

"Hermione," Harry murmured, "clear the hall."

"Why?" she said.

"I have an idea. I don't know if it will work. It might make things worse. Or it might solve some problems," he said. She ran back to the waiting students and told them to find other ways to their classes.

Soon the corridor was empty except for the three of them and the poltergeist, who was enthusiastically pelting Ron with chalk, quills and a variety of other things. Ron had a shield up so nothing was hitting him, but he was quite annoyed.

"Stand back," Harry murmured to his friends. They moved several paces behind him, watching the poltergeist as he turned flips in the air, bending over and farting toward Harry.

"Wee little Potty! What's Potty gonna do? Potty can't hurt Peevesy!" the poltergeist chortled, now letting off farts in rhythm. "Can you name that tune?" he asked cheekily.

"No, I can't," Harry said calmly, "but I'm tired of your behaviour. Are you going to leave the students alone, or keep messing about?"

"OOooooo, what a choice! Behave or mess about?" Peeves said, turning over in midair and lying on his side, his chin on his hand, his fingers tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Which to choose? Which to choose? Bad ol' Potty is making things hard for Peevesy!" With a devilish cackle, he rose up in the air and dove toward Harry, blowing a huge, juicy raspberry as he came.

"Don't say you weren't warned," Harry said quietly, casting his Sphere Shield Charm around the pesky poltergeist as it flew toward him. He was as amazed as anyone else when Peeves was unable to break through the charm. He hadn't known for certain that it would be impervious to the poltergeist, but of all the spells he knew now, he thought this one had the best chance of containing the nasty little beast.

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Peeves eyes were bugging out of his head, his face aghast that he'd been captured. He banged his fists on the wall of the sphere in obvious frustration. He backed away from the sphere's wall and flew at it as fast as he could, hitting it with a resounding "bong" and bouncing away again, shaking his head dizzily. He flew in circles faster and faster, trying to find a way out. Finally, he stopped and plastered his face and hands against the side of the sphere closest to Harry, his eyes and voice pitiful. "Oooo, no, please, Harry Potter, sir! Peeves will be good! Please let Peevesy out! Peeves was just having some fun! Please, Harry Potter, sir! pretty please?" the poltergeist cried, getting more pitiful the longer he spoke.

Harry held the charm easily, surprised that such a lightweight Sphere Charm was holding a non-corporeal being that could pass through stone walls.

"I think I'm just going to leave you in there for a while, Peeves," Harry said, looking calm and relaxed, as if he had nothing better to do than hold that charm all day long.

"NOOOooooooo! *Please!*" Peeves cried, getting desperate now.

"What's going on out here?" Professor McGonagall asked, having heard the racket Peeves was making from her classroom down the hall.

"I'm trying to get Peeves to behave, Professor," Harry said with a casual shrug of his shoulders. He was doing his best to hide his amusement, but the sparkle in his eyes and the crooked grin that appeared every so often gave him away.

"I see," she said, a smile tickling the corners of her mouth.

Peeves was alternating now between wringing his hands and banging his fists repeatedly on the wall of the sphere. "Please! Please! Peeves will be good!"

"Peeves!" Harry snapped when he thought the poltergeist had had enough. "Pay attention!"

Peeves was instantly silent, staring at Harry with rapt concentration.

"You will promise me – no fingers crossed, either! – that you won't bother me or my friends anymore. You can bother Slytherins all you want, but Gryffindors are off-limits, OK?"

"That's not exactly fair, Harry," Hermione protested before Peeves could answer. "Why not make him leave everyone alone?"

"He needs to have an outlet," Harry said wisely, "or he'll be even more trouble than he already is. If Professor Dumbledore didn't want him here, he wouldn't be here. Since he has to stay, he needs to have some fun." He looked back at Peeves. "Everyone needs to have fun, right, Peeves?"

"Oh yes, that's absolutely perfectly wonderfully right, Harry Potter, sir!" the poltergeist said eagerly, holding up both hands to show he hadn't crossed any fingers, then doing a back flip in his excitement.

"If you leave the Gryffindors alone, I'll be satisfied," Harry said quietly. "Agreed?"

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"Oh, yes! Absolutely, Your Potterness!" Peeves said, waving his open hands again to show he was keeping his word, then clasping his hands together and smiling unctuously as he sketched a small bow.

"And if I find you've been bothering Gryffindors again—" Harry continued seriously.

"Oh, no, Your Potterness! Peeves will be a good poltergeist! No Gryffindors! Not even ickle firsties!"

"And if anyone asks you why you're leaving Gryffindors alone, you'll just say. . .um. . .that you've decided you like Gryffindors, OK? You won't tell anyone I told you to do this."

"Oh, yes! I mean, oh, no!" Peeves replied, confused about what the correct answer might be. His face lit up when he hit on it. "Peevesy LOVES Gryffindors! And Harry Potter didn't tell Peeves anything!"

"Don't mention my name, Peeves, I'm serious," Harry warned, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

Peeves put his hands up, waving them anxiously at Harry. "No! No! Peeves will not mention your name, Your Potterness!" He clapped both hands over his mouth and his eyes grew huge with horror when he realized he'd said "Potterness."

"Yeah, not that either," Harry chuckled, relaxing the threat in his posture a bit. "All right, then, Peeves. Your word on all of this?"

"Absolutely, positively, indubitably, definitely, without a doubt, certainly, yes!" Peeves said eagerly.

"All right. Get in the centre of the sphere, then, and hold still," Harry instructed, then ended the charm when the poltergeist obeyed. Peeves bowed low, tipped his silly hat, then zoomed off as fast as he could.

"Well done, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said with an amused smile. "And I won't tell the other Heads of House that you told Peeves he's free to attack their students."

"Thanks!" Harry said as he, Ron and Hermione followed the professor into the room. All four were chuckling.

"And you'll have to tell me about that Sphere Charm sometime," she added under her breath as they parted. "It looks like a good one."

"OK," he agreed, then slid into his seat beside Ron and Hermione.

"Professor," Harry called, seeing Dumbledore striding down the hall ahead of him, "could I have a word?"

"Certainly! How are you today?" Dumbledore said, turning around and smiling warmly. "Lemon drop?"

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"Thanks!" Harry said, taking the offered sweet and popping it into his mouth. "I had an idea."

"Good for you!" Dumbledore teased, his eyes twinkling.

Harry grinned at his playful headmaster. "It's about Quidditch. Did you know that Ron and I organized an inter-House pick-up Quidditch game last year after the battle?"

"Yes, I knew about that," the headmaster replied. "Everyone involved seemed to enjoy it a great deal."

"We did! And we got to know people in other Houses better than we normally do. I was thinking it might be a good idea, or at least fun, to have an inter-House game sometime during the year. Muggles in America do that kind of thing with their professional sports teams – I've saw it on the telly when the Dursleys had satellite TV for a while. Sometimes it's called an 'All-Stars' game. Could we do something like that?" Harry looked at his headmaster hopefully.

"That's a wonderful idea, Harry!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "How would that game be organized? When would the teams practice? And how would they be chosen?"

"I was thinking that Madam Hooch and you or someone else could choose three players from each team and just. . .I don't know. . .mix 'em up together into two teams. We'd need to play one Chaser or one Beater short in order to have equal numbers of players from each house. I think it would be easier if we were short one Chaser, myself, but I'll leave that up to you. With one practice, the teams should be good enough to play, since they'd all be experienced Quidditch players." He watched Dumbledore's face carefully as the man mulled it over.

Dumbledore studied the boy in front of him as he considered his suggestion. Harry was so excited, he was bouncing on the balls of his feet, his eyes sparkling and brilliantly green, an expectant half-smile on his face. The old man smiled, enjoying Harry's delight in his brainchild.

"I think it's a splendid idea. I'll talk it over with Madam Hooch and the Heads of House. If everyone agrees, we'll get started on plans for it right away," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "I'll let you know when we have things sorted out."

"Thanks, Professor!" Harry said. "It'll be brilliant! See you later!" He waved and jogged down the hall, sliding into his seat in Inter-Beings Languages just before the bell rang.

"What did he say?" Ron whispered as their professor cleared his throat.

"He liked it. We're on!" Harry replied with a grin.

Ron grinned excitedly and pumped his fist in the air, whispering "Yes!" quietly so the professor wouldn't notice.

At Ron's quiet exclamation, the professor looked toward him to see what was going on. Ron and Harry both looked innocently diligent, getting their parchment, quills, ink pots and books set out on their desks. The few other students in the room looked from Ron and Harry to the professor expectantly, but the professor simply shook his head and turned back to the

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blackboard where he was creating a list of page numbers and the titles of various reference books with manic waves of his wand.

"This is your homework assignment. Please copy these page numbers and the names of the reference books listed now. I will explain the assignment as class progresses," the man said.

Inter-Beings Languages was a requirement for Seventh Years who planned to go into Auror training. Since so few students chose to become Aurors, or qualified for it if they were interested, the class wasn't given every year. This year's class was small, just Harry, Ron and a few Ravenclaws who were taking it because the subject interested them, not because they wanted to be Aurors. Both Harry and Ron found it to be quite a difficult subject and fervently wished Hermione was taking it as well.

Today they were continuing their study of Mermish, the language of the merpeople. Professor Reddo, a tiny little man who quite often gestured wildly with his hands while speaking, waved his wand once more, producing a list of vocabulary words on the board.

"Now, you must remember that Mermish is best spoken with the teeth held tightly clenched together, forcing the sound through your mouth in as high a pitch as you can manage," he said, his hands fluttering wildly around him, as if to make him appear bigger. "This will, of course, be more difficult for those like Mr. Weasley here, who have very deep voices."

Ron blushed at being singled out. His voice was now a booming bass, rather than the light baritone it had been in recent years.

The professor looked at his students, making sure they were all attentive. "All right, class. Repeat after me." The room resounded with what sounded like a great many dolphins arguing.

"Keep reading down the list as I pass among you to help you with your pronunciation," Reddo said, tucking his long, mousy brown hair behind his large, pointed ears.

Harry was half convinced the man was part elf. He wasn't much taller than Dobby, had very large eyes and a nose shaped like a cucumber, complete with warts. Harry leaned over to Ron. "I've been meaning to ask you, mate – what kind of elf do you think the professor is?"

"Elf?" Ron looked surprised.

"Yeah. He looks a bit like Dobby, except his skin looks human," Harry whispered, then went back to screeching Mermish verb declensions as the professor approached them.

"Oh, well done, Mr. Weasley! Mr. Potter, tighten your teeth more, and it's more an 'e' sound than an 'eh' sound in this verb. Try again."

Harry tightened his teeth and strained his neck, then felt his jaw muscles lock up as he struggled to achieve the proper sound.

"Better, much better!" Reddo said approvingly. "Keep working on it, Potter. Weasley, good work!"

Ron grinned at Harry, a triumphant gleam in his eye.

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"Oh, sod off," Harry muttered good-naturedly, then put on his most innocent face and went back to work when he saw the professor look his way.

After class, Harry asked Ron again, "What kind of elf could he be?"

"I don't know, honestly," Ron replied with a shrug. "I don't know that much about elves, actually. The ones I know about. . .erm. . .wood elves are tall and thin and rather aggressive. I hear they're good archers, like centaurs. Mountain elves are smaller, stouter, and seem to keep to themselves more than the others." He grinned at Harry. "I suppose he could be part mountain elf."

"Really?" Harry said. "How many kinds of elf are there?"

"Dunno. I could ask Dad if you want." That was Ron's pat answer to anything he didn't know about – ask Dad.

"No hurry. I was just curious," Harry replied easily.

"So are you going to try your Mermish out on the merpeople in the lake?" Ron asked, grinning. "They thought you were rather heroic in that second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. They might enjoy talking with you."

"I think it would be interesting to talk with them, yeah," Harry replied.

"I wish I could do that partial transfiguration you do with the gills," Ron said. "I'd love to see their town down there. We were asleep when they took us there, so I didn't get to see anything!"

"You didn't miss much," Harry assured him. They'd had this conversation before. Harry had described in detail what he'd seen in the depths of the lake, but Ron felt deprived because he'd been asleep and missed everything. Harry had enjoyed the freedom of swimming with gills, and, since becoming good at transfiguring himself, had conquered a partial transfiguration that gave him the gills, webbed hands and finned feet he'd achieved by eating gillyweed in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. "You still working on the gill transfiguration?"

"Yeah. Partial transfigurations are hard, aren't they?" Ron said as they walked toward their next class. "I can't understand why it's easier for me to do an Animagus transformation than to do a partial transfiguration of any kind."

Harry shrugged and said, "Yeah." Partial transfigurations weren't hard for him at all, but he wasn't going to make Ron feel bad by telling him that.

There was a commotion in the corridor ahead of them. Peeves was up to his old tricks. Ron went into "Head Boy" mode, pushing his way through the crowd, glaring angrily at the mischievous poltergeist.

"Peeves!" Ron yelled when he got near the poltergeist, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Pouring ink on ickle firsties," Peeves said, all innocence.

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"What have I told you about that?" Ron snarled.

"But your Headliness, they're Slytherins!" Peeves protested.

Ron looked at Harry uneasily. Peeves was going to say something that would cause more trouble than all the ink bottles he could find, if they weren't careful.

"Peeves," Harry said reasonably, "have they done anything to you?"

"Nope!" Peeves said arrogantly. "Can't touch this!" He did three back flips in a row.

"All right, if we say they can't touch you, will you let them pass?" Ron asked, doing his best to be patient.

"What does His Potterness have to say about it?" Peeves asked, zooming over to Harry until they were nearly nose to nose.

"I say let the ickle firsties go to class without bothering them," Harry replied.

"OK!" Peeves said, then zoomed away.

"That was easier than I expected," Ron said, looking at Harry in surprise.

"Yeah, that's a bit weird," Harry mused, watching the poltergeist zip out of sight.

"Nah, it's not weird," Ron said wisely. "He's really scared of you."

"I don't think he's *scared* of me," Harry said, shrugging. "I didn't hurt him, I just frustrated him."

"Well, maybe it's more respect than fear, but he's listening to you now. The only person he's ever actually obeyed before was the Bloody Baron," Ron said thoughtfully as they walked down the corridor. "I wonder why he listens to the Bloody Baron? I mean what could a ghost do to him?"

"The Bloody Baron's just bloody scary, that's why," Harry said, chuckling.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, and then his stomach rumbled. "Wonder what's for dinner? I'm starving!"

The Quidditch try-outs hadn't gone too well. The Gryffindor team needed two people to replace Katie Bell and Seamus Finnegan. Both had died in the Battle of Little Hangleton, but Katie would have finished Hogwarts the previous term anyway. Harry looked around at his team mates as they met after giving everyone who wanted a chance as good a try-out as possible. Nobody showed much promise.

"What do you think?" Harry asked. His eyes wandered from Ron to Ginny to Colin and Dennis Creevey.

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"Not one of those kids flew decently. What are we going to do?" Ron said gloomily.

"We'll make the best of it somehow," Harry said bracingly. "We'll give whoever we choose extra flying lessons."

"Fiona Ryan wasn't too bad," Ginny said, trying to be positive.

"Yeah, she was the best," Harry agreed. "She could catch and throw, she just didn't fly very well."

"We can fix that, Harry," Ginny said encouragingly.

Harry sighed, looked at Ron and, seeing resigned agreement in his eyes, replied, "Yeah. So Fiona? Everyone agree?"

"She's cute!" Dennis said with a grin. Colin chuckled and dug his elbow into his brother's side.

"Well?" Harry prompted. "Fiona OK with everyone?" He got nods all around. "All right then. I think Euan Abercrombie was probably the next best possibility. What do you think?"

"He's that Third Year who's always nervous around you, isn't he, Harry?" Ron said uneasily.

Harry nodded. "He's been scared of me ever since he got to Hogwarts," he said with a heavy sigh. "He believed that rubbish the papers printed about me after the Tri-Wizard Tournament."

"He's old enough to get over that," Colin said bracingly. "We'll set him straight, won't we, Dennis?" Dennis nodded vigorously. Colin and Dennis were still Harry's biggest fans.

"What do you think?" Harry asked, looking from Ron to Ginny.

"He's actually rather sweet," Ginny said defensively. "He's just terribly shy."

"Well, do what you can to get him over that, will you?" Harry asked her with a heavy sigh. "He can't be shy and be part of the team, it just won't work. He's got to be as bold as the rest of us. But he really was the best of a bad lot. Are you all in favour of picking him?" He got slow, resigned nods all around. "All right then. Fiona and Euan will be our new Chasers. We'll work out a rotation on who's giving them extra flying lessons so it won't be such a burden on any one of us. They're Third Years, so at least they don't have O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s facing them. I'm going to depend heavily on you three," he said, indicating Ginny and Colin who were both Sixth Years, and Dennis, who was a Fourth Year, "to oversee their training. Ron and I have a lot of revising to do for N.E.W.T.s this year. We'll do what we can, but we won't have as much spare time as you lot will." Getting understanding nods all around, he clapped his hands on his knees and stood up. "All right then. I'll post the team list this evening. Who wants to start the extra flying sessions?"

"I will!" Colin said eagerly.

"Somehow, I knew you'd volunteer," Harry said with a fond smile at the enthusiastic boy. "Thanks, mate."

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It was Harry's turn to give Euan and Fiona their flying lesson. Colin, Ginny and Dennis had each given the new team members a lesson, and their flying had improved somewhat, as had their teamwork in practice, but they had a long way to go before they'd be ready for their first game, which was approaching rapidly.

"Right then. I'll lead off, and you two follow me. I'm going to show you some manoeuvres, in slow motion. Do exactly what I do, and as slowly as I do them. Once you have a good feel for them, we'll speed them up. OK?" He looked at his two new team mates. Fiona looked fiercely determined, but Euan looked a bit green. "Euan, what's the matter?" Harry asked impatiently.

"Nothing," he said quietly.

"Then why do you look as if you're about to lose your lunch?" Harry asked, truly curious now.

"I'm," he gulped, trembling in the face of Harry's attention, "fine."

"No, you're not. Are you ill?"

"No."

"Then what's wrong?"

"He's scared of you," Fiona piped up.

"Still? Why the bloody hell are you still scared of me?" Harry demanded impatiently.

Euan trembled even more, shrinking back from Harry, but didn't answer.

Harry took a deep, calming breath and blew it out. "I'm sorry, Euan. I'm under a bit of pressure here, you know? With the D.A. meetings, and N.E.W.T. revision and Quidditch. . .but those are my problems, not yours. I didn't mean to blow up at you. I'm sorry." He and Ron had already discussed the fact that their dismal Quidditch prospects would probably kill any chance they had of being scouted for professional teams, and both of them would prefer playing Quidditch to going to Auror School. He sighed and forced himself to calm down. "All right. Why are you afraid of me?"

Euan's eyes just got bigger.

"Have I ever hurt you?" Harry prompted. "Or any of your friends?"

The boy shook his head.

"What's it going to take for you to relax around me?" Harry said, tilting his head and smiling at the boy, making his face and posture as soft and friendly as possible. "I know. You and I need to sit down over a butterbeer and get to know each other better. Next Hogsmeade weekend, we'll make it a point to get together in the Three Broomsticks and have a natter, how's that?"

"J-j-just us?" Euan asked nervously.

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"Well, Ginny will probably be there," Harry replied, "unless you don't want her to be."

"She can be there. I like Ginny," Euan said, showing his first genuine smile of the afternoon.

"Just as long as you remember she's my girl," Harry teased, then saw the boy's face tighten nervously again. "Bloody hell, Euan, can't you take a joke?" he said, reaching out and very gently poking the boy in the shoulder.

"But she is your girl – so it wasn't a joke," Euan countered cautiously.

"Well, mate, you have me there," Harry agreed. "Come on, then. Let's fly."

On the next Hogsmeade weekend, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione sat at a big table in the Three Broomsticks, having a good time and chatting with friends who passed by. Euan hadn't shown up yet. Finally, the Creevey brothers came barging through the door, dragging Euan between them.

"Brought somebody to see you, Harry!" Colin said cheerfully.

"I'll go and get our butterbeers," Dennis said as Colin sat Euan down next to Harry, then sat next to him. Colin and Dennis had finally grown into big, strapping boys with the perfect physique for Beaters, not as oversized as Crabbe and Goyle, but long-armed, broad-chested and strong, like the Weasley twins.

Poor Euan never had a chance of resisting if they wanted to force him to go somewhere, Harry thought. Aloud he said, "How's it going, mate? Having fun in Hogsmeade?"

Euan nodded nervously.

"What have you done today?" Harry asked, trying to draw the boy out.

"Nothing much," he muttered.

"Have you seen my brothers' joke shop, Weasleys Wizard Wheezes?" Ginny said kindly. "They have the best stuff in there. Harry and Ron helped develop some of the things they sell."

"Yeah, it was a lark working for them," Ron said with a grin. With that, he and Harry were off, swapping funny stories about working in the shop, about the joys and tribulations of being test subjects for some of the joke products, and about some of the things that happened when ingredients were added in the wrong order, or wrong quantity.

Before long, everyone at the table was laughing, even Euan, although his laughter was still a bit nervous. Here he was, surrounded by older students. Even the girls were bigger than him, although he was about the same size as Ginny, who was quite petite. He was just beginning to relax a bit when Harry spoke directly to him again. "Huh?" Euan said intelligently.

"I said, what do you want to do when you get out of Hogwarts," Harry repeated with a friendly smile.

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"Dunno," Euan muttered, closing himself off from the others again.

Harry saw this and sighed. He didn't know what the boy's problem was, nor how to solve it. "Colin? Have you decided what you want to do?"

"I want to be a photographer!" Colin said with a grin.

"Good for you!" Harry replied. "You've already got your foot in the door with the posters and Famous Wizards Cards and all."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Colin replied happily.

"What about you, Dennis?" Ginny asked. "What do you want to do?"

"I'd like to work for the Ministry in the International Games and Sports department," he said with no hesitation. "I'm not a great Quidditch player like Ron and Harry – and you, Ginny – but I love sports and would like to be involved in it somehow. So a Ministry position would be one way to do that."

"Or you could be a team manager, or a coach, perhaps," Ron said encouragingly.

"Yeah!" Dennis said, nearly bouncing in his seat at the idea. "That would be bril!" He looked at the older students. "What do you plan to do, Ron?"

"Harry and I have talked about going to Auror School," Ron replied, "but in an ideal world? We'd both like to play professional Quidditch."

"Really? Harry, you'd rather play Quidditch than be an Auror?" Euan asked suddenly. "Why? I thought you liked all that Defence stuff."

"I'm tired of fighting, Euan," Harry said, his eyes sad and serious. "Auror school interests me a lot, but I'd love to play Quidditch professionally. If I do get to play Quidditch, when I retire from playing, I might like to coach it. Eventually, I think I'd enjoy teaching at Hogwarts. But not for quite a while. I enjoy teaching spells in D.A., so I think teaching might be fun at some point. I love Hogwarts, but I want to see the world a bit before I settle down here – if I end up here at all." He shrugged as if it didn't make much difference to him, but he'd just said what was on his heart – he could see himself making a career at Hogwarts once his children were old enough to attend the school. If he had children. He glanced at Ginny, his eyes soft and tender as the thought crossed his mind.

"What would you teach?" Colin asked, interrupting Harry's dreams.

Harry sighed, getting back on topic. "Defence or Transfiguration, I suppose. I like both of them," he said with a shrug. "But the Defence job is Remus's until he decides to retire, and the same is true of McGonagall and Transfiguration."

"You could teach Charms," Colin said brightly. "You're really good at hexes and stuff."

"Yeah, but that's all a long way off," Harry said with a shrug.

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"What if you don't get recruited by a Quidditch team?" Dennis asked carefully. "Our chances this year—"

"Our chances are as good as anyone else's," Harry said quickly. "And if I don't get recruited. . .I don't know about Ron, but I'm not sure I want to go to Auror School at all."

"If you don't go, I won't go," Ron said stoutly.

"Right. Ruin your future because I'm a layabout and won't go to school. Then you can blame me for all your troubles," Harry teased.

"Exactly!" Ron said triumphantly, making everyone laugh.

"Hermione, what about you?" Colin asked, knowing Harry had answered enough questions for now and wanted the attention directed elsewhere. "What are your plans?"

"I don't know, really. I want to study more, possibly go to university, travel some. . .I honestly don't know what I want to do as a career yet. So many things interest me," she said with a small smile. "I suppose I'll work it out after I've done more study."

"Ginny," Dennis said, "what are you going to do after Hogwarts?"

"I was going to go to Healer School, but I'm not sure I want to do that anymore," she said quietly.

"Why not? You're brilliant with the Healer Squad!" Colin protested.

"And I've seen enough injured people to last me a lifetime. I want to spend the rest of my life happy. I might be happy as a healer, but I don't know that I want to spend three more years at school."

"And exactly what do you think you'll do with your time if you don't go to school?" Hermione commented wryly, her eyes dancing.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Ginny shot back, a cocky grin on her face.

"Does this involve a certain tall, dark-haired guy with brilliant green eyes?" Hermione teased.

"OK, how about we get some crisps to go with our butterbeer?" Harry interjected, staving off any more personal questions that he and Ginny didn't want to answer in public. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "I don't think I can carry all those heavy crisps by myself. You'll have to come help me," he whinged.

"You're silly," she said, poking him gently in the chest.

"Owwwww! Woman, you've killed me!" he said, overacting wildly and getting applause from his friends as a result. "Thank you, thank you. Please enjoy our refreshment stand during intermission!" he said cheekily, then led Ginny to the bar, where he got enough crisps for everyone at the table.

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"Is he always like that?" Euan asked Colin quietly.

"Like what?"

"Silly."

"He got a lot sillier in general when he and Ginny got together. She makes him happy. When he's around her, yeah, most of the time he is silly," Colin replied with a fond smile, watching Harry and Ginny coming back toward the table. "He's an honest-to-goodness hero, Euan, and a really good chap. And he's the best friend any of us could ever have. You need to relax with him, learn to trust him, OK? For the good of the team, if nothing else."

Euan studied Colin's unusually serious face and nodded.

"Harry and Ron are good enough Quidditch players to go pro," Dennis whispered to Euan as Harry noisily passed out the crisps and some cakes he'd picked up as well. "The team needs to do as well as possible to help them look good to the scouts. They deserve a chance, Euan." He looked at the younger boy, his eyes resolute. "Harry has put his life on the line for us loads of times fighting the Dark Lord. He saved Colin's life last year. He gets a lot of grief from other students at times, and unfairly so. They both help us by leading the D.A. meetings and teaching us things we'd never learn in normal classes. They help us with our homework when we ask. They're great guys, both of them. The Gryffindor team needs to back them one hundred percent. Are you with us, Euan?"

The young boy took a deep breath, his eyes wide and solemn, then nodded. "I'm with you, Dennis."

"And you're with Harry too, right?" Colin added quite seriously.

"Harry too."

"Brilliant! Let's eat!" Colin said happily.

The time in the pub really did help Euan get over some of his nerves with Harry, but he still acted a bit cautious near him. A few practices later, Ginny took Colin aside as Harry and Ron were packing up the balls.

"Colin, I'd like you to do something for me," she said earnestly.

"What's up?"

"I'd like you and Dennis to tell Euan all the Harry stories you can – the true ones. I've heard him talking to his classmates in the Common Room. He still believes some of the tripe he's read in the papers. He's trying hard, but he's still a bit afraid of Harry. There's no reason for that except for those stupid articles."

"Yeah, I think you're right," Colin replied. "We'll do our best!"

"I knew you would. Thanks!" she said with a smile.

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Several days later, Colin, Dennis and Euan were the last to leave the locker room after practice. "Euan, sit down," Colin said in as friendly a voice as he could manage. "You've still got some concerns about Harry, aren't you?"

"Who, me?" the boy said, trying to act innocent. "No, I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Dennis said, wrapping his burly arm around the boy's scrawny neck and tweaking his nose. "But you will be. Let us tell you about Harry Potter. The truth, not the garbage you and your parents read in magazines or the papers."

Euan gulped, then nodded slowly, sitting on the bench where the Creevey brothers indicated.

"Harry told us a lot of the stories in D.A. We've been there for others," Colin began. "He's saved a lot of lives. He's a good bloke. When he was in First Year. . ." and so began the story of Harry and Ron saving Hermione from the mountain troll, their quest for the Philosopher's Stone, and Harry's first meeting with Voldemort since he was a baby. Then they told the story of the Chamber of Secrets, as much as they knew about it, and the Tri-Wizard Tournament. They were good story-tellers, one brother adding detail where the other one paused. When they got to the battles of the previous school term, Euan held up his hand.

"I know all about that stuff," he said grimly.

"How could you? You weren't there," Colin said, eyeing the boy beadily. "What's up with you, anyway? Did you lose someone from your family in those battles?"

Euan hung his head and refused to answer.

"Out with it, Abercrombie," Dennis urged. "We'll never get to the bottom of this if you aren't honest with us."

"Harry will hate me," Euan said miserably.

Colin and Dennis sat down on either side of the young boy. "Why should he hate you?" Colin asked quietly.

"Because. . .because my uncle was a Death Eater," Euan whispered.

Colin and Dennis looked at each other over the smaller boy's head, both of them sighing at the same time. They'd finally found the cause of the problem.

"Do you think Harry will hold it against you that your uncle was a Death Eater?" Colin asked reasonably.

Euan nodded.

"It's not your fault he was a Death Eater, is it?" Dennis said, leaning down to peep under the younger boy's fringe at his eyes.

Euan shook his head, remaining stubbornly silent.

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Colin took a deep breath and blew it out. "Did Harry kill your uncle?"

"I. . .I think so," Euan said miserably.

"And you hold that against him?" Colin continued.

Euan shrugged.

Just then, Harry came back into the locker room, having left his play book behind. "Hey, mates, what's up?" he said breezily as he passed them on the way to his locker.

"Harry? D'you have a minute?" Colin said quickly.

Harry stopped in his tracks and studied the three very serious-faced boys. "What's going on?"

"We've been having a talk with Euan. We think we've found out what's been upsetting him all this time," Dennis said quietly.

Euan looked at him in horror. "You can't tell!"

"If we're going to resolve this, we have to tell him," Dennis reasoned.

Harry sighed, his face very solemn, and sat down on the bench opposite them. "Let's hear it, then."

Euan squirmed miserably between Colin and Dennis while they told Harry what they knew. Dennis kept his hand on the smaller boy's back, trying to comfort him as well as preventing him from running away. It was time Euan was open with Harry about his problem, and Dennis and Colin were determined that the air was cleared, once and for all.

When their recitation was done, Harry looked at Euan and said, "Are you upset with me, or afraid of me, because I may have killed your uncle in battle?"

Euan glanced up at Harry and shook his head.

"Why not?" Harry asked, confused.

"If. . .if you killed him in battle, then you were protecting yourself, or maybe someone else. I know you well enough now to understand that," Euan said hesitantly.

Harry leaned back and breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that's good to know, anyway! Did you think I'd be angry with you because your uncle was a Death Eater?"

Euan nodded, the very picture of misery.

"It's not your fault he was a Death Eater, is it?" Harry said logically.

Euan looked up at Harry, his eyes startled. "Dennis said exactly the same thing."

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"Probably because it's a reasonable thing to say," Harry said with a smile, "and Dennis is a smart bloke. So's Colin. We only allow smart people on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, y'know. Wise, intelligent, logical, reasonable – and fun, as well," he added with a grin, trying to cheer the young boy up a bit. "You're on the team, so you must have some of those qualities as well, right?"

"I do?"

"Yeah!" Harry assured him. "So since you're wise, intelligent and all of that stuff, I'm sure you're smart enough to tell me what else is bothering you."

Euan stared at Harry in horror for a very long moment. He finally dropped his eyes and sighed, then blurted, "I . . . I'm afraid I'm . . . not going to be good enough on the team and you won't get picked by a professional Quidditch team, and it will be my fault."

Harry's shoulders sagged in relief. He'd been braced for something far worse, although he didn't know what. "You know what? If it's meant to be, it will happen. If it isn't, well, there's always Auror School," he said with a shrug and his crooked grin.

"Really?" Euan breathed, afraid to believe what Harry was saying.

"Really. And Ron feels the same way. So don't give yourself belly aches worrying about letting the team down. Just do your best. That's all any of us can do, and all any of us can ask. OK?" Harry was pleased to see the younger boy's face brightening considerably. He stood up and smiled at the other boys. "Come on, you lot. Let's get to the Common Room. Ron's out nicking some food for us right now," he said, clapping Euan on the shoulder in a friendly way as the boy started toward the door. "And anytime you have a problem, or you're worried about something, anything at all," he told Euan, "you come straight to me, or Ron, or Ginny, or these two blokes," he grinned, indicating the Creeveys. "It doesn't have to be about Quidditch. We're a team. We pull together. We help each other out. OK?"

Euan looked up at Harry. Yes, he was tall and strong, a very powerful wizard and quite intelligent, but he wasn't scary. He was funny, he was silly, he was friendly – he cared about his team mates. Euan finally relaxed and really grinned at his team captain for the very first time. "OK!"

Several days later, Harry came bounding down the spiral staircase, ripping into a package Hedwig had brought him at breakfast.

"Are you only just opening that, Harry?" Ron said in astonishment.

"Yeah. I know what it is," Harry said casually, then finished unwrapping the package.

"Who's it from?"

"Dobby."

Ron snorted. "Is he sending you socks, then?"

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Harry grinned at him. "Nah. I asked him to make something for me. This is it. Or, these are them. Or, this is them. Or, these are they? I can't speak straight at all this morning. My brain's still mush after that test Reddo sprung on us in Inter-Beings Languages yesterday."

"Mine too. How do you think you did?"

Harry looked at Ron, a wicked gleam in his eye, and started squealing to him in Mermish. Ron replied in kind, to which Harry responded, both of them laughing at whatever they'd said as well as at the other students in the Common Room, all of whom had quickly covered their ears when Harry started squealing.

"That well, eh?" Ron laughed.

"Oh, yeah!"

"I didn't know you'd learned how to swear in Mermish!" Ron said, clearly impressed. "That's what those odd words were, right? How did you learn them?"

"I talked to some merpeople the other day. They came up out of the water and waved at me when I was out running early in the morning," Harry said with a grin. "They got a kick out of me trying to speak their language. They said I have a funny accent."

"So what made them swear?"

"One of them had a little one with him, and the baby pulled his hair, and he let fly with some interesting words, let me tell you! I think they were about our age, the merpeople, and they were quite friendly, so they explained what the words meant when I asked them. I don't know that adults would have done that." Harry grinned at Ron. "They were a rowdy lot."

"I'll bet!" Ron said, grinning. "Can I go running with you some morning, so maybe I can see them too?"

"I thought you didn't like to run, Ron?" Harry teased, knowing Ron would rather sleep in than get up early to run.

"Yeah, well, I don't," he admitted with a shrug, "but I think it would be fun to talk with mermish teenagers. Or is it merpeople teenagers?"

"I have no idea," Harry said with a shrug. "We can do that anyway – you don't have to put yourself out by running," he added, plopping down in a squashy armchair and opening his box.

"So what's in there?" Ron craned his neck, trying to peep in the box.

"Nosy, aren't we?" he teased.

"Yeah," Ron admitted, backing off. "I'll leave you alone, then."

"Nah, I was kidding," Harry said. "Look." He pulled out a small soft bag and tossed it to Ron.

"What's this?"

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"Muggles call them 'beanbags.' They use them in various games for little children so they won't get hurt if they get hit with one. Of course, Dudley could even manage to make getting hit with a beanbag painful, he did it so hard. But these are for Euan and Fiona. I had Dobby make seven of them, one for each of us on the team. When we pass in the hall, we'll toss them with no warning to team mates, and that way, *hopefully*, Euan and Fiona will learn to sense when the Quaffle is approaching so they'll be ready for it."

"That's a great idea, Harry!" Ron said enthusiastically. "Let's try it!"

"The idea is to help them improve their performance by throwing the bag when the person isn't aware it's coming," Harry said, chuckling. "You go over there and at some point I'll toss one your way."

"OK," Ron said, then crossed the room and plopped down in an armchair facing away from Harry.

Harry waited several minutes, then lobbed a bean bag toward Ron. It hit him squarely in the head.

"Ow!" Ron said, turning and glaring at Harry. "That hurt!"

"Did not," Harry replied cheekily, "or else your head is soft!"

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"What are you two on about?" Ginny said as she came down the stairs from her room, catching a beanbag neatly as she entered the room.

"See? Ginny caught it with no problem," Harry told Ron with a snort of teasing laughter. "What happened to you?"

"I dozed off," he admitted, blushing.

"That fast?" Harry grinned, incredulous. "You've only been up a little while."

"Well, you know, all work and no play makes Ron a tired boy," Ron said with a shrug, then reached up and caught the bean bag Harry had lobbed at him with no warning.

"What are these things?" Ginny asked.

Harry explained his idea, and Ginny thought it was a good one.

"Here comes Fiona," she murmured, then tossed the beanbag at the young girl, who caught it with no problem.

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"What's this?" Fiona asked.

As Ginny was explaining, Ron tossed a beanbag at Euan, who'd just come through the portrait hole. It hit the boy in the shoulder. He was the reason Harry had come up with the beanbag idea. Euan had to be paying absolutely full attention to the ball or he had a great deal of trouble catching it. Harry was hoping the beanbag trick was going to make him more sensitive to movement around him, so he could learn to catch the ball instinctively.

"What's this?" Euan asked, picking up the small bag from where it had fallen by his feet.

Harry held his hand up. "Wait a sec. I'll explain," then stood up and quickly tossed two beanbags at the boys' staircase just as Dennis and Colin emerged. Both of them swatted the bags away rather than catching them.

"Classic Beaters," Harry said with a grin.

"Huh?" Dennis said as he and Colin picked up the small missiles.

"Gather round, you lot," Harry said, sitting on the arm of the chair he'd occupied until a few moments ago. Ron sat on the other arm, and Ginny curled up in the seat as the others gathered around them. When they'd settled down, Harry made sure everyone had a beanbag in hand. "These are Quaffles – well, pretend Quaffles, anyway. They're actually called 'beanbags.' We're going to toss them at each other with no warning to increase our sensitivity to the movement of the balls. There's one for each of you. I want you to pay particular attention to throwing these at our Chasers, since they're the ones who handle the Quaffle, but don't neglect the rest of us if you see us around. And you Chasers, you can toss them among yourselves or to the rest of us. As you've already seen, they're easy to catch and don't hurt if they hit you," he paused and patted Ron on the head, "unless you're soft in the head like Ron."

"Hey!" Ron protested.

Harry snorted with laughter and poked his friend gently. "At any rate, I want you lot to surprise each other – and me – with these beanbags so we learn to sense when something's coming at us. I think just a day or two of doing this will help us a lot. What do you think?"

"Cool!" Colin said with his usual enthusiasm.

"Yeah!" Dennis agreed, tossing his beanbag in the air and catching it, over and over.

"Just as long as you Beaters don't decide catching Bludgers is better than hitting them," Harry said with a grin. "All right. See you at practice."

The first D.A. meeting of the year took place in the Great Hall and was pretty much a packed house. The majority of the students in Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were in attendance. As usual, there were no Slytherins at the meeting, which didn't really bother any of those who'd chosen to come.

Harry looked around at the huge group of people. He, Remus and Dumbledore had discussed limiting the size of the D.A. membership as they had in the past, but had chosen instead to

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open it up to anyone who wanted to participate. With Ron, Hermione and Ginny teaching the lower levels, Harry and Remus could concentrate on the advanced students. Madam Hooch would take those students who preferred to be in the Flying Squad and would train them both in flying and in airborne tactics. With luck and a lot of cooperation, they'd manage. He blew out a nervous breath. There were a lot of new kids in this bunch, and he expected the usual torrent of uncomfortable questions from those who didn't know him well.

Raising his hands for silence, Harry smiled at the assembled students. "Wow. What a great turnout! OK, let me explain a few things, and then we'll see if there are any questions before we get started. Stand up and let me rearrange the furniture." He waved his wand and the House tables slid up against the walls, while the benches moved into rows in the open centre of the room. "Have a seat. This first meeting stuff can take a while," he said with a grin. "All right. Hermione, Ron and Ginny are passing around attendance sheets so we'll know who's here. Those of you who are starting your third year of D.A., we may be calling on you to help out with the younger and newer members. If you're willing to help out that way, there's a place on those sheets for you to let us know. And thanks in advance to those who are willing to help!"

As his friends passed the attendance sheets around, Harry sat on the edge of the Head Table, so he was higher than the group and could see everyone. "OK, some procedural stuff. Third Year D.A. members – you know who you are – will be called Third Years, no matter what year you are in Hogwarts. Everyone in the Third Year group managed the spells we worked on last year so well that I don't think we'll need to do much revising with you – but we will do some, just to be safe, so don't worry about that. Second Year D.A. members, if you've improved your spell work enough on the advanced spells during your holiday, you might be able to take a test and be advanced to Third Year fairly soon. We'll give you that opportunity after we see how everyone's doing, probably in about a month. New members, no matter what year you are in school, you are now First Years in D.A. If your spell work is good, you can advance to Second or even Third Year quickly, in the case of you more experienced students. We will be introducing very difficult spells even to those in First Year, because we all learn at different rates. You advance at your own speed in D.A., and there are no failures here. Some people are better at spells and hexes, some are better at potions, some are better at other things. We have positions for everyone. If you're better at Potions or Herbology, you might be better suited to the Healer Squad than to one of the fighting squads. We're starting a new Flying Squad with the help of Madam Hooch, so that's a new area of opportunity for some of you, as well. We'll sort all of this out later. Right now, I'm just trying to make you familiar with how we work here."

He stopped to look around, his eyes landing on Ron, which helped him decide which issue to address next. "We're organized in the same way as a real army, with a general – that's Ron Weasley. Give us a wave, Ron!"

Ron waved and got quite a few cheers in response, which made him blush royally.

"Ginny Weasley – that pretty little redhead right there," he said nodding toward her and getting a fond smile from her in return, "is in charge of the Healer Squad. Hermione Granger – that lovely young lady still passing out the attendance forms," Hermione smiled and waved, "is Ron's assistant and is in charge of attendance, communication, research and a bunch of other stuff. She's the brain behind D.A. I'm in charge of these meetings, with the help of these three, Professor Lupin and Madam Hooch, but Ron is your general – he's the one who will

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give orders in the field if you should have to actually go into battle. Don't expect me to give you any orders in battle. That's just not my job. Ron's the strategist. He has squad leaders picked out from among the most experienced students. He tells them what to do, and they tell you. Their being in charge is not an ego trip or anything like that. It's a simple division of labour so we can work as efficiently as possible, and they have earned their positions by their skills and abilities. You *must* follow their orders in the field or you will endanger everyone around you. That's how it is, so no arguing. If you can't accept those conditions, then D.A. is not for you. Think seriously about this – you have to follow orders for everyone's safety, not just your own." He paused to let that idea sink in. "The only other rule we have is, if you have a dispute with someone in your squad, take it to your squad leader. If your squad leader can't resolve the problem, he or she will take it to Ron. Ron's word is law. Just accept that and you'll be fine," he said with a grin, glancing at Ron, who was blushing madly again.

Harry rubbed his hands together, hoping he'd covered everything he needed to for the first meeting. "Oh, we'll be meeting once a week, starting in here each time, and then splitting up and using various classrooms as necessary, or all working in here, depending on what we're doing. Professor Dumbledore has set aside Wednesday evenings for us, so there will be no Quidditch practices on Wednesdays to interfere with our meetings. Professor Lupin will bring in boggarts for us to practice our Patronus Charms on, and whatever other equipment we might need. He's also letting us use the Defence classroom if we need it. Professor Flitwick has kindly provided several boxes of cushions for us to use when we're hexing each other, so we don't have to land on the hard floor. He's also allowing us the use of the Charms classroom when we need separate areas to work in. Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey have agreed to meet the Healer Squad on occasion to explain more difficult potions and injury treatments, and they will help keep the Healer Squad supplied with the necessary potions, bandages, etc. Madam Hooch will work out the flying practice sessions with those who are in the Flying Squad. They won't be working on spells as much as the rest of us, since they will be dropping bombs and other things the Weasley twins come up with to use in aerial combat, so if you wind up in the Flying Squad, don't worry that you'll have two D.A. sessions per week – that's not the way it's going to work. You'll be working with Madam Hooch, not here with the rest of us." He looked around at his three best friends. "What have I forgotten?"

"I think you've got it covered, mate," Ron said with a confident smile.

"Yes, me too," Ginny agreed.

"Do you want to take questions from the floor now, or not?" Hermione reminded him.

"Oh yeah, that was it," Harry said with a sigh. He hated this part, but the questions the new people, in particular, had, needed to be dealt with. "All right, before I do that – Third Years, to my right please," he said, gesturing to his right. "Second Years to my left. First Years, stay put." He waited until the groups had sorted themselves out. "Right. Third Years, you'll be going with Ron and Professor Lupin to the Defence classroom, and they'll start reviewing spells with you. Second Years, you're going to the Charms classroom with Hermione and Professor Flitwick to review the spells at your level. First Years, you stay here with me and Ginny, and we'll answer questions and start checking your spell work. You won't have the same leaders each week, by the way. We will switch which groups we work with on a regular basis so we can all learn your strengths and weaknesses and get a good idea of what we need to concentrate on with each of you." He stopped and looked around. He couldn't think of

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anything else he needed to cover. "Right then. Before you older groups leave – any questions?" He looked around, hoping to see no raised hands, but sighed as he saw several.

"All right," he said, pointing to a Ravenclaw boy, "what's your question?"

"How did you and Ginny escape at that concert during the summer?" the boy asked.

"That whole thing was a case of mistaken identity. Didn't you read my interview in the paper the next day?" Harry replied, genuinely curious. Minister Bones had gone to a lot of trouble to get that press conference arranged. Why bother if nobody was going to believe what they read?

"Yes, I saw it, but I don't understand," the boy said. "You had a glamour on and they didn't recognize you? Why would changing your hair colour make that much of a difference?"

"It wasn't just my hair colour. I had a beard, and had a hat on that covered my scar," Harry replied matter-of-factly. "And that poor bloke who died matched my description, except for the scar."

"And his hair wasn't black, it was brown, and his eyes weren't green, they were hazel, and he wasn't as tall or well-built as you – or as handsome," Ginny put in cheekily. She turned to face the other students. "He only looked like Harry to people who'd never seen him."

Harry glanced at her, sharing a look that spoke worlds between them. "And his girlfriend wasn't nearly as pretty as Ginny, but that's beside the point," he said, grinning at the blush he'd caused on her face. He turned back to the group. "Any more questions?" He saw a lot of the students look at each other indecisively. "Tell you what. Any questions you have, Ron or Hermione can answer, and if they don't know the answer, they can ask me and tell you later. Let's get to work, shall we?"

Once the two older D.A. groups left, Harry turned back to his new members. "OK. Any questions before we start?"

"Can we ask about anything?" a Second Year Ravenclaw asked.

"Course. What's on your mind?" And thus began the usual round of questions Harry dreaded, but had learned to deal with in the past, about him having killed people, how it felt to kill people, why did he have to kill people, were they going to have to kill people, did he really do this or that they'd heard of or read in stories, all of that. He answered as patiently as he could, with Ginny taking over when she could see he was getting annoyed or overwhelmed. Finally, he called a halt. "We could talk all evening, but we should get started. Stand up, I'm going to send your benches back to the walls." Once the benches were out of the way, he had the students pair up and start doing simple spells as he and Ginny went through the crowd correcting flaws wherever they found them. Finally, the meeting was over and he sent them on their way.

"Yeah, see you next week," he told the last of the departing students, then turned to Ginny. "I'm knackered."

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"Me too," she said, coming into his arms and resting her head against his chest. "This feels good."

"Yeah, I've been wanting to hold you all evening," he said, leaning down and kissing her on top of her head. Just then, Ron and Hermione joined them, as they'd agreed. The four of them set the Great Hall to rights and started back to Gryffindor Tower.

"I'll tell you what, I really miss Seamus," Ron said, shaking his head sadly. "He was gobby, but he helped to keep things light, y'know? We don't have anyone that cheeky now. I miss it."

"Yeah, me too," Harry agreed. There was still an aching hole in their dormitory where Seamus should have been.

"So how did Euan do? I noticed him in the First Years group," Ron said.

"He did surprisingly well," Harry replied. "He's quite good with a lot of the spells, and he picks things up quickly. If we can just get that quickness to translate to Quidditch, we just might have a decent shot at the Cup this year."

Ron looked at Harry in surprise. This was the first time he'd been optimistic about their chances at the Cup this year. "Really? That would be brilliant!"

"Yeah," Ginny said, grinning at Harry and Ron. "We need to win it this year, because we won't have a prayer for years after you two leave Hogwarts!"

"I think the First Years looked like a good group," Hermione said thoughtfully. "And so many of them! It's remarkable."

"I just hope we can give them enough attention, with so many members now," Harry mused. "I liked the smaller group we had before, so we could be certain everybody got plenty of help."

"Dumbledore's right, Harry," Hermione said, "we need to involve as many as want to be involved. We need to have as many trained fighters as possible."

"I just hope we don't need them to fight," Harry said sadly. "I can't bear the thought of losing more friends."

Ginny glanced up at him, wondering how to stave off the sadness she could see in his eyes. A sudden inspiration hit her. "You know what?" she said brightly. "Let's organize a tournament!"

"A tournament?" Harry said, thinking of his many awful experiences in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. "What do you mean?"

"Something where they can test their skills, the way you did with the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Something that isn't as dangerous as testing them in actual battle," Ginny explained.

"That's a great idea, Ginny!" Hermione said, the wheels in her mind obviously already turning. "It will take some planning. . . ."

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"And what will we use as a prize? Or will there be one?" Ron asked. "And can we four enter too?"

Harry snorted. "I don't think it would be fair for me to enter since Dumbledore and Remus give me extra lessons, but you lot are welcome to if you want. Let the best man – or woman," he said, with a nod to Hermione and Ginny, "win!"

"Will it be inter-house, like Quidditch, or individual?" Ron asked.

"I don't know," Ginny said with a shrug. "I came up with the idea. You lot have to sort out the details!"

"I'll talk to Remus and Dumbledore about it when I meet with them tomorrow," Harry said. He had one of his extra sessions with them where he was learning how to control his new wand. "Maybe the Minister of Magic would like to contribute the prize?" he mused. "We could ask. . . ."

"Wow, this is so cool!" Ron enthused. "Gin, you're a genius!"

"Yes, I know," she said haughtily, then dissolved into laughter. "Won't it be fun?"

"Between that and the All-Star Quidditch game, this could be a fun year!" Harry said happily. "Now if we could just do away with those pesky N.E.W.T.s!"

"Speaking of which, we still have some studying to do yet this evening," Hermione reminded them.

Ron put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her forehead. "You're such a slave driver."

"Good thing, too, or we'd never get anything done!" Harry agreed. Hermione just smiled.

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Chapter 13 – Transfigurations

"A D.A. tournament?" Dumbledore said when Harry told him about the idea the next day.

"Yes! It would be a way for them to try out their spells in a realistic situation, but not in battle conditions. I think it would be good training, as well as a lot of fun," Harry enthused.

"I think it's a great idea," Remus said with a grin.

"I'll speak with the staff about it, Harry, and see what we can work out. If this All-Star Quidditch game is to take place in March, when would you like the D.A. tournament to take place? And would it be open to anyone who wanted to enter, or just D.A. students?"

"That's a good question – about who can enter, I mean. I'm disqualifying myself, but I don't see why Ron, Hermione and Ginny couldn't try if they want. I mean, I get extra training with you. It just wouldn't be fair," Harry said with a shrug.

"Quite so. I believe you should be one of the judges, since you're the Tri-Wizard Tournament Champion as well as the founder of D.A.," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Me? Oh, erm, well. . ." Harry stammered.

"I think you should, Harry," Remus said encouragingly.

"Well, I'll leave that up to you," the boy said with a shrug. "As for when? How about April or May? Their skills will be about as good as they'll get for the year then. And they won't have to do any extra studying or practice – we can set it up so all the challenges use skills they've learned in D.A."

"I believe it's an excellent idea," Dumbledore said, looking very pleased. "I'll discuss it with the staff and come up with entry criteria, rules, and so on. Since you have members of various levels, do you want to have competitions of differing levels, as well?"

"I suppose that would work," Harry agreed. "I'm not really certain how any of this will work, but I want it to be both exciting and safe for those involved. It's supposed to be fun for those involved, not life-threatening," he said with a crooked grin.

"You've started my mind whirling in some very interesting directions," Dumbledore said with a delighted smile. "Organizing the Tri-Wizard Tournament was a tremendous headache in many ways, but I think organizing this one will be a pleasure. I'll get some of the staff to work on rules and so forth, and they can get with you and Remus about what the appropriate challenges will be. Oh, I'm looking forward to this!" he said excitedly. "What fun!"

Harry grinned. When Dumbledore was excited, you could see the boy in him, regardless of how old and wizened he was now. At the moment, he was acting like a teenager himself, his eyes alight with anticipation, a huge grin on his face, and an aura of energy coming off of him in waves.

"Be sure to ask Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger and Miss Weasley to share any further ideas they have on this project," Dumbledore added. "Well done, Harry! Well done, all around."

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"It was Ginny's idea," Harry reminded him, grinning at the old man's enthusiasm.

"Well, that was an enjoyable discussion! But now, I suppose we should get to work," Dumbledore said. "Let's go out to the edge of the forest. It's a nice enough day to work outside."

Harry grinned. "And then I won't be able to blow up your office again," he said with a laugh.

"Indeed!" Dumbledore replied, smiling broadly. "I had far too many things in here anyway." When he saw the blush on Harry's face, he clapped the young man on the shoulder affectionately. "As I told you at the time, things can be replaced. What you learned from that experience is priceless. And what I learned from it is to use other facilities for such spells," he added, chuckling. "It was a worthwhile effort all around."

Remus laughed quietly at the banter between Dumbledore and Harry. Harry had told him about accidentally blowing up half of Dumbledore's office with a spell he'd cast with far too much power. The sight of the headmaster standing covered in dust and debris and laughing in delight at the amount of power Harry now had was something the young wizard would never forget. Remus would never forget Harry's expression, a mixture of horror, shock, and amusement, when he told the story. And Dumbledore, when he and Remus discussed it, was nearly dancing with excitement, the destruction of his property clearly the least of his concerns.

At the edge of the forest, out of sight of the castle, Harry pulled out the wand containing his hair as the magical core. He'd been working with it regularly, under the supervision of Remus or Dumbledore, or sometimes, as today, both of them. He'd refined his control quite well after a few initial mishaps, including the time he'd accidentally blown up half of Dumbledore's office. Fortunately, most of the headmaster's things were repairable with a simple charm, but others. . .well, Harry was just glad Dumbledore was the forgiving sort, and had also done such things himself in his youth.

"I want you to work on that Sphere Shield Charm of yours," Dumbledore said, referring to a charm Harry had discovered in the Dark Arts books, and then put a few of his own twists on.

"Did I tell you it will contain Peeves now?" Harry said suddenly.

"No, but Professor McGonagall mentioned it. She was quite amused by the whole thing. I'd love to hear more about it," Dumbledore said, his mouth quirked in amusement. Harry told him the story, and Dumbledore and Remus laughed out loud at hearing how Peeves had finally been bested.

"I'm so glad you allowed him an outlet, Harry," Dumbledore said when the story ended. "Yes, I could remove him if I wanted to, but I think everyone deserves to be somewhere, and this is just where Peeves happens to be. Well done for telling him to keep your name out of it in case anyone notices he's no longer attacking Gryffindors."

"Yeah, I have enough trouble as it is, without adding preferential treatment from a poltergeist to it," Harry said with a chuckle.

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"So. Your Sphere Shield Charm is impervious to poltergeists. That's quite interesting. I've been looking forward to your trying it on various things, to see how strong it really is. I'm going to conjure a rat, Harry. I want you to capture it and hold it with your sphere."

"The sphere will hold it," Harry said, puzzled. "It held Lucius Malfoy, and held against his spells, even the Killing Curse."

"Yes, but it was a very difficult spell to hold, you said. I want to see if this new wand makes it easier to hold, and what other things you can do with the sphere. For instance, if you shrink the sphere, will it crush the rat? Or will it die from a lack of oxygen if you hold the spell long enough? How light a charm can be done and still contain a living being? That type of thing." Dumbledore looked at Harry to see if he had questions.

"I held Peeves with a very lightweight sphere," Harry said thoughtfully. "It was barely there, and easy to hold."

"Which wand did you use?" Remus asked.

Harry thought a moment. "This one, actually. It was stuck in the pocket of my robes and I'd just untangled it when we found Peeves attacking the firsties."

"Excellent! You're getting good control over this wand, then! Well done, Harry!" Dumbledore enthused. "Any questions before we begin?"

"Do you want me to kill this rat?" Harry asked, wanting to be absolutely clear on what his headmaster expected him to do.

"Yes," Dumbledore said seriously. "This charm is a very unusual one. I don't believe there are many defences against it, since I've never heard of anyone actually using it before."

"But I found it in a book!" Harry interrupted. "Surely it wouldn't have been written down if someone hadn't used it!"

"It could have been a purely theoretical exercise and still be included in that book, Harry," Dumbledore said patiently. "I honestly have never heard of *anyone* using it successfully – until you, that is. Now then, back to our experiments today. I want to see what you can do with it. Take it as far as you can in every direction. I can always conjure more rats."

"All right," Harry said, holding his new wand at the ready with the light grip he'd found worked best with it.

Dumbledore conjured the rat, which began racing across the meadow. Harry conjured his sphere and captured it neatly, holding it in a delicate sphere that glistened with the softest possible golden light.

"This is the. . . 'light' version of the sphere, I suppose you'd say," Harry said as he held the sphere carefully between his hand and his wand. "This is how I captured Peeves."

"How difficult is that for you to hold?" Remus asked.

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"This version isn't difficult at all. It's a fiddly spell, delicate and fragile, but once I have it in place, it doesn't take a lot of effort to hold. It's more a matter of, um. . . ." He paused, searching for the right word.

"Finesse?" Remus offered.

"Yeah, that's it! Finesse!" Harry responded. "And I can do other spells while I'm holding this one, once I have it secure."

"What other types of spells, Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Um. . . the Stunning Spell, Impedimenta, simple ones like that," he said with a shrug.

"Impedimenta isn't a simple spell," Remus chuckled.

"Well, compared to some things it is," Harry retorted with a laugh.

"Show me how you'd do another spell while holding the sphere," Dumbledore suggested.

"OK," Harry replied. He focused his attention on the sphere for a moment, then moved the wand point inside it, and said "*Stupefy!*" The Stunned rat fell over on its side. "*Ennervate,*" Harry said, and the rat got on its feet and began running in circles inside the sphere.

"Well done, Harry, well done!" Dumbledore said, clapping his hands enthusiastically.

"Thanks," Harry said with a grin, glancing up at his headmaster. He went back to watching the rat, which was racing around inside the sphere, trying to find a way out. "What do you want me to do now?"

"I'd like you to concentrate the sphere, Harry. Make the walls thicker, more opaque, make the sphere itself smaller. Go slowly. I want to see how far you can take it before you can't hold it anymore," Dumbledore explained.

Harry complied, and the sphere darkened and shrunk, then fizzled into nothingness, the rat racing away. Dumbledore pointed his wand at it and it vanished.

"Sorry," Harry said with a shrug. "I guess I can't hold it that well yet."

"But you didn't *have* to hold it, not the way you did with Lucius Malfoy," Dumbledore said patiently. "You weren't under attack. You weren't angry. You're actually quite relaxed at the moment. I think things will be quite different if you're under attack or angry."

"Yeah, probably," Harry agreed.

"All right, then," Dumbledore said, pacing away from the boy a bit. "Defend yourself!"

"What? Sir, I don't want to hurt you!" Harry said, horrified at the thought of capturing his beloved headmaster in his sphere and possibly injuring him.

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Dumbledore shot a spell at Harry that stung his leg. "I'm going to keep stinging you until you defend yourself, Harry!"

Harry danced out of the way, dodging the spells as well as he could, but Dumbledore was a master dueller and deceptively quick for a man of his age.

"Come on, you young whelp, fight! Fight, I say!" Dumbledore challenged him. "Get angry! Show me what you can do!" He kept sending the Stinging Nettles Charm at Harry, giving him welts all over his body.

Finally, Harry lost his patience and started fighting back, at first with light charms, then more seriously. Dumbledore blocked his spells easily at first, then had to work much harder to protect himself.

Remus finally yelled, "The sphere, Harry! Do the sphere!"

Harry threw a Sphere Shield Charm surrounding Dumbledore, and found very quickly that he needed to thicken the walls. The old wizard was sending quite serious spells his way now, just barely managing to cancel them before they bounced back on him. Harry was panting now, his eyes glittering green fire, determination in every muscle. He began to pour power into the sphere, focusing on making it smaller and with thicker walls.

"Harry! *Stop!*" Remus called, then put his hand on his godson's shoulder to get his attention.

Harry had been concentrating so hard, he hadn't heard Remus's cry, but he felt the man's strong hand on his shoulder and released the sphere so quickly that Dumbledore stumbled and fell. "Professor! I'm sorry! Are you all right?" Harry cried, rushing to the old man's side.

Dumbledore was gasping for breath, his face blue.

"What have I done?" Harry moaned miserably. "Professor, I'm sorry!" He began to run his hands over the old man's body to sense for injuries, trying to help him.

"I'm fine, dear boy, just fine," Dumbledore gasped after a moment. "No injuries, but I was running out of air in there."

"I'm so sorry!" Harry repeated wretchedly.

Dumbledore laid a calming hand on Harry's arm. "Don't apologize, Harry. You did exactly what I told you to do. We had to learn how strong that charm is, and how hard it is for you to hold it. We had to test it." His colour was improving, and he finally sat up, with Remus's and Harry's help. He was grinning broadly. "I cannot tell you when I've had more fun!"

"*What?*" Harry said, absolutely shocked.

"It was fun!" Dumbledore insisted.

"But I hurt you!" the boy protested. "If Remus hadn't stopped me. . . ."

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"But he did, dear boy, and that's why we had him with us, so we'd have a third party to make certain we didn't kill each other by accident!" Dumbledore was chuckling. "That was most entertaining! Quite amazing. I must say, I haven't had that much fun in ages!"

Harry sat back on his heels, completely baffled. "Fun? In what possible way was it *fun*?"

"I got to see what it's like to face you in battle, just a bit, but still – oh, my, what an experience! You are a wonderfully powerful wizard, Harry. You weren't even working hard. If you're truly focused, that Sphere Shield Charm is a very powerful tool! Well done! Full marks!" Dumbledore grabbed Remus's and Harry's proffered hands and got to his feet. "Next time, though, I think we'll put Remus in the sphere!"

"I don't want to do that again with anyone I care about," Harry said, still quite unnerved by the whole experience.

"Have you had enough for one evening?" Dumbledore asked, seeing Harry's distress.

"Yeah. I'd rather not do any more this evening, if you don't mind."

"Not a problem, lad. Now then. I'd like you to continue researching that charm and those that are similar to it. I can see some very interesting uses for it in battle, as well as in your duties as an Auror, once you become one."

"All right," Harry agreed. "But about that, sir?"

"About what?"

"About my becoming an Auror," Harry said, glancing uneasily at his headmaster. "I know Professor McGonagall and Minister Bones have gone to a lot of trouble to make sure I can get into Auror School. . ."

"Quite honestly, Harry, your marks are good enough for you to get in on your own," Remus commented with pride.

Harry smiled a bit. "Well. . .it's just that I've seen enough battle for a lifetime already. I'm not certain I want to be an Auror anymore."

"What would you like to be, then?" Dumbledore asked with interest.

"Seriously?" Seeing his headmaster's encouraging nod, Harry smiled shyly and said, "I'd love to play professional Quidditch. Ron and I are hoping our team will be good enough this year that the scouts will come look at both of us, but honestly, with two new Chasers, I don't know if that's going to happen or not. I don't know how good our chances are for the Cup, and without that, I don't think they'll consider us."

"What will you do when you've finished playing Quidditch?" Remus asked quietly.

"Maybe coach. Maybe come back to Hogwarts and teach," he said, smiling at his headmaster, "but I'd like to see some of the world before I do that."

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"So you don't see yourself as an Auror at all?" Remus said, his head tilted as he studied his godson's face.

"No. Yes. Maybe. I mean, I know I'm good at this Auror kind of stuff. But I'm tired of the fighting."

"Aurors rarely have to fight in the normal course of their work, Harry," Remus assured him. "They do a lot more paperwork than you'd imagine. You've been doing the work of a soldier in a war, not the normal work of an Auror. Talk to Tonks. Maybe she can help you get a better picture of what they do. You've based most of your ideas on what Mad-Eye's told you, haven't you?" Harry nodded. "Well, Mad-Eye was one of the more combative Aurors, although he brought in his quarry alive far more often than dead. But most Aurors don't make a habit of going after the worst of the lawbreakers alone, as Moody did so often. Talk to Tonks before you make a final decision."

"But I'd really like to play Quidditch," Harry said sadly.

"If you get recruited, you could go to evening classes for your Auror training," Remus said encouragingly. "You can do both if you want to."

"I can? I didn't know that," he said in surprise, but then he shook his head and sighed. "If a Quidditch team will have me."

"Don't give up yet. The Quidditch season is still young! You haven't played your first game yet," Remus said, clapping the young man on the shoulder.

Dumbledore put his finger beside his nose. "I have it on good authority that your two new Chasers are actually quite good in comparison to the competition," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Don't tell anyone you heard that from me, though!"

Harry grinned at the mischievous light in his headmaster's eyes. "Really? Ours are better than theirs?"

"You didn't hear that from me!" Dumbledore said, grinning broadly as they reached the top of the marble staircase, the parting of the ways between his office, Gryffindor Tower and Remus's quarters. "Good night, Harry. I greatly enjoyed our little exercise this evening."

"Are you sure you're all right, sir? Should we go with you to the hospital wing to get you looked at?" Harry asked, still concerned.

"I'm fine, lad. Don't worry about me. I haven't had that much fun in years! Sleep well! Good night, Remus! Thank you for your help this evening." With that, Dumbledore went down the hall toward his office with his usual quick, long strides.

"Do you think I hurt him?" Harry asked his godfather.

"You might have done if he hadn't put protections around himself before he let you put that sphere around him. He was relatively safe because he had an idea what to expect. A real enemy wouldn't know to do that, so your sphere will be a formidable weapon for you. Keep working on it!"

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"I will," the boy replied.

"You did give him quite a workout!" Remus added. "I'm not sure I'd hold up as well as he did under the circumstances! I'll have to make certain I have those protections in place long before I let you anywhere near me with that sphere!" he teased.

"No, don't worry about it," Harry said seriously. "I don't want to do that to anyone I care about. I meant that. Now if Malfoy showed up. . . ." He grinned cheekily.

"Lucky for Draco that he's still in prison, then," Remus said, patting his godson on the back. "Oh, before you go. . ."

"What?"

"Tonks and I wanted to ask you something." Remus blushed a bit as he spoke.

"Yeah?" Harry said, his interest piqued.

"We'd like you and Ginny to stand up for us. I'd like you to be my best man, and Tonks wants Ginny as her maid of honour. We'd also like Ron and Hermione to stand up with us if they will."

"That's brilliant!" Harry said happily. "Yes, of course I'll do it, and I'm sure the others will, as well. D'you want me to ask them for you?"

"Would you? It's difficult for me to find time to talk to them with no one else around. Tonks would ask the girls herself, but as you can imagine, the Aurors are staying pretty busy these days."

"I'd be happy to ask them. Just let us know what we need to do, what we need to wear, all that."

"Oh, your normal dress robes will be fine, Harry," Remus said quickly. "We're not doing anything elaborate."

Harry knew neither his godfather nor Tonks could afford anything fancy. He'd have to have a talk with Dobby about the reception and make sure it was as special as they could manage.

"OK. Dress robes it is. Dobby and Winky will enjoy having guests. How many are you inviting?"

"Just the Order members, since it will be at your house. If we had it anywhere else, it would be difficult to invite some of the Order members, since people outside the Order aren't supposed to know that we know each other," Remus said with a smile. "Thank you for letting us use the house."

"It will be fun! And the reception will be my gift to you, all right? No arguments! I have house elves who love to cook!"

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Remus was touched. He knew any reception at all was expensive, and Harry was such a generous person, whatever he hosted would probably be a great deal more elegant than anything he or Tonks expected.

Harry saw his hesitation. "She's worth it, Remus. So are you. Don't give me a hard time about it. You two deserve the best possible start to your marriage."

"She is worth it, you're right," his godfather said with a smile. "All right, then. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure!" he said sincerely.

Remus squeezed his godson's shoulder fondly. "Well then, I'm off. Good night, lad."

"Good night."

"These human to animal transfigurations are fun!" Hermione enthused as she, Ron and Harry got their books and wands out to do their homework several days later. They were at their favourite table in the corner of the Common Room.

"Yeah, for you maybe," Ron said morosely. "You could do it first go. It's just not fair."

Hermione's temper snapped. She put her hands on her hips and "humphed" impatiently. "Ronald Weasley! Who are you to talk about what is and isn't easy in Transfiguration? You're a registered Animagus now! And I still can't get past a partial Animagus transfiguration no matter how hard I try!"

"That is odd," Ron allowed with a shrug, glancing uneasily from her to Harry. "Isn't it, Harry?"

"I'm staying out of this conversation," he said with a smile, then buried his nose in his book.

"Oh, no, you aren't, Harry!" Hermione said decisively. "We're talking about this right now!"

Harry looked wounded. "What did I do?"

Hermione leaned across the table toward him, glanced around to be certain nobody was paying attention to them, then hissed, "What, eight Animagus forms now? Nine? I've lost count! THAT's what you did! Why can't I do even *one*?"

Harry sat back, nonplussed. "I don't know," he said honestly. "I've told you everything I can think of to help you, Hermione. I haven't held anything back. I don't know what else to do to help you." He'd even changed her into a poodle toward the end of the previous school term to help her get over any fears she might have about the transformation.

Hermione sat back looking irritated, her arms crossed tightly, scowling fiercely. The boys could hear her foot tapping impatiently on the floor under the table. Finally, her face relaxed a bit, but she looked sad, sighing heavily. "I'm sorry. I'm just so frustrated."

"It's OK, Hermione," Harry said bracingly, "you'll get it eventually."

She sighed heavily, her shoulders sagging. "Actually, I probably won't," she admitted.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, leaning toward her and putting his hand on her arm in concern.

"I've been researching all the Animagi in recorded history," she began

Both boys looked at her in open-mouthed shock.

"Oh, don't look like that," she chided them. "There aren't that many."

"What did you find out?" Harry prompted her.

"Every single one seems to have been either pureblood or half-blood like you, Harry," she said despondently. "Not one Muggleborn."

"You're kidding!" Harry said, amazed.

"I wish I were," she said with a sigh.

"Have you talked to McGonagall about this?" Ron said quietly.

"Yes. She was as surprised as I was by the results of my research. She looked over my notes and agreed, not one was a Muggleborn." Hermione looked despondent.

"What about Peter Pettigrew?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Pureblood, can you believe it?" she replied, shaking her head in disbelief. "How such a creepy, awful person could be pureblood. . . ."

"Uh, can we say 'Malfoy?'" Ron said with a snigger.

"Watch it, Ginny's coming over," Harry warned quietly. Ginny still flinched whenever she heard Malfoy's name due to his kidnapping and abusing her during the summer.

"Hi!" Ginny said brightly. "What are you working on?"

"Human to animal transfigurations," Harry replied with a smile, pulling a chair out beside him for her.

"That sounds exciting. I can't wait to do those!" she said enthusiastically. "What are you doing?"

Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was still fuming. "I suspect Hermione is about to turn me into a baboon," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Ginny laughed. "A baboon? Why?"

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"I've annoyed her," he said with a casual shrug. "Go ahead, Hermione, you know you want to do it. Just do remember to reverse it when you think you've punished me enough, all right?" He gave her a cheeky grin. She stuck her tongue out at him in reply.

"How did you annoy her?" Ginny asked, astonished.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear, since several younger students had just seated themselves nearby, "Because she can't get the Animagus transformation."

Ginny sat back and looked at him seriously. "Oh. I see. And yet you're willing to let her change you into something?"

"I think changing me into a baboon or something equally detestable will satisfy her. Aren't baboons the ones with the bright red bums?" he said, working hard to tease Hermione out of her dark mood. He glanced at her and saw a smile starting in her eyes.

"Yeah, I think they do have red bums, but not all the time, or not all of them. I don't know that much about them honestly," Ginny replied, looking uncertainly from Harry to Hermione. "Are you sure you want to let her?"

"She's the smartest witch in our year," Harry replied confidently. "If she can't change me back, McGonagall can do it. And Hermione is, of course, the best at this in class every day. This would just be practice."

"I'm not the best," Hermione said doggedly. "You began changing Ron into a collie long before he worked out how to do it himself, and that was months ago."

"Well, erm, that's just one person, one animal. . ." Harry said, trying his best to mollify her.

Hermione sighed and stood up suddenly. "Let's go and find an empty classroom, then," she said determinedly. "Baboons are rather active. You might need room to run."

"Still angry with me, are you?" Harry said, giving her his most charming smile.

Hermione sighed. "No, I'm not angry with you, Harry. But I do think we need more room to work in. I'm sorry I blew up at you. It's not your fault you're better at something than I am."

He leaned over and rapped his knuckles gently on top of her head. "I fly better than you, too, y'know."

"Oh, sod off!" she said, laughing at last. She couldn't resist Harry when he was in one of his playful moods.

"OK," he said amiably. "Still going to turn me into a baboon?"

"Of course! It sounds like a wonderful idea to me," she said, gathering her things and packing them in her bag.

Ron and Ginny had watched this exchange curiously, looking from Hermione to Harry as if they were watching a tennis match. When Hermione closed her bag decisively and looked at

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Ron and Harry expectantly, the two of them packed up and followed her docilely out of the portrait hole, Ginny trailing after them.

"Don't you have work to do?" Harry said when she caught him up and took his hand in hers.

"Right now, I'm looking after your best interests," she said quietly, so Ron and Hermione couldn't hear her. "I'm going with you. If she loses her temper again, or can't change you back, I'll make sure you're taken care of."

"That's my girl, always looking after poor Harry," he said, leaning down and kissing the top of her head.

"Well, somebody has to do it!" she said, leaning her cheek against his arm and smiling up at him.

"This looks good," Hermione said, opening an empty classroom. The others followed her in and set their things down. Once the boys had opened their books and gone through the instructions again, Hermione said, "Harry, were you serious? Will you let me change you into something?"

"Course. Even a baboon, if it will make you happy," he said agreeably.

"All right then. Ron, Ginny, stand back," Hermione warned, pushing up her sleeves and getting a good grip on her wand. She stared seriously at Harry for a moment, concentrated on the word "baboon," then said "*Abeo vir tenus bestia*," and waved her wand in the prescribed manner. With a small "pop" Harry disappeared and a large male baboon squatted where Harry had been.

"Wow, Hermione! That was great!" Ginny said in admiration. "Now change him back!"

"No, wait," Ron prompted, a grin on his face. "Give him a chance to play. Look at him. He can't wait."

Ron was right. The baboon was bouncing up and down on its legs, as if trying out its new body. Suddenly it screeched and bounded across the room, leaping from desk to desk, jumping up to swing from the rafters, then dropping easily to the floor and rolling over and over before stopping in front of Ginny and leaning affectionately against her leg, wrapping its tail around her possessively. She reached down and scratched the long hair behind its ears.

"You're a very handsome baboon, Harry," she said, smiling at him.

The baboon opened its mouth and hooted, showing its enormous fangs as it bounced up and down on its legs beside her.

Hermione was laughing by this time. "Well done, Harry! You make a wonderful baboon. Are you ready for me to change you back?"

The baboon rubbed its cheek on Ginny's leg and looked up at her, then over at Hermione and Ron. It moved away from Ginny, sat back on its haunches and gazed steadily at Hermione.

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She did the reversal charm, and Harry was instantly himself, standing there with a huge grin on his face, his eyes sparkling.

"Brilliant, Hermione!" he said enthusiastically. "Full marks!"

"What's it like being a baboon?" Ron said, grinning at his friend.

"It's fun, actually. Those legs are like tremendous springs – I could do fantastic jumps with them," Harry replied. "I wished you were a baboon too, so we could chase each other. I kept thinking there should be others like me around, and that it would be great fun to play with them."

"Well, baboons are social animals and live in large groups," Hermione said wisely. "Maybe that's why you felt that way."

Harry just shrugged in response, his eyes still dancing merrily.

"Harry, are you willing to be a baboon again?" Ron said hopefully.

"Sure, mate. So it's your turn, eh?" Harry replied easily.

"Yeah," Ron said, "if you don't mind."

"Nah. It was fun!" Harry replied, looking at Ron confidently. "Have a go, then."

They had practiced this transformation in class many, many times, with mixed results. Ron had finally begun to have regular success with it, as long as he only did dogs or wolves. He was nervous about trying to turn his best friend into something other than some form of canine.

"Go on, Ron, I know you can do this," Harry encouraged him.

Harry's trust in him gave Ron confidence, so he took a deep breath, concentrated on the word "baboon," waved his wand and said the incantation. There sat Harry as a baboon again.

"Wicked!" Ron breathed, breaking into delighted laughter. "It worked! Look at him! I did it!"

"Good one, Ron!" Ginny complimented him.

"I knew you could do this once you believed in yourself enough," Hermione said supportively.

The baboon took off across the room again, bounding onto the window ledge and then leaping up to the chain that supported the chandelier. He went hand over hand up the chain and soon sat on the swaying chandelier, where he screeched happily, keeping it moving with wide swings of his tail. He started pulling candles out of their holders and bombarding his friends with them, making a monkey sound somewhat resembling a laugh all the while.

"OK, Harry, come down now!" Ron said, laughing as he caught the thrown candles. "Come on, or I'll change you back up there and you can make your own way down!"

"Or he'll just change into a bird and fly down," Hermione said, a bit sadly.

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The baboon held his hands out expectantly, and Ron tossed the candles back up to him. After replacing the candles in their sockets, the baboon climbed down to hang by his long arms from the edge of the chandelier, then started it swinging widely, letting go at just the right moment to land neatly on the window ledge. He scampered down and settled on his haunches in front of Ron, looking up at him expectantly.

Ron did the reversal charm and instantly, Harry was revealed, but not the Harry they knew. He still had the back legs and tail of a baboon.

"Erm, Ron? Could you fix this?" he said, snorting with laughter.

Ron's eyes were wide with shock. "I'm sorry! Yes, hang on," he said, flustered. "I don't know what I did wrong. Let me check the book again." He checked the book and turned back to Harry, trying the incantation again. No change. Ron ran his hands frantically through his hair, making it stand on end. "Bloody hell! I don't know what I'm doing wrong!"

"I'd honestly like my own lower half back again, if you don't mind," Harry said patiently.

"This didn't happen in class," he said in frustration. "I don't know what I did wrong."

"Just try it again," Harry said reasonably.

"OK," he said nervously, then waved his wand and said the reversal incantation once more.

Harry sat there gazing at him hopefully, still with a baboon's back legs and tail.

"Damn, damn, damn. I'm sorry, mate!" Ron said in frustration.

"Ron," Hermione said, "point your wand over in the corner and show me the movement again." He complied. "I think you made too much of a flick at the end."

"Really?" he said, hope lighting his eyes. Hermione was wonderful at spotting even the tiniest error in wand movement, and he trusted her judgement completely.

"Yes. Try it again," she said supportively.

He had another go, and Harry finally had his own legs and no tail at all.

"Whew, thanks!" he said in relief.

"Ron, you need to do it again," Hermione said. "Harry, do you mind?"

Harry sighed. "All right. Have another go."

"You trust me after all that?" Ron said in disbelief.

"Why not? You fixed it eventually. You'll never learn if you don't try," Harry said reasonably.

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And so it went. Hermione and Ron both practiced on Harry, who said he enjoyed being a baboon. Ginny laughed at his antics, and paid close attention so that it would be easier for her when she had to do such transformations her seventh year.

After about an hour of work, Harry was getting tired. "I think it's my turn, now," he said.

"Uh. . .OK," Hermione said hesitantly. "Which of us do you want to change?"

"How about both of you," he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "I was lonely as a baboon. They're supposed to be in groups, you know."

"OK, if that's what you want to do, go ahead," she said bravely.

"I'll do Ron first, how's that?" he said, noticing that she was nervous about the whole thing.

"Fine with me, mate," said Ron, who'd been turned into a collie by Harry numerous times before he'd conquered his Animagus transformation himself. Moments later, a baboon sat where Ron had stood.

"Well, of course you're good at this," Hermione said with a sigh.

Harry just shrugged and gave her a cheeky grin. "Ready?"

She braced herself. "All right. Go ahead." A moment later, she was a baboon with a bright red bum.

"Harry, why's Hermione's bum red and Ron's isn't? Yours wasn't, either," Ginny said suddenly.

"I don't know," he said, scratching his head. "Maybe because she's female?"

The two baboons sat close together, making soft sounds and grooming each other's fur.

"That's interesting," Harry said, tilting his head. "I thought they would have wanted to run and play like I did. The baboon in me was just itching to get up on that chandelier."

"Uh-oh," Ginny said, bursting into laughter as the male baboon started being overly friendly with the female, grunting happily as he pushed her face down on the floor and grabbed her shoulders. "I think their inner baboons have something different in mind! You'd better stop them before this gets embarrassing!"

Harry was doing his best to stifle his laughter so he could say the incantations correctly. A moment later, Ron and Hermione stood where the baboons had been, both of them blushing madly and looking uneasily at each other. Ron was holding his hand over his crotch, as well.

"Now I know why McGonagall has us do all different kinds of animals in class," Harry said, shouting with laughter now. "Sorry, guys, I didn't even think about that kind of thing happening."

Ron's face was redder than his hair. He snorted with embarrassed laughter. "Who knew a red bum would be that sexy?" he muttered. "That stupid baboon took me over! I'm sorry,

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Hermione." He stood uneasily a moment more, his hand still covering his crotch. "Erm, excuse me," he said, then left the room, his friends doing their best to stifle their amused grins. Once he was gone, they doubled up with laughter.

"OK, we know better than to do that again," Hermione said when she caught her breath.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I honestly didn't expect. . .I mean, I was lonely as a baboon, I didn't know. . .I'm. . . ." Harry was breathless with laughter again.

"Boy, am I glad I saw that," Ginny said when she was able to talk again. "If any of you had told me about it, I wouldn't have believed you!"

"You're not going to tell anyone, are you?" Hermione said, looking in horror from Ginny to Harry and back again.

Harry placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "No, Hermione, we won't tell. No problem. But it was funny, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't call it 'funny,' exactly," she said, squirming a bit under their scrutiny. "I thought he was pretty hot, as well." Her comment made them all burst into laughter again.

"OK, let's go back to the Common Room," Harry said finally. "We can practice making each other into smaller animals, how's that? Ginny does have homework to do, so she needs to get back, and we all have other work to do as well."

"And we should check on poor Ron," Ginny said, going off into gales of laughter again.

When they arrived in the Common Room, Ron was nowhere to be found.

"I'll go and look for him," Harry said, setting his books down on the table across from Hermione's and taking the steps two at a time. First he checked their dormitory. No Ron. He went up to the Head Boy Suite and found Ron sitting in an armchair, his face still red.

"All right there, mate?" Harry asked, flopping into the chair across from Ron's.

"Never better," Ron said sarcastically. "Why'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make her so sexy?"

"I didn't. I just turned her into a baboon," Harry said reasonably. "She's a girl, so she became a female baboon. I guess you just found her attractive."

"Damned right I did," Ron said, his face still a bit red.

"Are you OK?" Harry asked, concerned.

Ron sighed. "Yeah, I'm fine. I was just. . .well. . .erm. . .I'm fine now," he said with a shrug.

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"I'm sorry. I honestly didn't know there would be a problem."

"It's OK, Harry, really. Lesson learned, right?" Ron replied, trying to be philosophical about it, but then he sighed. "You do know Ginny will never let me live this down? She's too much like the twins to let something like this go."

Harry did his best to stifle a grin. He knew Ron was right about how the twins would treat such an experience, and that Ginny was far too much like them in many ways, but he trusted her to be kind to her brother. "I'll speak to her, all right? I think she'll leave you alone about it."

"No, she won't," Ron grumbled.

"Look, mate, it was funny! Nothing happened except for all four of us being embarrassed at what was *about* to happen! So we may laugh about it on occasion, but we're laughing at the baboons, not you, Ron." Harry looked hopefully at his friend. "It really was funny, you know."

"I suppose."

"Tell you what. You can turn both me and Ginny into baboons if she gives you a hard time, and then you'll be able to laugh at us. How's that?" Harry said, feeling quite charitable about his own willingness to be a laughingstock among his friends.

"You'd do that?" Ron said in amazement.

"Yeah, for you, I would," Harry said seriously. "And I'll tell Ginny that, as well."

Ron finally sat back and smiled. "Yeah. That should take care of it. She won't want to be embarrassed that way. Thanks!"

"Right, then!" Harry said, standing up and leaning over to clap his friend on the knee. "Let's go. We're going to do smaller animals now – and one at a time!"

"You're on!" Ron said, getting to his feet and following Harry down the spiral staircase.

When they got to the Common Room, both girls looked at Ron, Hermione in concern, Ginny with laughter in her eyes as well as concern. Harry took Ginny aside and had a little talk with her, after which she still had laughter bubbling below the surface of her every word, but she managed to contain it admirably.

"OK, so small animals. What shall we try?" Hermione said, looking from Ron to Harry.

"I wished I could be a frog for the Second Task of the Tournament," Harry said amiably. "Why don't you turn me into a frog?"

"All right," Hermione said, "if you're sure?"

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"My fate is in your hands," he said, sitting back and spreading his hands as he spoke. "Do remind Ginny to kiss me to turn me back into a handsome prince, though, if I get stuck? Please?"

"I heard that!" Ginny said from the table where she was hard at work again studying with other Sixth Years. "I'll remember."

"Good enough for me," Harry said. "Fire away!"

Hermione did the incantation and turned him into a handsome green frog. She lifted him from his chair and put him on the table, where he hopped around, climbing on their books, dropping into Ron's lap at one point when he slipped on a piece of parchment.

"Watch it there, Harry," Ron chortled, then set him carefully back on the table.

"Where'd you get the frog?" Neville asked as he passed by. "He's a beaut!"

"It's Harry. I transfigured him," Hermione explained.

"Well done!" Neville said, then started to move on.

"Neville! Wait!" Hermione said suddenly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Where's Trevor?"

"Right here," he said, pulling his toad from his pocket. "Why?"

"It would be fun to see if Harry can talk to him, since Harry's a frog," Hermione said.

"Yeah, Neville!" Ron said enthusiastically. "Bang him on the table next to Harry."

Neville smiled and set Trevor in front of the frog that was Harry, so the two were face to face. The frog croaked at Trevor and tilted its head as if waiting for a reply. Trevor croaked in reply and soon a regular "conversation" was going on between them.

"Wow!" Neville said. "What do you suppose they're saying?"

"We'll find out when we change Harry back," Ron said confidently.

After a while, the frog and toad quieted, the frog looking expectantly at Hermione, the toad looking much less listless than it normally did. Moments later, Harry was sitting in the middle of the table, his long legs knocking over Hermione's ink bottle when they appeared.

"Sorry!" he said, scrambling to get off the table without making further messes.

"It's OK," she said, cleaning up the mess with a wave of her wand. "My fault. I should have put you in your chair first. How was it being a frog?"

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"Not as much fun as the baboon," Harry admitted, "but interesting in its own way."

"What did Trevor say?" Neville asked eagerly.

"Let's take Trevor and go up to Ron's suite," Harry said, putting his hand on Neville's shoulder and looking seriously into his eyes. "We need to talk."

"Huh?" Neville asked, shocked.

"What's up?" Ron asked, frowning.

"Just come with me," Harry said, picking up Trevor very gently and handing him to Neville. "Come on, let's go. Leave that stuff, we won't be that long," he told Hermione, who'd started to pack up her books.

In Ron's suite, Ron and Hermione shared one large squashy armchair and Neville sat in the other while Harry paced.

"How long have you had Trevor?" Harry asked Neville.

"My Great Uncle Algie gave him to me just before I came to Hogwarts."

"Where did he get him?" Harry asked.

"He bought him somewhere," Neville said with a shrug. "Why?"

"Neville, I don't know how to say this except straight out. Trevor isn't a toad. He's a wizard," Harry said, watching Neville's face closely.

"*What?*" Neville said in shock, studying Harry's face carefully. "Why are you saying that?"

"When I was a frog, Trevor and I talked," Harry said seriously. "You saw that, right?" Neville nodded. "He told me he's a wizard. He made a witch absolutely furious with him and she put him under an enchantment. He's been stuck this way ever since."

"You're kidding!" Hermione said, a surprised laugh bursting out of her.

"No, I'm not," Harry said, turning to look at her. She looked into his eyes, which were a troubled, turbulent green and not laughing at all. "Some witch turned him into a toad and tossed him into a pond. He'd been there for years and years before somebody caught him and took him to wherever Neville's great-uncle bought him. All those times he escaped here at school? He was trying to find some way to get changed back." He turned back to Neville. "When we first got here, and you couldn't find him, and he showed up at McGonagall's feet? He knew she was the Transfiguration teacher. Maybe he went to Hogwarts too, I don't know. He's been trying to get her attention ever since he got here, hoping she could change him back."

"He's been turned into all kinds of things," Hermione said in horror. "Snape even made him a tadpole once!"

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"That's true," Ron added. "So why didn't any of those spells make him a wizard?"

"Because none of them were supposed to make him a wizard," Harry said reasonably. "One of us should try this spell on Trevor, Neville, to see if we can turn him back into a wizard. All right?"

"Uh. . .yeah, I guess," Neville said, still in shock over this revelation. "You do it, Harry, or Hermione. You two are the best at this spell. I'm still hopeless at it."

"OK," Harry said, taking Trevor out of Neville's trembling hands and setting him on the floor. Harry stood back and did the reversal incantation and proper wand movement, but nothing happened.

"Nothing happened," Ron said helpfully.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Now what?"

"In fairy tales," Hermione offered quietly, "a frog can be kissed to turn him into a handsome prince."

Harry smiled. "D'you suppose Trevor is a handsome prince?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Want to kiss him and find out?" Ron said, snorting with laughter.

"Luna used to kiss him all the time," Neville said quietly. "Nothing happened."

"There goes that theory," Harry said with a shrug. "I think this is beyond us. Let's take him to McGonagall. That's where he wants to go anyway."

"OK, let's go," Hermione said decisively, and the three boys followed her willingly enough through the Common Room to the portrait hole.

Ginny saw the determined-looking group leaving and followed them, having to jog to keep them in sight once they got into the corridor.

"What's up?" she asked Harry when she caught up with them.

He told her briefly what was going on.

"You're kidding!"

"Nope," he said. "We're going to see if McGonagall can change him back."

The five friends soon stood outside Professor McGonagall's quarters, Trevor trembling in Neville's hands. Hermione knocked on the door.

"Yes?" Professor McGonagall said as she opened the door. She was wearing a tartan dressing gown, a hairbrush in her hand, her long black hair in loose waves around her shoulders. It was

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a shocking sight to students used to seeing her with her hair in a bun so tight it pulled her eyes into a slightly almond shape.

"Professor, we're sorry to disturb you, but we have a problem," Hermione began as they followed her into her sitting room. "Well, Harry should explain. He's the one who talked to Trevor."

"Trevor?" the professor said, confused.

Neville held his toad out toward her nervously. Trevor struggled in his hands, trying to get to the professor. "Harry says he's not a toad. Harry says he's a . . . a wizard," Neville said uneasily.

"What?" she said in disbelief. "Potter, I expect better of you than to tease Longbottom this way."

"I'm not teasing," Harry said seriously. "Hermione turned me into a frog and Neville walked by and Ron told him to bang Trevor on the table next to me so we could talk. . . and then we did."

"You did what?"

"We talked." Harry went on to tell her all he'd learned from Trevor. "I tried to change him back into a wizard using the Human-to-Animal Transfiguration Reversal Spell, but nothing happened. Nothing at all. We don't know what to do. Trevor told me he's been trying to get to you all these years, all the time he's been at Hogwarts. He thinks you can help him. I think he may be an old student of yours. He knew you taught Transfiguration when he got here." The students sat watching their professor expectantly.

"Well," she said, thinking hard. "I should speak to him myself to see if I can find out what kind of spell he's under. Miss Granger, could you please change me into a frog?"

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said, taking out her wand.

"Wait!" the professor said. She looked at Hermione beadily. "Has your reversal spell worked every time?"

"Yes, Professor, and Harry's has, as well," Hermione assured her. "He's been doing this transfiguration longer than I have. Perhaps you'd prefer he do it?"

Professor McGonagall looked at her two best Transfiguration students, Hermione and Harry. "Just be certain to change me back," she said finally.

"All right," Hermione said, then looked at Harry. "You do it. You have a lot more experience at this than I do."

"OK," he said, then turned to his professor. "Would you prefer to be a frog or a toad?" he asked, an impish grin on his face.

"Either. Just get on with it, Potter!" McGonagall said tartly.

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A moment later, she was a very handsome toad, similar to Trevor. The two began croaking at each other immediately. After several long minutes, the toad that was McGonagall turned to face Harry again. He changed her back into herself and she sat down in her easy chair, a look of relief on her face.

"Are you all right, professor?" Ginny asked in concern.

"I'll be fine," she said with a shudder. "I haven't allowed anyone else to transfigure me in decades. It's a bit unnerving."

"Did I do something wrong?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No, no, Potter, you did very well. Full marks," she said distractedly. "Ten points to Gryffindor. Or maybe I should make that twenty." She sat rubbing her forehead for a while.

"Would you like some tea?" Ron asked hesitantly, looking around to see where her teapot was.

"Yes, actually, that would be lovely," she agreed, then waved her wand and a tea tray appeared, complete with six cups and a pile of cakes and biscuits. "Help yourselves," she offered as she poured herself a cup. "Sit down, sit down," she added to the still-standing students.

As the students sat down and drank their tea, the room stayed silent except for the sound of sipped tea and the occasional crunch of a biscuit being bitten into. Finally, McGonagall broke the silence.

"Trevor is a wizard who was put under a spell by a witch he. . .betrayed, shall we say, many years ago."

"Is he a Dark wizard?" Ginny asked quickly.

"Oh, no, Miss Weasley, nothing like that. He was just stupid," she said in disgust. Trevor croaked in protest. "Well, you were, you know," McGonagall told the toad tartly.

"What happened?" Neville asked nervously.

"It seems he was a married man, and he. . .well. . .he decided he needed a girlfriend as well as a wife," she said reluctantly. "His wife turned him into a toad when she found out."

"What did she do to the girlfriend?" Ron asked.

"She turned her into wild oats, since her husband had been sowing them with her," McGonagall said in disgust.

"She turned a witch into oats? I didn't know you could turn people into plants," Neville said, suddenly interested.

"She was a Muggle, which doubly insulted the witch who did this," McGonagall snapped. "The witch who put this spell on your toad and that poor Muggle woman is a very powerful one. We should talk to the headmaster before we do anything else."

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The entire group was soon seated in Dumbledore's office, telling him the whole story.

"Indeed? How fascinating!" he said, studying Trevor with interest. "Trevor, have you learned your lesson?" he said, smiling at the toad, which gave a long, sad croak in reply. "Right, then. Minerva, what have you tried?"

"Nothing yet. I was concerned about raising the ire of the witch who enchanted him against these students if we reversed her spell."

"How long ago did all of this happen?"

"About forty years ago," McGonagall replied, "if I understood him correctly."

"Does he know if she's still alive?" Dumbledore asked.

"He says she is. I don't know how he knows."

"Do we know who she is?" Dumbledore asked.

"I didn't ask him. I think it would be hard to translate her name from toad language to ours anyway. I wasn't able to understand him when he tried to tell me his name. Our communication was a bit broken, at best."

"I didn't have any trouble understanding him," Harry said, perplexed.

"You're studying Mermish now, aren't you, Harry?" Dumbledore said with a benign smile.

"Yes."

"Perhaps there's some crossover between Mermish and toad language," Dumbledore suggested. "Why don't we turn you into a toad and let you ask him the name of the witch and whether there might be reprisals against any of us for changing him back into a wizard."

Harry was quickly turned into a toad and began conversing with Trevor. After a few minutes, he turned back to Dumbledore and stared at him.

"Are you quite finished?" Dumbledore asked. Harry croaked at him. Dumbledore looked around the room. "Can anyone think of anything else we should ask him? No one? All right then." He changed Harry back into himself and looked at the young man expectantly. "What did you learn?"

Harry looked anxiously at Neville. "I don't know how to tell you this, mate," he said uneasily.

"What?" Neville replied, tilting his head and studying Harry's face. "What did he say?"

Harry gulped. "Uh. . .his name is Rupert. . .Rupert Longbottom. The witch who transfigured him is your gran, Neville. He's your grandfather."

"*WHAT?*" Neville was white with shock.

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Dumbledore conjured a tea tray and poured a cup for Neville, adding a drop of potion to it before handing it over. "I've added a wee dose of the Draught of Peace to help you calm yourself, Mr. Longbottom," he said as Neville took the cup and saucer in shaking hands.

Dumbledore turned back to Harry. "You're certain of this?"

"Yes." Harry's eyes were wide. He watched Neville nervously. Harry didn't know how he would react to such news. It certainly seemed to be disconcerting to poor Neville. "I'm sorry, Neville."

"Not your fault," Neville said stiffly, calmer now but still trembling. "I don't understand."

"Understand what, Mr. Longbottom?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

"She said he was dead. Why would she say that?" He turned sad, confused eyes to his headmaster. "Why?"

"She was very angry with him, apparently," Dumbledore said. He looked at Professor McGonagall. "If Mrs. Longbottom is the witch we have to worry about, I suppose we're safe. She's a powerful witch, but I don't believe she'd take her anger out on any of these students."

Minerva laughed, a short, bitter sound. "And what about us, Albus?" she said with half a smile.

"I believe we can handle her," he assured her. She nodded. "Did he tell you what type of spell it was?"

"I didn't understand him well enough on some things – that was one of them," she said regretfully.

"Did he tell you about the spell, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. Harry shook his head. "Right then," the old wizard said, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction. He looked around at the gathered students. "What you are about to see must not leave this room, understood? Neither what I'm going to do, nor the spell itself. I trust you lot, or I'd make you leave the room." They all nodded solemnly, then all but Harry and McGonagall gasped as Dumbledore changed into quite a handsome frog.

"I didn't know he could do that," Hermione breathed. "He's registered as a bumblebee Animagus."

"You'd be amazed at what he can do," Harry murmured.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said warningly.

Harry looked up at her and smiled innocently. "What?"

She arched a dark eyebrow at him over her square spectacles, which was reprimand enough.

"I wasn't going to say anything else, you know," he said in his own defence.

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Meanwhile, the frog and toad were conversing like old friends. After a while, Dumbledore changed back into himself, a smile on his face. "Oh yes, he's learned his lesson. He won't give anyone any trouble. He just wants to be able to live the rest of his days as a human." He stood and went to one of his bookcases, running a long finger along the spines until he found the title he was seeking. "Yes, I think this will do admirably." He carried the book to his desk and sat it next to the toad, still studying the text as he sat down. "Yes, yes," he muttered as he read. "Ummm. Yes."

Finally, he looked at the toad. "Are you ready, Rupert?" The toad croaked. "Let's put you in a chair so you'll be comfortable when you return," Dumbledore said considerately, then conjured a chair beside him and set the toad in its seat. He mumbled a long incantation, waving his wand in an intricate pattern and suddenly, a wizened old wizard sat in the chair next to him in filthy, shabby robes forty years out of style.

"Oh, my!" the man croaked, his voice scratchy and crackly from disuse. "Thank you!" He stretched his arms and legs, worked the kinks out of his back, and ran his hands through his long white hair and beard. "Gracious, my hair was black! Look at me now! I must look like my granddad!" He looked at the shocked faces around him. "I cannot thank you enough. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you've done. I will never forget it," he said, looking seriously into each face in turn, ending with Neville. "And you, my dear, dear boy. You have taken such good care of me. Thank you for that."

"OK," Neville said in a small voice.

"We have a bit of catching up to do, you and I," the old man said, smiling at the nervous young man, who nodded timidly in return.

"Mr. Longbottom, we have guest rooms in the castle where you are welcome to stay for a few days, so you and Neville can chat. Then we'll have to sort out how to get you on your feet back in the human world again," Dumbledore said kindly. "Would you like me to owl your wife?"

"My wife?" the man said, looking at Dumbledore in amazement. "I suppose she still is. She never remarried." He shook his head. "I don't know what I was thinking. I loved my wife. I just. . ."

"There are young people present, sir," McGonagall warned him, her tone dripping acid. "Please restrict your comments accordingly."

"Ah yes. Well." The man picked at his robes nervously. "You're quite right, of course. I have a lot to think about, plans to make, things to do. . . ."

"I'm sure you do," Dumbledore said smoothly. "I'll take you to our guest rooms, where you and Neville can chat." He rose and escorted the group to the spiral staircase. "Thank you, Harry, Hermione, for bringing this to our attention. You've done the Longbottom family a great service this evening, I believe. Thank you, as well, Minerva. Now, I believe you lot have homework to finish?" he said, prodding the teenagers toward Gryffindor Tower, while leading Rupert and Neville Longbottom the opposite direction. "You'll see Neville later. He deserves some time to talk with his grandfather."

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"Wicked!" Ron said, shaking his head as they walked away. "Trevor was Neville's grandfather! Who would have thought?"

"I'll bet he has some interesting stories to tell," Hermione said, her eyes glowing. "Can you imagine spending so much time as an animal?"

"Uh, Hermione?" Harry said quietly. "Toads eat ants, frogs, flies, worms, yucky stuff like that. They spend most of their time trying to find food. They hibernate in the winter. I don't think he's going to have a lot of fascinating things to tell you, quite honestly."

She deflated a bit, but then brightened again. "Maybe not. But you do! I'm going to want all the details, Harry. What a great story this will make!"

"Story for what?" Harry asked, horrified. "Not the paper again?"

"No. I have something else in mind," she said mysteriously, but then wouldn't say anything else, deflecting all of his questions with comments about all the homework they had to finish that evening.

"Hermione, if I see this story in the paper or a magazine. . ." Harry said, getting a bit annoyed.

She hastened to assure him. "Don't worry. I wouldn't do that to you. But it would make an interesting story, wouldn't it?" she said wistfully.

"Yeah," he agreed.

The next morning, Harry and Ron had awakened and dressed early and now sat together bouncing quietly on Ron's bed, waiting for Neville to wake up.

Dean noticed the expectant looks on their faces and the fact that they were sitting close together and whispering before they noticed he'd got up. They stopped whispering and smiled brightly at him when he emerged from his curtained bed.

"Good morning!" Harry said brightly. "How are you this morning, Dean?"

"Sleep well?" Ron asked, equally solicitous.

"Yeah," Dean said, knowing they were up to something. "What are you two up to this time?"

"Us?" Ron said innocently. "We're not up to anything, are we, Harry?"

"Nope, nothing at all," Harry agreed cheerfully. "We're just in a silly mood."

Dean just shook his head. They were obviously conspiring about something again. Harry and Ron were always up to something, and Dean was used to it by now. At least they didn't play as many pranks as the Weasley twins had during their stay at Hogwarts. "See you later," Dean said, then left them to it. They never played any tricks on him, so he knew he was safe. Whatever it was, he'd find out about it when it happened, and that was all right with him. He

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had girls to meet up with, which was a much higher priority to him than worrying about any Potter/Weasley conspiracies.

When Neville finally parted his curtains and poked his sleep-tousled head out, they both smiled at him expectantly.

"Well?" Ron prompted excitedly. "What's he like?"

"Huh?" Neville said muzzily, rubbing his eyes.

"When did you get to bed, mate?" Harry said sympathetically. He'd had a lot of sleepless nights and recognized the look on Neville's face.

"Late. After two, I think," Neville said, finally straightening to his full height, the bones in his back cracking as he stretched the kinks out.

"How was it?" Ron urged. "Getting to know your granddad. What's he like?"

Neville shook his head, shoved his curtains open wide and sat back down on his bed. He scratched his head, making his hair stand up nearly as wildly as Harry's did when it was shorter. He sat with his head bowed, picking at a loose thread on the hem of his pyjama bottoms, lost in thought, his face quite serious.

Harry leaned toward him. "What's wrong, Neville?" he asked quietly.

"It's just so weird, you know?" the other boy replied uneasily, glancing up at his friends a moment before going back to picking at that thread.

"Yeah, it's weird, all right," Ron agreed. "Is he nice? What did you talk about?"

"Maybe Neville doesn't want to share it," Harry said abruptly. "Let's go on down to breakfast."

"No, that's all right," Neville replied. "If it wasn't for you, Harry, I wouldn't know about him. You have a right to know. I owe you that."

"No, you don't owe me that or anything else," Harry said firmly. "We were being nosy, and that's not fair. We'll see you later. Do you want us to bring you some breakfast?"

"No, don't go," Neville pleaded. "I . . . it's hard for me to make sense of it all."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Harry said gently. "We don't want to be a bother."

"You're no bother," Neville said, smiling a bit as he glanced at his two friends. "Well. . . he told me what happened. He's sorry for what he did. He and my gran loved each other, he said, but then he saw this beautiful woman. . . . The way he talked about her, she could have been part-Veela, but he says she was a Muggle."

"Maybe she was part-Veela but was a squib?" Ron offered.

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"Maybe. I suppose that would explain it," Neville said with a shrug. "He lived in a pond for years, not that far from our house, actually. He thought about trying to get the attention of the wizards who came to collect frogs and toads from time to time, but he knew that a lot of toad parts go into potions, so he was afraid to get caught." Neville snorted, a nearly humourless laugh. "Someone finally caught him, but he sold him to a pet shop rather than using him in a potion. He recognized Great Uncle Algie when he came in the shop and tried to get his attention. That's why Uncle Algie bought him, because he'd never seen a toad that could do tricks. Trev. . .Rupert. . .my granddad. . .I don't know what to call him yet. . .he said he sprained his back trying to do back flips to get Uncle Algie's attention."

"Wow. I'd buy a toad that did back flips," Ron said with a grin. "Sounds pretty cool. That was a good idea he had."

"Yeah," Harry said encouragingly. "He was pretty smart to do that."

"Yeah," Neville said, finally beginning to relax a bit. "He hoped Uncle Algie would take him somewhere Gran would see him. She certainly saw him enough once I got him, but she never wanted to look at Trevor, so she never looked closely. I suppose if she had, she might have recognized him." He was quiet a moment, then smiled and went on. "My granddad was a botanist. He's where I get my interest in Herbology. He did research on medicinal herbs and was trying to hybridize some plants to have one herb have the healing power of two or more when he met that Muggle woman and my gran. . .well, you know."

"That's great, Neville," Harry said sincerely. "It's nice that you found out where you get your talents and interests." *I envy you, Neville, he thought sadly. I wish I could talk to my grandparents and find out how I turned out as I have, but I know such a thing will never happen. You don't know how lucky you are.*

"Yeah," Neville replied with a shy smile. "He said I'm a lot like he was when he was a kid." He sighed before going on. "He told me he's quite upset about what happened to my parents. Every time I visited the hospital, he'd hide for a while after we got back. I didn't know why. He told me it was because he was miserable that such a horrible thing happened to them."

"That's understandable," Ron said.

"Oh, and he knew McGonagall was the Transfiguration teacher because she taught my dad. Trev. . .Rupert," he shook his head in frustration, "my grandfather had Dumbledore as his Transfiguration teacher."

"Cool," Harry said. "Dumbledore's a great teacher. Your grandfather must have enjoyed having him. Did he and Dumbledore recognize each other when Dumbledore turned into a frog and talked with him?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask him," Neville said with a sad little shrug. "We spent most of our time talking about my gran and all that."

"Does he have any plans now? What's he going to do next?" Harry asked, hoping to get the conversation on a more cheerful note.

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"Professor Dumbledore owed my gran last night. Late last night, he came to, um, Rupert's quarters while we were still talking, and told us that Gran is coming today to see him. He said she didn't sound happy." Neville looked miserable.

"Is she angry that someone reversed the spell?" Harry said carefully.

"Oh, yeah! And she's simply furious that he's still alive. She'd hoped he would have been eaten by an owl by now, she said." Neville hung his head.

"Are you going to see her when she comes?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. Professor Dumbledore told us he'd stay with them until he was certain she wouldn't hex Rupert – my granddad – again. If they can get along at all, he'll have me come and visit them."

"Whoa. That's heavy," Ron said, impressed with all the amazing things suddenly happening in Neville's life.

All three boys were quiet for several minutes. Then Harry spoke. "So, Neville? You want to go to breakfast with us?"

Neville took his time answering. "OK."

"And Neville?" Harry added.

The other boy looked up at him. "Yeah?"

"If you want to talk to us about this, fine. If you don't want to talk to us about it, that's fine too. No pressure. OK?"

A slow smile spread across Neville's face. "Yeah. Thanks, Harry. I don't really want everyone else to know about this just yet. If anyone asks, Trevor's just lost again, OK?"

Harry smiled at his friend. "Of course!"

Chapter 14 – Transfiguration Complications

The ceiling in the Great Hall was stormy and grey, with roiling clouds scudding across the sky. It seemed a portentous sight when Harry, Ron, Neville, Ginny and Hermione arrived for breakfast that morning. The girls didn't question Neville's joining them for breakfast, but they did glance curiously at Ron and Harry, who both gave them a "tell you later" look.

The quiet murmurs and soft laughter of early morning breakfast were disturbed by the appearance of a formidable witch in the doorway of the Great Hall. She gripped her red handbag as if it was trying to escape. Her face was glowering, her eyes flashing furiously as she looked around at the various students. The stuffed vulture on her hat trembled with her barely suppressed rage. Spotting Ron's bright hair across from Harry's messy black hair – they were tall enough so that they were by far the easiest Gryffindors to spot in any crowd – she stormed down the length of the table, stopping behind Neville, who cringed and leaned away from her.

"What the *bloody hell* did you lot think you were doing?" she hissed at Harry and Ron, then glared at Neville, who cowered next to Harry. She finally fixed her stony gaze on Harry.

"Sorry?" Harry asked, realizing too late that he was just asking for trouble by answering her.

"Why did you transfigure that toad?" She glared from boy to boy, apparently blaming all three of them equally.

"Erm. . .homework?" Ron offered nervously.

"Homework? Homework! Since when does homework involve transfiguring someone's pet toad?" she demanded, her face twisted in a snarl.

"We've always transfigured our pets – Professor McGonagall assigns it to us," Hermione said carefully. "It's part of the curriculum. Trevor's been transfigured loads of times."

"Yeah, and we turned Hermione's cat into a rug not long ago," Ron said, doing his best to get the old witch's attention off of Trevor a bit. His mouth twitched as he tried not to smile. Turning Crookshanks into a rug had been a prank he and Harry had played on Hermione recently. She had not been all that amused by it, but Ron still thought it was funny.

Mrs. Longbottom stood there fuming, glaring from one of Neville's friends to the other, pondering which one to attack next. Her eyes fell on Harry again. "I suppose most of the blame is yours, Potter."

Harry glanced at Neville, who flinched miserably as his grandmother breathed angrily down his neck. He felt Ginny's tension beside him and noticed she had her hand on her wand. He placed his hand on top of hers, warning her silently to stay out of it, then looked over his shoulder at the woman, trying his best to wear his most innocent expression. "I was the one turned into a frog. How does that put the blame on me?"

"You're the one who talked to him," she growled.

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"Don't you think he's been punished enough?" Neville said suddenly. He stood up and turned to face his grandmother. At that moment, he realized for the first time that he was head and shoulders taller than her. "Quiet down, Gran. You're making a scene. Nothing was anyone's fault. Everything's fine."

"It most certainly is *not* fine!" she snapped.

"Have you been to see him yet?" Neville asked, keeping his voice low.

"No, I have not, and I don't plan to," she retorted. "How dare you reverse my hex!"

"Augusta," Dumbledore said, gliding up behind her quietly, "As I told you in my note, I am the one who reversed the hex. If anyone should receive your ire, it is I. May I invite you to my office, where we can have some tea and discuss matters privately?"

Mrs. Longbottom glared around, suddenly aware that hundreds of eyes were staring at her, amazed at the scene she was creating and curious about its cause.

"Yes," she blustered. "Tea would be fine." She gave her grandson and his friends each a glare that would blister paint, then turned to follow Dumbledore out of the Great Hall.

Neville sat down hard, as if all the air had been let out of him.

"Well done, Neville!" Hermione commended him. "You were wonderful!"

Neville's face was as white as parchment. "I can't believe I did that. I'm in so much trouble now. . . ."

"As are we all, mate," Ron said heartily, reaching across the table to clap Neville on the shoulder. "She's going to hex the lot of us, you watch and see." He snorted with sudden laughter.

"What's so funny?" Ginny wanted to know.

"The whole situation," Ron said, reaching for the platter of sausages and tipping several onto his plate. "Well, it is and it isn't. I mean, it sounds like something out of a fairy tale, doesn't it? So it's just funny that such a thing happened in real life. And she's trying to make us feel bad, but she's the one who could get in trouble, so that's not funny at all. I mean, hexing him so he's been a toad for over forty years! What was she thinking?"

"What kind of trouble?" Harry said curiously. Ron was still, as ever, his guide through the wizarding world, explaining things that seemed normal to Ron, but were still mysteries for Harry to learn about.

"Well, for one thing, she might wind up in Azkaban," Ron said casually as he smeared marmalade on his toast and took a huge bite.

"Oh, that's sensitive, Ron," Hermione snapped, nodding at Neville, who now had red blotches on his overly-white face.

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"Sowwy, Nebl," Ron muttered around his mouthful of food. With a tremendous effort, he managed to swallow. "I mean, really. It's like wrongful imprisonment, isn't it, what she did?"

"Yeah, and we've seen how concerned the Ministry is with that," Harry said sarcastically, recalling Sirius's twelve years in Azkaban with no trial at all.

"D'you really think they'll put my gran in jail?" Neville said in a small voice, his eyes wide and frightened.

Hermione was annoyed with the boys for making Neville even more nervous than he had been. "You lot are so insensitive," she snapped, glaring at Ron, then Harry.

"What did I do?" Harry asked, nonplussed.

"You asked the wrong question at the wrong time," she said, irritated. She reached over and put her hand on Neville's arm. "Don't worry, Neville. I'll go research this in the library and have an answer for you by dinnertime, all right? And I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will find some way to protect her."

"Protect her? After what she did?" Ron was horrified. "Are you on her side?"

"I'm on Neville's side! If you were paying attention, you'd know that!" she snapped.

Ron turned to Harry, his eyes confused. "What did I miss?"

Harry just shrugged. Ron and Hermione hadn't bickered in a long time. He looked from Ron to Hermione and wondered if something was going on besides their concern over Neville. His eyes found Ginny's. Her brown eyes looked as concerned as he felt.

"Let's all calm down," Ginny said after a moment. "Neville, Ron and Harry didn't mean anything by what they said. You know that, right?"

Neville looked from one boy to the other. "Yeah, I know. No problem, guys."

"Thanks," Ron said with a smile. "I didn't mean to . . ."

"No, seriously," Neville interrupted him. "No problem. And Harry, you asked a good question. I would like to know the answer myself." He turned to Hermione. "Let me know what you find out, all right? And thanks for doing the research for me. I don't know that I could do it."

"You have to talk to them, Neville, so you wouldn't have time anyway," she said, trying to comfort him.

"Yeah," he said, shaking his head as if to clear it. "I need to talk to them."

"It's Transfiguration first today, mate. Go on down and chat with your grandfather again," Ron encouraged him. "We'll talk to McGonagall for you. She'll understand."

"And we'll help you with the class work you miss, as well," Hermione promised.

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"Yeah. OK. Thanks." With that, Neville pushed away from the table, got up and left without having eaten a single bite of breakfast.

"What's up with Longbottom?" Blaise Zabini shouted across the Great Hall. "Does he need his granny to hold his hand in school now? What a ponce!"

"Shut up, Zabini," Harry warned quietly.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Zabini demanded, leaping to his feet so quickly that his bench fell over.

"That will do," Professor McGonagall said coldly, sweeping down the aisle. "Five points from Slytherin, Mr. Zabini, for provoking other students."

"Potter started it!" Zabini snarled.

"No, he did not. I heard the whole conversation, and I must say, Mr. Zabini, that I am appalled at your lack of sensitivity. Every student here knows that if a relative turns up at Hogwarts, there's some good reason for it. Your behaviour was abominable. If you don't calm down immediately, there will be more severe consequences than just a few points taken from your house."

Blaise sat down, grumbling something very rude under his breath.

McGonagall spun around and eyed him beadily. "I heard that, Mr. Zabini. A further five points from Slytherin for your cheek, as well as a detention. Come and see me at the end of the day to schedule it."

Zabini's face was flushed with anger, but he kept his mouth shut as he nodded his agreement.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, if I might see you two after you finish your breakfast, please?" McGonagall asked as she reached their seats. "Can you both come to my classroom a bit early?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "What's up?"

"We'll discuss it at that time." Seeing their anxious faces, she smiled. "Don't worry, you're in no trouble. And you handled yourself admirably just now, both of you. I saw the whole thing, from the time Mrs. Longbottom came in. I started to intervene, but then I saw that you had the situation well in hand for the most part, and the headmaster stepped in at just the right moment, so I didn't really need to interfere. Poor Mr. Longbottom has a lot to deal with these days. I'm glad you are being such good friends to him. Thank you for that. I will see you in my room in a few minutes, then?"

"Yes, Professor," both boys agreed.

"I've been meaning to talk with you about this for some time now, but you've been so busy with start-of-school things, I thought I'd wait until you'd settled into your routine," McGonagall said when the boys had taken seats in front of her desk. Hermione sat in the back

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of the room, trying to act inconspicuous. McGonagall ignored her, knowing the boys would tell her everything as soon as they got together anyway.

"We have a rare opportunity here. You two are the first Animagi in many years, certainly the first registered ones. And Harry, you have done a remarkable job of explaining things to your classmates in a completely different way than I have, with the result that Mr. Weasley here has become an Animagus himself. I commend both of you for your achievements." She smiled at them, pride in her eyes.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said quietly. He wondered what else was on her mind. Surely she didn't call them to her room early just to compliment them?

"I've spoken with the headmaster about an idea I've had, and he thinks it's a good one. I would like the two of you to speak to the entire student body about the Animagus transformation. In order to avoid imposing too much on your already very busy schedules, we will schedule an assembly after dinner on a Saturday evening. That way, no matter how late the assembly goes, people can sleep in the next morning, and it won't interfere with last-minute homework."

Harry gulped. "An assembly?"

Ron gulped as well. "Of the whole school?" His voice squeaked as he spoke, something that hadn't happened in a couple of years. He cleared his throat and tried again. "You want us to talk to the whole school about this? Even Slytherins?"

"All Houses, all ages, yes, the entire school," she said firmly. "It will be a great benefit to the other students, and by speaking to them all at once, we will save a great deal of your already limited time. I know how busy you are with Quidditch and D.A meetings, and I don't want to impose, but you two boys sharing your own experiences with learning how to do the transformation will have a much greater impact than anything I can say in class. You're their age. You've learned how to do something that very few people ever manage. If you are willing to share your knowledge, you might help someone to follow in your footsteps."

The boys both looked at her with wide, nervous eyes.

"What do you think?" she prompted when they'd been quiet a while.

"So how do you want us to do this?" Harry asked, gulping hard to quell his uneasiness.

"Very much as you did in class last term, Mr. Potter," she replied. "You did an admirable job of demonstrating the change, and then explaining how you worked it out. And possibly you could take questions from the floor. You could explain how you helped Mr. Weasley, as well."

"Why not have Harry do the whole thing? You don't really need me," Ron said, trying to wiggle out of it.

"Nonsense! You have achieved a remarkable thing yourself. No matter how much Mr. Potter helped you, you had to conquer the transformation yourself. You do have a lot to bring to the discussion, Mr. Weasley. And the students respect you. You're Head Boy, an excellent

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Quidditch player, the general in D.A. – they will want to hear from you, Mr. Weasley, trust me."

Harry and Ron looked at each other and shrugged.

"What do we need to do to prepare?" Harry asked, already bracing himself for the job.

"Just bring yourselves and an open mind," she replied. "You know what to say. It will be a great benefit to the younger students, especially. Thank you for doing this."

Ron looked at Harry, wondering exactly when they'd agreed, then shrugged. He knew Harry would have to do the majority of the work, so he'd just go along as "side-kick" and do what he had to in order to help his best mate.

Other students were filtering into the room now. McGonagall leaned forward and murmured. "Thank you, boys."

"Professor?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Yes, Potter?"

"When will we do this?"

"Will this Saturday evening suit you?" she said with a smile.

"Uh. . .yeah, I guess," he said reluctantly.

"I think getting it over with will be a help to both of you. You won't have so long to build up a case of nerves," she said with a smile. "All right, take your seats."

They got up and moved back two rows to their normal seats, and Hermione joined them.

"Did you hear?" Ron asked her quietly.

"Yes!" she said, "I think it will be wonderful." She looked at him wistfully. Since learning that no Muggleborns had ever become Animagi, Hermione had begun to lose hope of ever being an Animagus, but she would keep trying as long as she was at Hogwarts, at least. "Every bit of information you can share will be useful to someone," she said encouragingly.

"You think?" he said uncertainly.

"I think you'll be brilliant, Ron," she said, putting her hand over his and squeezing it gently.

He smiled, his face lighting up in the glow of her approval. "OK. I'll have a go."

Harry watched them together, their earlier tiff forgotten. *I suppose the 'new' has worn off of their relationship enough that they can bicker again*, he thought. *And Mr. and Mrs. Weasley bicker, so maybe that's normal in a good relationship. But Ginny and I don't bicker. We get along well nearly all the time.* He wondered about that, the thought of Ginny, as always, bringing a soft smile to his face. *I hope the 'new' never wears off of our relationship.*

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Hermione glanced over at him. "Knut for your thoughts, Harry," she teased.

"Huh?"

"You were a million miles away. What were you thinking about?"

"Erm. . .nothing," he said, digging his things out of his bag to cover his blush.

"Not nothing," she said wisely. "You were thinking about Ginny, weren't you?"

"A bit," he admitted, his cheeks turning pink.

Hermione grinned at him. "You two are so cute," she murmured as she finished setting her class things out. Harry just blushed again and ducked his head, hoping his hair would hide his pink face.

"Watch what you're thinking about my sister," Ron teased, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Hey!" Harry protested, then returned Ron's grin.

"All right, class, settle down," McGonagall called imperiously. "We're continuing our work on human to animal transfiguration. How many of you have managed it so far?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione all raised their hands, but there were no others.

"Miss Granger, please tell us about your transformation."

"I changed Harry into a baboon, and then a frog," she replied. "He seemed to enjoy both experiences, and suffered no ill effects."

"What do you mean, he seemed to enjoy them?" McGonagall prompted.

Hermione smiled. "When he was a baboon, he went bouncing all over the classroom we were using – I was afraid a baboon would be too active to be in the Common Room – and he even swung on the chandelier and threw candles at us at one point." Harry and Ron were grinning at each other, which nearly made Hermione laugh.

McGonagall didn't look all that pleased. "He removed the candles from a classroom chandelier?"

"Oh, he put them back when Ron threw them back up to him," she assured the professor with a smile.

"All right then. Why did you choose a baboon?"

"Harry said since he had been acting like a git, I should turn him into one if it would make me feel better, so I did," Hermione admitted with a shrug.

A smile tickled Professor McGonagall's mouth. "Really. Well, I suppose that's as good a reason to choose an animal as any," she said over the laughter flowing across the classroom.

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When the class quieted, she turned to Harry. "And how did you like being a baboon, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, it was brilliant," he said with a bright smile. "The baboon wanted to bounce all over the room and swing from the chandelier. Its legs were so springy and strong, it took nearly no effort to jump from a desk to the window ledge up to the chain supporting the chandelier. It was great fun!"

"And did you have any problems changing him back into himself?" the professor asked Hermione.

"No problems, Professor."

"Now tell us about the frog," McGonagall prompted.

"I turned him into a frog in the Common Room. He seemed to enjoy that as well," Hermione said with a smile.

"And no problems changing him back?"

"No, Professor, no problems."

"Mr. Weasley, you had your hand up. Who did you transform, and into what kind of animal?"

"I changed Harry into a baboon too. He said it was fun and he was willing to do it again," Ron answered.

"Any problems?"

Ron blushed madly. "Well, when I first tried to change him back, he still had a baboon's back legs and tail for a while. It took several tries to get him back the way he should be." He turned and grinned at Harry, who was snorting with laughter. "It didn't help that he was laughing at me at the time!" Ron retorted.

"I see you were able to change him back eventually, because here he sits, giggling at you," McGonagall said dryly, doing her best not to laugh along with the class, who were all now laughing out loud.

"Yes, Professor," Ron agreed.

"Did you discover what you'd done wrong, or was your success pure luck?" the professor prompted.

"Hermione noticed I was doing the wand movement incorrectly," Ron admitted. "When I did it right, Harry changed back into himself."

"Very good, Mr. Weasley. It's important to learn from our mistakes, and apparently Mr. Potter suffered no lasting injury from it, did you, Mr. Potter?"

"No, Professor," he said, trying not to laugh.

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"What are you finding so funny, Mr. Potter? You can't seem to stop laughing," McGonagall said, amused in spite of herself.

"I'm just remembering how weird it was to be half man and half monkey," he said with a grin. "It felt rather odd – but interesting."

McGonagall's smile escaped her control. "All right, then, tell us about the transformations you did, Mr. Potter." She could hardly wait to hear this, because he looked even more amused now.

"Erm. . . I turned Ron and Hermione into baboons," he said, blushing suddenly and doing his best not to look at his friends.

"Surely not at the same time, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall said suspiciously.

"Erm. . . yes?" He looked thoroughly chagrined when she turned appalled eyes on him.

"Did. . . um. . ."

"Nothing much happened," Harry said instantly, "and I changed them back quickly." He begged her with his eyes not to ask more of him in class. Ron and Hermione hung their heads, their faces beet red.

Professor McGonagall had been teaching long enough to have seen nearly everything, so she wasn't as upset as her students might have expected. "Nothing much happened? All right then, you've learned your lesson, correct?" He nodded. She looked at the rest of the class. "For future reference, if you are doing homework with more than one friend, please transfigure only one friend at a time in order to avoid problems."

Parvati raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Patil?"

"What kind of problems?" she asked innocently.

"A great many, some of which can be quite difficult to deal with," Professor McGonagall said tartly. "A word to the wise is sufficient. Only change one person at a time. Mr. Potter could have caused some serious problems by changing both of them at once."

"He didn't change us both at once," Hermione said, hoping to keep Harry out of trouble. "I was a bit nervous about being transformed, so he did Ron first and then he changed me. Not both of us at once."

"Ah, I see. Well, that's good, Mr. Potter," she said, smiling down at him. "However, what I said holds – do not transform more than one person at a time. There should only be one animal at a time. Some of the consequences of having two or more animals in close proximity could be quite dire, because some wizards don't have good control over their animal instincts. They might, for instance, fight, resulting in serious injuries." She left other thoughts dangling in the air, and drew her own conclusions based on the redness of Harry, Ron and Hermione's faces.

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"All right, then. Let's practice this exercise again. Since Mr. Potter seems to enjoy being an animal and does have good control of the spell, I'll use him to demonstrate. Mr. Potter?" she said, inviting him to stand next to her. "What kind of animal would you like to be today?"

"Oh, I don't know. Um. . .a lion," he said, noting the Gryffindor lion on the banner on the classroom wall.

"Can we trust you to behave yourself and not try to bite anyone?" she said with a smile.

"Yeah, sure!" he said with a cheeky grin. "Let's do it!"

McGonagall went through the instructions step by step again, showing the wand movement in slow motion, then turned to Harry and performed the spell on him.

Instantly, Harry was transformed into a large, magnificent lion. He turned his head and looked at himself, shook his thick mane and twitched his tail, then let out a bellowing roar. He looked around at his classmates and gave a lion's version of a smile in satisfaction at their reactions to his roar.

"Mr. Potter, are you aware of yourself in that lion's form?" McGonagall said cautiously.

The lion looked at her and blinked, and then a rumbling noise came from him, not a growl, but . . .

"Is he purring?" Lavender said, astonished.

"It would seem so," McGonagall said with a smile. She reached toward him carefully. "May I?"

The lion took a step toward her and allowed her to pet him, then leaned into her hand with a happy look on his face as she scratched behind his ears. He was purring loudly now.

"Class, a point of interest. If you'll notice, the lion is only purring on his exhaled breath, not when he both inhales and exhales. A house cat will purr on both the inhaled and exhaled breath. And lions don't purr often, from what I've read. Mr. Potter is a very unusual lion indeed." She gave him a final pat, then said, "I'm going to change you back now." She did the spell reversal incantation and Harry stood there once more, a grin on his face.

"That was cool!" he enthused.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said. "Right then, class. Pair off, and let's see how you do."

When class was over, Professor McGonagall called, "Mr. Potter? A word, if I may?"

Harry walked up to her desk, a questioning look on his face.

"One moment. Let's wait until the room clears a bit," she said quietly.

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"OK," he said agreeably. Ron and Hermione lingered by the door, waiting for Harry.

When the room was clear of all but the three students, McGonagall murmured, "Tell me what happened when you changed both of them into baboons."

"Uh. . .do I have to?"

"I'd like to know, Mr. Potter."

"But it will embarrass them," he protested. "And I promised I wouldn't tell."

"Please, Mr. Potter. I have heard nearly every possible kind of story about these transformations. I want to be certain they're both all right. What happened?"

"But they're fine, Professor, you can see that," he said, getting a bit desperate now. She was going to force him to break his promise, and he sincerely did not want to do that.

"Mr. Potter, I do understand, but I must insist," she said, her glasses flashing and making her look even more formidable than usual.

Harry sighed and gave in. "Well. . .when Hermione became a baboon, her . . .um. . .bum was quite. . .red?" he said, blushing madly, "and the baboon that was Ron thought it was. . .rather. . .erm. . .exciting," he ended lamely.

McGonagall snorted with laughter, which shocked Harry, as well as Ron and Hermione all the way across the room. "Oh, forgive me. I'm so sorry. From the looks on all of your faces, I suspected as much, but the way you told it. . .well, it was funny, that's all." She chuckled a bit more, then got back to business. "Tell me, did you change them back before they did anything about their. . .um. . .mutual attraction?"

"Oh, yeah! Nothing happened! But if I hadn't done it quickly. . . ." Harry stopped, the mischievous grin on his face matching the one on his professor's.

"I should take points away from you for making the mistake of changing them both at once, and especially into the same kind of animal. I hope you understand the problem now," she said, only the slightest bit testily.

"When I saw what was happening, I realized why you always have us change all different kinds of animals, or at least if they're the same kind, they're all the same sex," Harry said, trying to stifle his laughter.

"Precisely," McGonagall said, equally amused. "Well done, Mr. Potter. Thank you for your honesty. And I'm very glad you were able to take care of matters before they got out of hand."

"Me, too!" he said sincerely.

"You're dismissed."

As he, Ron and Hermione walked down the hall, Hermione asked, "What did she want?"

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"Yeah, mate, you and she were giggling like a couple of girls!" Ron teased.

"She wanted to know what happened when you were both baboons," Harry replied, trying not to laugh. He wasn't sure how his friends would take this news. After all, what happened was a bit embarrassing to them.

"You TOLD her?" Ron said, turning and staring at Harry in shock.

"You said it was our secret!" Hermione snapped. "You promised!"

"She said she already suspected from our reactions, but needed to be sure, needed to know if I'd stopped you in time," Harry said, hoping they'd understand. "She insisted!"

"But you TOLD her!" Ron said. "That's bloody *awful*!"

"I can't believe this. I'll never be able to look her in the eye again," Hermione said distractedly, her cheeks bright red.

"She thought it was funny," Harry said, desperately trying to explain. "She said she's seen and heard it all. She wasn't upset! She just wanted to be certain that everything was all right, that you were both fine."

"Couldn't she SEE that we're fine?" Ron demanded. "I can't believe this, I just can't *believe* this!" he said, striding off down the hall, shaking his head in a furious temper. Hermione followed close behind him, leaving Harry standing alone, frustrated and miserable in the middle of the corridor.

"Thanks a *lot*," Ron snarled over his shoulder.

"But. . ." Harry called after them as they hurried away from him. He watched them disappear around a distant corner, wondering what he should do next, then slowly followed them down the hall, his head hanging sad and low, his feet scuffing along disconsolately. He thought about getting angry about the whole thing, but that wouldn't solve anything. Yes, he'd promised not to tell, but honestly, what harm was done? "Doesn't matter if no harm was done," he grumbled as he scuffed his feet irritably along the stone floor. "You screwed up, Potter."

That evening in the Common Room, Ginny noticed the distance between Harry, Ron and Hermione, and the angry looks that Ron kept darting Harry's way. Hermione seemed to be angry with him as well, but not as much as Ron. They even sat at a different work table than Harry, which was nearly unheard of. Ginny scooted in next to Harry where he sat hunched over his homework, and leaned her head on his shoulder, smiling up at him.

"Hiya, handsome."

Harry looked at her with sad eyes. "Hi. Missed you at dinner."

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"I helped Professor Sprout clean up after class," she said with a shrug, "and by the time I got there, you three were gone. What's wrong, baby? Why do Ron and Hermione seem angry with you?"

"Because they are," he said shortly, "and they have every right to be."

Ginny was shocked. "What happened?"

Harry stood up and took her hand, leading her out of the Common Room and down the corridor. He stopped at a window, lifting Ginny up to sit on the deep window ledge so she'd be nearly at eye level with him. Leaning his forehead against hers, he said, "I'm an idiot."

"No, you're not! What are you on about?" She cupped his face in her hands and lifted it so she could look into his eyes, which currently were deep green pools of misery.

Harry sighed, then told her about the conversation he'd had with McGonagall and the subsequent one with Ron and Hermione.

"And they're angry about that now?" she prompted.

"You saw them," he said. He was quiet for a while, then shook his head despondently.

"Professor McGonagall has been so much help to me this year, and last year, as well, and she trusts me with these advanced spells, she's working hard to get me in Auror School in spite of my past grades in Potions. . . . When she insisted, I just couldn't lie to her. And honestly, she guessed – I only confirmed it. She already knew because we'd all blushed so much when she asked me about it in class."

"I understand," Ginny said softly, pulling his face to her shoulder and holding him tenderly. "I don't blame you at all. I can see why they'd be upset, but they should get over it soon. They're just embarrassed."

"And angry," Harry added curtly.

"And angry, yes," she agreed. She lifted his face to hers and kissed him warmly. "It will be all right. They're your best friends. They'll get over it."

"How many years do you suppose it will take?" he said gloomily.

Ginny chuckled softly, running her fingers lovingly over the tense muscles in his jaw. "I have no idea. At least you've still got me."

"Yeah," he said tenderly. "I still have you." He kissed her gratefully, and gratitude soon gave way to passion, their kisses deepening, leaving them breathless when they parted.

"I need you," he said simply.

"Shack or tunnel?"

"I don't care," he said, his eyes hungry.

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"Let's go!" she said with a grin.

"Oooo, look, my pet," a sneering voice murmured just then. "We've caught some students snogging in the hall!" Filch and his cat shuffled up to Harry and Ginny, the man's eyes gleaming in evil delight. "You're in trouble now, aren't you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry sighed and lifted Ginny down from the window ledge. "We were just talking," he said defensively.

"What? Not snogging? I don't believe it," the man scoffed.

"Did you see us snogging?" Ginny asked briskly.

Filch looked uncomfortable. "Well. . .no, but— "

"Then all you saw was us talking, and we're allowed to do that. I'm a Prefect, in case you've forgotten, Mr. Filch, and I'm allowed to escort students in the halls after curfew," Ginny said in her most authoritarian voice.

Filch grumbled, then waved his hand peremptorily. "Then get on with your escorting and get him back to his Common Room," he growled, frustrated, as always, at not being able to find reason to punish them. "Come on, my sweet," he told his cat, then shuffled away, grumbling about the good old days when you could hang students up by their thumbs when they were caught out after curfew.

Harry and Ginny started back toward Gryffindor Tower, glancing over their shoulders to make sure Filch and Mrs. Norris were gone before finally starting to giggle.

"You were brilliant!" Harry said, scooping Ginny up in his arms and spinning her around. "You had *me* scared, you were such an authority figure!"

"Learned that from my mum. And then the twins – they told me the best defence is a good offence, so if someone comes after you, make them look like the guilty party as soon as possible. Seems to work!" Ginny laughed, glad that something had finally made Harry forget his problems.

"I suppose we should forget about the Shack for now," Harry sighed. "Filch will be keeping an eye out for us."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed. "But hold that thought! We'll get there soon! Maybe Saturday?"

"Saturday, yeah," Harry agreed happily.

As they opened the portrait hole and climbed inside, Harry's smile faded as his eyes found Ron and Hermione sitting at their favourite table.

They glanced up when they heard Harry and Ginny coming in. When they saw it was Harry, Ron's eyes hardened and Hermione's looked reproachful.

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Harry's shoulders sagged. He wasn't going to get any reprieve from them, not tonight, anyway. He turned to Ginny and looked sadly into her eyes. "Thanks for the break. I think it's the only one I'm going to get this evening."

Ginny looked at her brother and her best friend, then back at her boyfriend. "Maybe not. Remember the offer you made to them?"

"What offer?" he said, too miserable to think.

"To let them turn us into baboons so we can be equally embarrassed?"

"Ginny, that's not a good idea," Harry said, smiling in spite of himself at her enthusiasm.

"No, it's perfect! And if anything happens. . .well, so what?"

"You're kidding, right?" he said, tilting his head and looking at her seriously.

"I was never more serious. Wait here," she said, then went to the table and spoke with Ron and Hermione. Both of them shook their heads vehemently at first, then finally agreed with her and trailed behind her toward Harry.

"Let's go," Ginny said, heading for the portrait hole again.

"Wait," Harry said suddenly. "Filch is looking for us now."

"So go and get your Invisibility Cloak," Ginny urged.

Harry sighed, then jogged up the stairs, returning moments later with his Cloak in his bag. "Good thing the Common Room's deserted," he commented as he draped the Cloak over the four of them.

"It's not going to fit all of us now," Hermione grumbled. "You boys are too big!"

"*Augeo*," Harry said, enlarging the Cloak as much as it would allow. "How's that?"

"That's better," Ginny said encouragingly.

"Our feet will show!" Hermione fussed.

"Hermione, Invisibility Cloaks can only be enlarged so much. If it would enlarge infinitely, people would enlarge them and cut them up to sell more of them," Harry said in frustration. "This is the best I can do."

"This is silly," Ginny said, doing a Disillusionment Charm on all of their feet. "There, that's got it. Let's go!"

Soon the four of them were in an empty classroom. "*Colloportus*," Hermione said, locking the door just as Ginny put a Silencing Charm on the room itself so nothing that happened in it could be heard in the corridor or adjoining rooms.

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Harry stood braced in front of his best friends, Ginny at his side. "You do promise to change us back when you're satisfied we've been humiliated enough, don't you?" he asked quietly.

"We'll think about it," Ron growled, then quickly turned Harry into a baboon.

Hermione changed Ginny into a baboon soon thereafter, sighing as she did so. She wasn't nearly as angry as Ron was, but then again, she hadn't done anything really embarrassing. She hoped turning Harry and Ginny into baboons and letting them humiliate themselves would satisfy Ron's anger. He hadn't been this angry at Harry in years, not since he'd thought Harry had entered the Tri-Wizard Tournament without telling Ron how he'd gotten past the Age Line.

Unlike his first experiences as a baboon, Harry didn't seem to be interested in enjoying himself. He just sat where he was, looking as sad as a monkey could manage.

The female baboon began picking at his fur, then smoothing it down, trying to get his attention. She put a long arm around his shoulders and leaned into him, hooting softly, her lips pursed.

The male baboon seemed lost in thought for a long time, but then the female's persistent attentions finally broke through his reserve. He put an arm around her and pulled her close, nuzzling her neck and breathing her scent deeply. Her bum was as bright a red as Hermione's had been, but it seemed that he was only interested in embracing her.

Ron and Hermione stood watching silently, Ron grim-faced, Hermione nervous. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore.

"It's time to change them back, Ron. They're not going to do anything awful. And honestly? We didn't do anything awful either," she said, trying to mollify him.

"I had you shoved down on the floor and was about to. . .well, you know," Ron said, his face red and angry.

"That's not anyone's fault," Hermione said soothingly. "It was the baboon taking over, I'm sure of it. And Harry didn't tell that part anyway."

"He didn't have to. McGonagall could draw her own conclusions," he griped. "Why isn't he trying to. . .to breed her? Her bum's as red as yours was."

"Do you *want* him to do that in front of us?" Hermione said, looking at him oddly.

"I want him to be as embarrassed as I am," Ron snarled. "Why isn't he doing it?"

"Maybe because he doesn't want to?" Hermione said quietly.

"Why would he not want to? He loves Ginny."

"Maybe that's why."

Ron turned to her suddenly. "Are you saying I did that because I don't love you?"

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"Erm. . .no. . . . I know you love me, Ron, but you and Harry are. . .different," she said, trying to find a way out of the problem.

"Different how?"

"I don't know. You just are!" Hermione snapped, her temper flaring. "Look at them. He's not going to do it, so just change him back!"

The baboons were holding each other closely, sitting quietly and watching the two humans argue. Suddenly, the male baboon screamed and fell over, holding his head. He began banging his head on the floor, then running blindly around the room, screeching at the top of his lungs, his long fangs exposed, crashing into furniture unheedingly.

"What's wrong with him?" Hermione said, aghast.

"Dunno," Ron said, trying to aim his wand at the racing monkey so he could undo the spell. His spells kept missing.

Finally, blinded by pain, the baboon ran full-tilt, head-first into the stone wall of the room. He lay dazed on the floor, blood streaming from a gash in his head. The female baboon threw her body over his protectively, glaring up at the humans hovering over him, her fangs exposed menacingly.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Hermione said. "This really was a bad idea." She reversed the spell and Ginny lay there, still protecting the male baboon.

"Move, sis, so I can reverse the spell," Ron said, his face grim.

"Don't you dare hurt him, Ronald Weasley, or I'll hex your wobbly bits right off your body!" Ginny growled, pointing her wand determinedly at the area in question.

Ron sighed. "I won't hurt him. I promise. I'm not angry with him anymore." He reversed the charm and soon Harry appeared, his unconscious body splayed awkwardly on the floor, his hair red with blood flowing from a huge gash in his forehead.

"What the bloody hell do you suppose that was about?" Ron said, looking at his best mate in confusion. "Being a baboon shouldn't have triggered that kind of behaviour."

"You don't know that, Ron," Hermione chided him.

"Maybe it was scar pain and the baboon didn't understand it, so he got violent," Ginny said, doing her best to stop the bleeding. She ripped a strip off the bottom of her shirt and then a second strip, making one strip into a pad and using the other to tie it into place on his head. Blood quickly soaked through the bandage. "He's bleeding pretty badly. Merlin could stop the bleeding, but we need to see what other injuries he may have. He needs to go to the hospital wing. I'll call Merlin to carry him."

"No, I'll do it," Ron said. "Flashing there might hurt him." He picked up Harry's limp body up in his arms and struggled to his feet. "Bloody hell," he grumbled. "He's a lot heavier with all this muscle."

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"We can Levitate him, Ron," Hermione said anxiously. "Just hold him there and I'll lift him out of your arms."

"He bloody well hates being Levitated when he feels ill, and so do I," Ron snarled, his face stormier than either girl could remember seeing it for a very long time. "Open the damned door." Hermione opened the door and Ron stomped through it, impotent fury in his every stride.

"What in the world happened to him?" Madam Pomfrey asked when they entered the hospital wing, Ron staggering now under Harry's weight. He put him gently on a bed and collapsed in a chair next to him. "Are you all right, Mr. Weasley?"

"Yeah, just knackered," Ron said, trying to catch his breath. "He's heavy!"

"You could have Levitated him," Madam Pomfrey began.

"He and I both hate being Levitated when we're ill!" Ron snapped. "I did what he wanted. Or what he would have wanted if he'd been awake," he said, dropping his face into his hands and rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"Someone please tell me how he received this injury," Madam Pomfrey insisted as she began examining him.

"We were practicing human to animal transfigurations," Ginny said quickly, "or they were. I went along to watch. Ron turned Harry into a baboon – he's done it before, and Harry usually likes it. He actually suggested it himself, the baboon," she said sadly. She stopped speaking, looking uncertainly at Hermione. Everything else that had happened had been while Ginny was a baboon herself, and she didn't know how to tell the story without causing more trouble for all of them.

Hermione took up the narrative. "All of a sudden he screamed and began running around the room – no, wait. I'm telling it out of order." She thought a moment, then said, "He screamed and fell over, then banged his head on the floor a few times, then started running. I don't think he was looking where he was going, because he ran head-first into the wall. That's how he got hurt."

"So he had some kind of fit or seizure?" Madam Pomfrey asked in surprise. Harry had never had such things before without some distinct cause, such as the nearby presence of Dementors.

"I think it was his scar. I remember him putting his hands on his head for a moment before he started banging in on the floor," Hermione said.

"All right. Miss Weasley, you did this bandage, correct?" Ginny nodded, tugging at the bottom of her ruined shirt. "Nice job. Well done. Go get a bowl and a flannel and some warm water. You know the drill. You clean him up and I'll get the potion to heal this gash."

Madam Pomfrey left for her office, but Ginny stayed by Harry's side for a moment. "Can I trust you two to treat him well now?" she said, glaring from her best friend to her brother.

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"Yeah," Ron said disconsolately. "I know this is my fault. I'm a stupid git."

"Yes, you are," Ginny snapped. "You're also his best friend. You have no idea how much he loves you, Ron. He LOVES you. You're the brother he never had." She opened her mouth to say more, then thought better of it and took off at a run to get the things she needed to start washing her boyfriend's face.

"She's right, you know," Hermione said softly. "He does love you. He loves both of us. I can't believe we let things go this far."

"It's my fault. I'm to blame," Ron said, "not you."

"I could've said something sooner," she began.

Ron lifted broken-hearted eyes to hers. "Don't, Hermione. Just don't. What's done is done. We can't undo it. We can just hope he's going to be all right. It was probably his scar, and the poor baboon didn't know what to do about it."

"I imagine you're right," she said sadly.

"What's going on?" Professor McGonagall demanded, sweeping into the hospital wing in her tartan robe, her hair loose around her shoulders again. "What happened? Madam Pomfrey sent word that Potter was hurt while he was transfigured."

"It's my fault, Professor," Ron said in a quiet voice. "I was angry with Harry and changed him into a baboon and left him like that for a while. I guess his scar hurt him and the baboon didn't know what to do about it and ran around like a maniac and finally crashed head-first into the wall."

"Why were you angry with Potter?" she demanded. "And we never, ever use Transfiguration as a punishment, Weasley. You know that."

Ron hung his head. "I know," he said in a voice so low, she had to lean closer to him to hear him clearly.

"Tell me what happened," she said tartly. Seeing Madam Pomfrey and Ginny on their way back to care for Harry, she grabbed Ron by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "Come with me, Mr. Weasley. I want to hear everything."

Ron looked at Hermione and shook his head. He wasn't going to let her take any of the blame for what happened. She stood where he left her, her mouth gaping open, not certain what to do next.

When they were out in the corridor, McGonagall turned to Ron. "Tell me."

"Harry had promised not to tell what happened when he turned us into baboons," Ron said miserably. "I was really embarrassed by that, and then he broke his promise and told you."

"I insisted, Mr. Weasley. It wasn't Potter's fault," she said acerbically.

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"I know, but I was angry about it. Harry said if it would make me feel better, I could turn him and Ginny into baboons and let them embarrass themselves in front of Hermione and me, so I did it. But they just sat there – they didn't do anything embarrassing. It went on for a long time, and then he grabbed his head, screamed and fell over, then started banging his head on the floor, then ran screaming around the room and finally crashed his head into the wall. And that's what happened."

"How did he get up here?"

"I turned him back into himself and we looked him over, then decided he needed to be up here, so I carried him," Ron said with a shrug. "I should have made him a baboon again," he added with a brief, rueful smile. "He's really heavy now, with all that muscle."

Seeing how upset the boy was, McGonagall's heart softened. "All right, Mr. Weasley. Thank you for your honesty. I think you've probably punished yourself enough that I don't need to add to it. Let's go back in and see how Mr. Potter is doing."

While McGonagall and Ron were talking in the corridor, Ginny was doing her best to get all of the blood off of Harry's face and out of his hair so the nurse could see the gash clearly. It went from the middle of his forehead up into his hair a good bit.

"He's a very lucky young man," the nurse finally said when she finished her exam. "He should have a fractured skull, but it's just a mild concussion. He'll be back in class after a good night's sleep." She applied an ointment and a bandage, tidied up her materials and said, "He should be waking up soon. Try to find out what triggered this episode if you can. Call me if you need me, or if he wants anything. I'll be in my office."

Professor McGonagall joined the vigil of Harry's friends waiting for him to wake up. The three friends and the professor all sat quietly for a long time before Hermione asked a question.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"When someone is turned into an animal, they have their own mind as well as the animal's mind and instincts, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"How does that differ from the Animagus transformation?"

"In the Animagus transformation, the wizard has control over the animal. The animal can... express an opinion, you might say, but the wizard doesn't have to do what the animal wants to do. You've heard Harry say 'the cat wanted to do this' at times, haven't you? I know he said that in class last term." Ron, Hermione and Ginny all nodded. "Right. In the Human-to-Animal Transfiguration, on the other hand, the animal can take control over the wizard in certain circumstances." Seeing the question on Hermione's lips, she continued. "For instance, Mr. Potter may have suffered scar pain, which he knows how to deal with, but the baboon didn't. The baboon was probably so frightened of the pain in its head, it didn't know what to

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do, so it hit the painful place, much as you will bite or suck on your finger if you slam it in a door, for instance. When terribly frightened or in serious pain, the animal may very well take over, since its instinctive reactions may be quicker than the human's reactions while in animal form. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, thank you," she said thoughtfully.

Ginny sat by Harry, playing with his hair as he liked her to do, hoping he'd wake up soon. Ron stared at his best mate, still mentally kicking himself for being any part of Harry getting hurt. Hermione spent her time rubbing Ron's back, trying to comfort him. McGonagall kept careful watch on Harry's face, glancing at the other students from time to time, but keeping her silence, letting them work through their emotions at their own speed.

Finally, Harry began to stir. His eyes fluttered open and fixed on Ginny's concerned face. "Hi, baby," he whispered. "What happened?"

"You're going to be fine, Harry," she said firmly. "You'll just have a bit of a headache. The cut is already nearly healed."

"Cut?"

"You split your head open, sweetheart, but it's going to be fine," she assured him.

He reached up and gingerly touched the bandage on his forehead. "Another scar?"

"No," Ginny said, smiling at him, "no scar, sweetheart. Madam Pomfrey said it will heal completely, with no scar at all."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I have enough to be going on with."

"How are you feeling, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked.

He turned his head to look at her. "Professor? Why are you here?"

"I was told you had an injury while you were transfigured. I initially came up to see what had happened, if the transfiguration went badly or something of that nature. But after hearing what your friends had to say, I thought your injury might have been caused by the baboon's reaction to pain in your scar. Did you have a vision?"

"A vision? Dunno." He closed his eyes and frowned, trying to call up the memory. "I can't. . . um. . ."

"You had a rather serious head injury, Potter, so it's possible you knocked that memory right out of your head. Don't worry about it. If you remember it, do let me know?"

He nodded.

"All right then. You lot have classes tomorrow. You need to get your rest. Let him get back to sleep now." She looked sternly at each of her students, then told them goodnight and left.

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"Professor?" Harry called as she reached the door, "wait."

"Yes?" she said, turning back to him.

"I remember something," he said, squinting his eyes painfully. Ginny put his glasses on him and he murmured his thanks.

"What do you remember?" McGonagall asked, sitting on the edge of his bed so he could see her easily.

"He can see. He has eyes again. He can't see clearly – images are foggy, and they have. . .um. . .coloured lines around them, a bit like an aura, shades of red, yellow, green.. .I don't know what else." He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember. "I was there when he was making them, I think. I remember he . . .oh," he said, his face suddenly taking on a greenish tinge.

"What is it, Harry?" the professor said quietly.

"Are you going to chuck?" Ron asked, starting to pull his sister and the professor away from the bed.

"No. . .no, I'm OK," Harry said, his face twisted in anguish. "It's just so gross."

Ginny sat back down and wiped his face with a flannel she'd dipped in cool water.

"Thanks," Harry said, glancing at her. "That feels good." She leaned down and kissed his forehead, then went back to quietly cooling his face with the damp flannel.

"What's gross?" McGonagall prompted.

"He. . .before he could see, he. . . ." Harry gulped, unable to go on for a moment. He took a deep breath and said, "He ripped the eyeballs out of some man's head. The screams were awful, they just went on and on. . . ." He paused, squeezing his eyes shut at the memory. "I couldn't see at first – I could only hear things. He was talking as he worked. He put the eyeballs in a cauldron with unicorn blood, venom from his snake, Nagini, and some other things. It brewed very quickly once he added the eyeballs. He drank it – that's how he made his eyes. I heard him talking about the ingredients with a couple of people. One of them. . .I. . .I think it was Professor Snape. It sounded like his voice."

"Severus?" McGonagall said in shock. "I believe he's in his office. I spoke with him earlier this evening." She looked at the students around Harry's bed. "Miss Granger, go to Madam Pomfrey's fireplace and call Professor Snape. Ask him to join us, please, right away."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said, then ran to do what she'd been told.

Moments later, Snape came striding into the curtained area around Harry's bed, looking quite annoyed. "What is it, Minerva? I was in the middle of something," he snapped.

"Where were you this evening, Severus?" McGonagall asked carefully.

"In my office. Why?"

"Potter had a vision while he was having scar pain," she replied, studying his face.

"What does that have to do with me?" Snape snarled.

"He heard He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named talking as he brewed a potion. One of the people he was talking to sounded like you."

Snape turned to Harry, who was staring at him with narrowed eyes. "Indeed? And what were the Dark Lord and the person who sounded like me talking about? And who else was there? How many others?"

"Voldemort was making a potion to give him new eyes," Harry replied, doing his best to do Legilimency on his professor. "I don't know how many others were there. One or two were helping with the potion, I think, and then he had some acting as guards, I suppose, to hold the prisoner. He ripped the eyes out of a man – I don't know who that was, I just heard him screaming – and added them to a potion with unicorn's blood and Nagini's venom. I'm guessing he was a prisoner, anyway. There were other ingredients, but I didn't hear him list them specifically. The man who sounded like you advised him on some ingredients, and told him he'd need to draw some of his blood to add to it."

Snape's eyes glittered. "Ah, he used that potion, eh?" he murmured.

"Severus? What do you know about this?" McGonagall demanded. She saw him looking warily at Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "All of these students are in the Order, except for Miss Weasley, and she may as well be, for I'm certain she knows everything these others do. Go ahead and tell us what you know."

"Where's Dumbledore?" he said.

"He received an urgent owl from London," she replied. "He'll be back in the morning."

"What was the owl about?" Snape said, frowning.

"I don't know. You're evading the issue, Severus. Tell me what you know about this potion. Were you with You-Know-Who this evening?"

Snape sighed. "As you well know, Minerva, in order to maintain my cover, I have to cooperate with the Dark Lord at times. This was one of those times. I wasn't there this evening. He used a Recording Charm during a meeting we had together, where he asked me about a potion he was developing that might restore his sight. I talked with him about the ingredients needed. I did change a couple of ingredients slightly, so if he follows my directions, his sight won't be fully restored, but I couldn't be *obvious* about that misdirection or my cover would be blown." He looked around at the faces before him, all of which were in various states of disbelief. "Well, what else could I do? I'm a Potions Master. He asked me about a potion, and he knows I should know the answers to such questions," he snapped.

"You helped him get his sight back?" Harry said in disbelief. "How could you?"

The Time of Destiny

"Again, Potter, what else could I do? If I'm to maintain my cover, I need to appear to be a loyal Death Eater," Snape said with amazing, if grudging, patience. "Where were you when you had this vision?"

"Inside him, I suppose – I couldn't see at first, and then I could see foggy images with coloured lines around them, red, yellow, green," Harry replied. "The images weren't in colour, though – just those lines. Why?"

"I gave him some inaccurate information on a couple of ingredients and on the process itself," Snape said dismissively, "but he's brilliant at potions himself. That's how he managed to maintain a life force for the time he didn't have a body, by drinking unicorn blood and that snake's venom along with some potion he created. This potion is a variation of that one. If he can see clearly at all, he'll be able to make a potion that fully restores his sight. So how well did he see, Potter?"

"Colours and shapes, light and shadow, nothing distinctive. It's much worse than when I don't have my glasses on," Harry replied.

"Hmmm. The other aspect of these eyes is that they won't last very long. He'll have to remake the potion in a few weeks to maintain what little vision he has," Snape mused.

"So there are going to be loads of Death Eaters with no eyes?" Ron asked suddenly. "Because he's ripping the eyes out of living people – that's what Harry said."

"I realize that, Mr. Weasley. Gruesome as it sounds, yes, that's what he will probably do. But I doubt he'll waste his Death Eaters for this purpose. He'll simply capture people and use their eyes instead."

"That's horrible!" Hermione said with a shudder. "How awful!"

"Of everyone in this room, Miss Granger," Snape said silkily, "you are the only one who is in no danger of having your eyes plucked out for his use. This potion requires at least a half-blood wizard's eyes, preferably a pure-blood's."

"Professor," Harry said slowly, trying to make sense of something that had occurred to him, "why didn't you give him the right information to start with? You put yourself in danger by giving him the wrong information."

"I'm fully aware of that, Potter," Snape snapped.

"Then why. . .?" Harry asked, shaking his head in confusion.

"I would think it would be obvious, Potter, especially to you."

"Sorry, I'm just not getting it," Harry replied uneasily. What was he supposed to be understanding that was just passing him by?

Snape sighed impatiently. "I'm buying you time."

"Time? Time for what?"

The Time of Destiny

"Time to finish your education, time to perfect your skills, time to prepare. The next time you face him, you will have to *destroy* him, Potter. You won't have many more chances. Every time he fights you, he learns more about how you think, how you react, how you fight. He's terribly clever, and his study of you will lead to your downfall if you give him too many opportunities to do so. You need to study hard, work hard, and not make a mockery of the hard work of so many who are trying to keep him otherwise occupied *so he can't attack you while you prepare.*" Snape bit off his last words, as if he regretted saying so much.

The room was silent for a moment, and then Harry looked up, gazing seriously into the man's eyes. "Thank you."

"We all have to do what we can, Potter. See to it that our efforts are not wasted," Snape said, not nearly as acerbically as usual.

"I'll do my best," Harry promised, meaning every word.

McGonagall broke the ensuing silence. "I'll notify Hagrid to round up the unicorns and protect them. That's a start," she said with determination.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Minerva," Snape replied.

"I wish you'd told me about this earlier, Severus," she said with deceptive mildness. "I would have brought the unicorns in for protection sooner."

"I had no way of knowing when he would try the potion, or even if he'd try this particular one. We had that conversation some time ago," Snape said, shaking his head. "These eyes won't last long. He may well do more experimentation before trying again, but he is determined. Those phoenixes only delayed the inevitable by scratching out his eyes."

Harry sat up. "The inevitable?"

"The final confrontation, Potter," Snape said, staring seriously into Harry's eyes.

Harry stared back at him, and realized Snape was opening himself up to Harry's Legilimency. Harry instantly used the skill that Snape himself had begun teaching him his fifth year. Remus and Dumbledore had completed Harry's Occlumency and Legilimency education in the past year. Now Harry used it to look inside the man's mind. He saw confusion, blood, battle, terror, and an image of Voldemort as terrifying as the Dark Lord himself, with glittering green eyes like a bastardized version of Harry's. Harry broke the contact, gasping.

"Harry, are you all right?" Ginny asked, concerned at his sudden pallor.

"Uh. . .yeah, I'm fine," he lied, and all of them knew it.

"You saw, didn't you?" Snape hissed. "He's using your blood. His eyes will look something like yours. You gave him protections he could not have achieved otherwise."

"*I didn't give him my blood willingly!*" Harry snarled, instantly enraged.

"Severus! Harry's ill. Don't upset him!" McGonagall warned.

The Time of Destiny

Snape backed off, glaring at Harry, then finally turned to leave. As he reached the door, he turned back and said, "Remember, Potter. With your blood, he will be harder for you to defeat. You will have to find a different way."

"Different from what?" Harry said, flummoxed.

"From anything anyone has ever tried before," Snape said mysteriously and left.

"What the bloody hell did that mean?" Ron asked, scratching his head.

"Yeah, and does he think I don't know that?" Harry said, equally perplexed.

"I believe it's time for us to leave and let you rest, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said kindly, helping Harry settle back into his pillows and tucking his blankets around him in a surprisingly motherly way. "You rest now. You'll feel better in the morning."

"Professor, I'm not leaving him," Ginny said with determination.

"Why am I not surprised?" she said, smiling at the girl.

"No, Gin, I'll stay," Ron said stoutly. "This was my fault. You go on, I'll look after him."

"No, Ron, I . . ."

"Please, Ginny," Ron said his eyes guilty and sad, "I'll stay."

Harry looked from Ginny to Ron and back again. "You've lost enough sleep over me, sweetheart. Ron can stay this time. It's only for overnight."

"Are you sure?" she said in a small, tremulous voice. Harry had never sent her away before.

"Come here, you," Harry said, pulling her down until she was nose to nose with him. He looked around at his friends and professor. "Could we have a moment, please?"

"I have to send an owl to Dumbledore. Don't stay up too late, and try not to tire him anymore," Professor McGonagall said as she rose to leave. "Sleep well, Harry."

"Thanks, Professor," he said. "Good night."

"We'll just go out here," Hermione said, dragging Ron to the other end of the ward. Once there, she wrapped her arms around him and held on to him, relieved Harry was all right, but horrified at the things she'd heard since he'd awakened.

Once they were alone, Harry pulled Ginny onto the bed with him and then down into a kiss. "Ummm, I needed that," he said with a smile.

"Why don't you want me to stay with you?" she said, still sounding hurt.

"Baby, Ron and I need to make up," he explained. "He was angry with me, and I got hurt while I was a baboon—"

The Time of Destiny

"And he feels guilty, so you two need to talk," she said, finally understanding. "OK."

"You know you're my healer of choice, don't you?" he said with a cheeky grin.

"Yeah, I knew that," she replied, bending down to kiss him again. "You had me scared for a while there."

"Because I wouldn't let you stay?" he said, genuinely surprised.

"No. Yes. I don't know. I'm just glad you're all right now," she said, lying down with her head snuggled into his shoulder. "Harry?"

"Um-hmm?" he said, tightening his arms around her.

"Why didn't your baboon do anything to mine?"

"He thought you were the sexiest thing he'd ever seen in his life, I guarantee you that, but I didn't want him to do it, so he didn't," he replied, squeezing her again.

"But McGonagall said. . ."

"Yeah, his instinct wanted to, but he listened to me. I knew it wouldn't be right," he assured her.

"You never cease to amaze me," she said, raising up on her elbows to kiss him again. "I guess I'd better get out of here, then. It's late."

"Yeah. Good night, baby. Thanks for taking such good care of me." He held her hand until she'd stepped beyond his reach as she moved toward the door.

"Hermione, I'm on my way to the dorm. Do you want to walk with me, or are you staying a while?" Ginny said as she reached the door.

"I'll come with you," Hermione said, kissing Ron good night, running to Harry and kissing him on the cheek with a quick "Feel better!" and then following Ginny out the door.

Ron came and sat in the chair by Harry's bed.

Harry grinned up at him. "Alone at last!" he teased. Ron grinned half-heartedly. "C'mon, Ron. I'm not angry with you at all. It was an accident. It could have happened in class."

"But it didn't."

"Still best mates?" Harry said hopefully, holding out his hand to his friend.

"Always," Ron replied after a moment, then shook Harry's hand firmly. "Absolutely always. I'm sorry I was such a git."

"It was your turn. I was a git recently myself. So now we have it out of our systems, right?" Harry said with a cheeky grin, trying to tease Ron out of his mood.

The Time of Destiny

"You think?"

"I hope so!"

"Too right!" Ron agreed. He pulled out a pack of Exploding Snap cards and they played for a little while before they both got tired and finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 15 – Racing the Moon

"You look loads better," Ginny said when she saw Harry at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall the next morning. He was busy shovelling eggs onto his plate when she plopped down beside him.

"I feel fine now," he said, leaning over to kiss the top of her head. "You look pretty this morning. But you always look pretty. However do you manage it?" he said, grinning crookedly at her. He was determined that his vision of Voldemort's latest horrors was not going to ruin his day.

"You're silly," she said, resting her head on his shoulder a moment. "I'm so glad you're all right."

"Never better!" he said airily, passing her the bacon. "Neville! You look knackered. Everything all right?"

"Gran and my granddad fought all night and I was afraid to leave," he moaned as he sat down with his friends. "I don't really want him to be a turned into a toad again. Dumbledore took Gran's wand away so she'd talk instead of hexing him as soon as she saw him. That's what she was threatening to do. They seemed to have it all worked out in the end, but it was exhausting and loud and horrible before they got to that point."

"Aw, Neville, I'm so sorry it was difficult," Ginny said, "but at least they worked it out, right?" He nodded, looking exhausted and sad.

"How did they work it out?" Hermione asked as she passed him the porridge.

"I think they simply got tired. And then I pretended to fall asleep and they finally stopped yelling. They talked for hours and hours," he said, rubbing his weary eyes with his hands. "He says he still loves her. Can you believe that?"

"After what she did to him? No way!" Ron said, astonished.

"Love can last through all kinds of things," Hermione said wisely.

"How do you know?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"I'm the smartest witch in our year, remember?" she teased saucily.

"Oh. Well. . .yeah, I guess you're right, then," he said, completely nonplussed.

Hermione buttered a scone and shoved it playfully into his mouth. "Here, love. I'm sorry."

"Mumph-kumf," he mumbled through his mouthful of scone.

"Harry, I heard you got hurt?" Neville asked, tearing his eyes away from the spectacle of Ron trying to chew an entire scone all at once.

"I hadn't seen Madam Pomfrey in a while, you know," Harry said playfully. "I missed her."

The Time of Destiny

"Seriously, are you OK? What happened?" Neville asked, his face furrowed with concern.

"I'm fine," Harry said with a shrug. "Had a bang on the head and a bleeding great headache, but that's all over now. Looks to be a beautiful day, eh?" he said, looking at the celestial ceiling. Light, puffy clouds scudded across a sky of heartbreaking blue. "Good flying weather. Tough luck we have class."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Care of Magical Creatures this morning." He loaded his fork again and was about to stuff it in his mouth when a thought hit him and he paused. "Neville?"

"Yeah?"

"When we studied thestrals, you said you could see them because you saw your grandfather die," Ron said, his face puzzled.

"That was my mum's dad," Neville explained. "Rupert's my dad's father. Gran told me Rupert died long before I was born."

"Oh, OK," Ron said. "So how do you like him, your granddad?"

"He's funny. He really likes me," Neville said with a smile. "He's not as strict as my gran. I'd like to have more time with him, but he's leaving tomorrow. Professor Dumbledore has set him up with a flat near my gran's so they can be close but not actually together. He thinks they need time to get to know each other again, and having flats near each other will make that easier. He seems to think they can sort out their differences."

"Do you think they can?" Hermione asked.

"Dunno," he said with a shrug. "It would be nice if they could."

As the Gryffindors trudged wearily back to the castle after following Hagrid on a long trek through the forest to study the habitats of several creatures, they were shocked by a strange sight in the rose garden. Seated under a trellis covered in late-blooming roses were Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. . .kissing. Neville's mouth fell open. Ron started to laugh, but Hermione stood on his foot. Harry looked from the Longbottoms to Neville and grinned.

"Looks like they're sorting things out," he said quietly. Neville's eyes were wide, but he grinned and nodded. They managed to keep their classmates quiet as they passed, but the Slytherins had no such consideration.

"OW! My eyes, my eyes!" Blaise Zabini cried dramatically.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" Daphne said, looking concerned.

"I've been blinded by those dirty old people snogging!" he said, then joined his house mates in shouts of laughter.

The Time of Destiny

Harry watched this scene with growing uneasiness. He glanced from the Slytherins to the Longbottoms and saw the blushes on the old couple's faces, blushes that were quickly suffused by the red of fury.

"What the devil do you think you're playing at?" Mr. Longbottom snarled. "How dare you insult my wife!"

Mrs. Longbottom looked up at him in astonishment. The man was rolling up his sleeves and digging in his pocket for a non-existent wand, obviously ready to fight to defend her honour.

"Rupert, dear, that's all right. Some people don't teach their children any manners these days," Mrs. Longbottom said, her serene expression only maintained with a tremendous effort.

"Zabini, that's a detention for insulting guests at Hogwarts," Hermione snapped.

"You can't do that!" he snarled.

"I'm Head Girl, or did you forget?" Hermione said, striding toward him threateningly.

Zabini's eyes slid upward from Hermione's furious face. Ron was directly behind her, his wand pointed at Zabini's heart. "And I'm Head Boy," Ron reminded him, his voice dangerously quiet. "Get inside and be grateful we don't give you a week's detention."

Zabini and his friends moved off, grumbling under their breaths.

"I heard that, Zabini," Ron snapped. "A week's detention with Hagrid."

"You can't do that," Zabini snarled, turning suddenly toward Ron with his wand in his hand.

"I just did," Ron said sternly, his wand still pointed at Zabini's heart. "Go to your dormitory. Now! Before I make it two weeks!" Zabini slowly lowered his wand, then shoved it into his pocket with an impatient gesture. The Slytherins slunk away silently, throwing dirty looks over their shoulders at the Gryffindors clustered protectively around Neville and his family.

Hermione had moved to stand in front of the Longbottoms. "I'm so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. Some people. . ."

"Have no manners at all," Mrs. Longbottom interrupted. "It wasn't your fault, dear. Thank you for dealing with it."

"I'm glad we could help," Hermione said politely.

Harry was standing with Neville, watching wildly varied emotions chase each other across the other boy's open face. "You can put your wand away now, Neville," Harry said quietly, looking warily at the wand held tightly in his friend's shaking hand. "It's over now. Put it away."

"I should have. . .I could have. . .I knew . . ." Neville sputtered.

The Time of Destiny

"Zabini isn't worth you getting a detention over," Harry said reasonably. "If you'd tried to take care of things, you'd be in trouble. Ron and Hermione can do this kind of thing and get away with it. Isn't it great they're our friends?" He smiled at Neville, trying to cheer him out of his anger.

Neville glared at Harry. "I should have. . ."

"No, you shouldn't. You did the right thing just now," Harry assured him.

"*You* would have done something!" Neville growled.

"And I spend a lot of time in detention, or hadn't you noticed?" Harry replied bracingly.

"C'mon, mate, it's over. Your grandparents seem to be getting on well now, don't they?"

Neville looked at his grandparents, his expression going from fury to surprise. They were smiling and holding hands as they chatted with Hermione. "I don't believe it."

"We all saw them kissing," Harry reminded him. "You didn't imagine it."

Neville turned to Harry, a slow smile spreading across his face. "D'you suppose they'll get back together?"

"It's possible. Your granddad seems to be quite the charmer," Harry said, nodding at Rupert, who was busy charming Hermione now.

"Bloody hell," Neville snapped. "That's how he got in trouble with Gran before!" He strode purposefully over to his grandparents. "Hi, Gran! Are you enjoying the nice weather?" he said nervously, hoping his gran didn't notice his granddad twinkling at a girl young enough to be his granddaughter.

"Neville, dear, have you just come from a class?" his gran asked him as she smacked her husband firmly on the knee. "Rupert, behave yourself."

"Yes, dear," he said quietly, winking at Hermione before subsiding into respectful silence.

"Come and talk to us for a while, Neville," his gran invited sweetly.

"Uh. . .I need to go and do my homework," Neville said uneasily, torn between wanting to stay with his family and the need to keep up with his school work.

"We're leaving in the morning. You can take a little while to chat before we go, can't you?" she said a bit more insistently.

"Uh. . .OK," he agreed finally, looking nervously at his friends.

"We'll catch you up later, Neville," Harry said, clapping his friend on the shoulder.

"Yeah, Neville, see you," Ron said, taking Hermione's hand and pulling her away from the Longbottoms.

The Time of Destiny

As they entered the castle, Ron looked over his shoulder at the Longbottoms, who were talking earnestly with Neville and ignoring the scattered students still passing them. "What the bloody hell was that?" he asked, looking down at Hermione.

"What?" she said in surprise.

"That dirty old man was flirting with you!" Ron said, appalled.

"No, he wasn't!" she said, surprised at his attitude. "He was just being nice."

"No, Hermione, that was definitely flirting," Harry said. "Even Neville noticed."

"But. . .," she said in surprise.

"Neville said that's how Rupert got in trouble with his gran in the first place," Harry told her, smiling a bit as they climbed the stairs. "It looks like being a toad for forty years didn't really change him."

"I wonder how much trouble she'll get into if she changes him back again," Ron mused. "He'd certainly deserve it."

"He was sweet!" Hermione insisted. "He wasn't flirting, he was just thanking me for helping!"

"You might have noticed that he didn't thank me the same way," Ron said cheekily.

"Don't worry about it, Hermione," Harry assured her. "He was flirting with his wife as soon as she got his attention away from you. Maybe he just can't help himself."

"Especially with such a pretty girl standing right in front of him," Ron teased gently, mollifying her.

"Oh, you two!" Hermione said in exasperation.

"What?" Harry said innocently, acting wounded. He glanced at Ron and each of them slid an arm around Hermione's waist, lifting her off the ground and carrying her toward the Great Hall, their laughter echoing off the stone walls.

"They're getting back together!" Neville said, his face shining with joy, as he entered their room late that evening. "They've made up. She's going to give him a chance. Isn't that great?"

"Yeah, Neville, that's wonderful!" Harry agreed, genuinely happy for his friend.

"Cool!" Ron enthused. "I hope they're happy together! I guess it will be really different during your holidays now, having a granddad there as well as your gran."

"Yeah," Neville said with a happy smile. "He's a really interesting person. And he likes me."

"So do we," Harry murmured as he patted his friend on the back. "I'm happy for you, mate."

The Time of Destiny

"Thanks."

"Harry!" Ginny cried, running across the Common Room to the table where he was working with Ron and Hermione a few evenings later. "Look! Look at this!" She held out her left hand, which was now a cat's paw.

"Good for you!" he said bracingly. Ron and Hermione exclaimed over it, as well. "So you're starting the Animagus transformation, are you?" Harry continued.

"I've been trying ever since I watched you show Hermione how, but this is the first time I've really managed it," she said happily.

"Can you change it back?" he said with a smile.

"Uh. . .I haven't tried. I was just happy I did it!" she said, a bit nervously.

"You can do it, sweetheart, and the sooner you try, the sooner you'll get it. Go on, have a go," he encouraged her.

Ginny sat on the edge of the worktable and stared at her cat's paw, stroking the fur a moment. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"Trust you to do a ginger cat," Harry said with a grin. "Yes, it's pretty."

"Well. . .ginger seemed easier than black," she said with a shrug. The cat's paw was only a few shades lighter in colour than her hair. "I suppose I need to try to change it back, huh?" she said, looking at Harry. He nodded, smiling at her warmly.

"You can do it. Go on."

Ginny cast the reversal charm but nothing happened. "Oh no," she said nervously.

"Soft focus. Deep breaths. See the image in your mind of what you want to do. Let your magic flow like water," Harry murmured.

Ginny nodded and tried again. "Nothing!" she cried in frustration.

"Breathe slowly," Harry advised. "Follow me. In," he said, breathing in slowly, "out. In. . .out. Good, now you're more relaxed. Keep breathing like that, and remember—"

"Soft focus, flow like water, yeah, I know," she said impatiently.

"Breathe, Ginny," Harry reminded her quietly. He watched as she concentrated, breathed deeply, her eyes softening as she stared at the paw and suddenly. . .

"I did it! It's gone!" she cried excitedly.

"Great! Now bring it back," Harry said, a proud grin on his face.

"Slave driver!"

"Somebody's got to whip you into shape," he teased.

She stuck her tongue out at him, then stared at her hand again, barely hearing Harry's murmured "Soft focus" as she made the ginger cat's paw reappear. "Cool!"

"That's it, Gin! Keep working on it. Try doing other parts – the back feet, the tail, both hands, a whole arm. Eventually, Crookshanks will have a little ginger cat to play with!" Harry beamed.

"Erm. . .no," Ginny said, thinking of the incident when Ron and Hermione were both baboons. "I don't want to be a ginger cat."

"What do you want to be then?" Harry asked curiously. "A horse?"

"No, something smaller. Maybe a fox," Ginny said. "Then I could run under the moon with you, Ron and Remus."

"That would be brilliant!" Harry enthused. "Get to work on it, then!"

"Thanks for the help!" she said, leaving them to their homework and going back to the Sixth Year table.

Hermione sighed. "You lot are going to be out having fun as various kinds of canines and I'm going to be stuck at home."

"We can turn you into a dog so you can join us, Hermione," Harry reminded her. "No problem."

"I just wish I could do it myself," she moaned.

"Keep working on it. You'll get it yet," Harry said supportively.

Hermione sighed again. "Oh well. If this is the only way being Muggle-born handicaps me as a witch, it isn't so bad," she said philosophically. "But I will keep trying."

"There you go," Ron said, giving her shoulders a squeeze. "That's my chocolate poodle."

"Ginny's going to be a fox. She's going to get this, I know she is," Hermione mused. "And I'll be a froufrou chocolate poodle. That's just not fair somehow."

"Ron's a froufrou rough collie," Harry reminded her, his eyes sparkling, waiting for Ron to explode.

"Collies are cool, not froufrou!" Ron said right on cue. Harry snorted with laughter and Ron blushed, knowing Harry was teasing him. "I'll get you back for that one, Potter," he threatened, his eyes mischievous.

"I'm shaking," Harry said, pretending to be quivering horribly.

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"All right, boys, playtime's over," Hermione said. "Back to work."

"Slave driver," Ron said.

"No, that's Harry," Hermione said, smiling prettily at her boyfriend. "I'm more of a . . . motivator."

"Whatever you say, sweetie," Ron said, leaning over to kiss the top of her head and getting back to work as she'd instructed.

Under the full moon, a handsome sable collie and a huge black wolf ran alongside an eerie grey werewolf. They raced across Hogwarts' grounds, around the greenhouses, through Hagrid's vegetable patch and along the far side of the lake, skirting the front edge of the forest. They gambolled and frolicked, sometimes tumbling each other over in rough play, the collie barking joyfully, the wolf's tongue hanging out, giving it a laughing expression, the werewolf's eyes remarkably cheerful. They stopped to lap water from a cold mountain stream that was one of the tributaries of the lake. While the collie finished drinking, the wolf and werewolf sat on their haunches, tongues lolling out in happy dog-like grins. Something caught the collie's attention and it took off at a run. The wolf and werewolf followed, with no idea what they were chasing, only knowing that such games were part of the magic of racing the moon.

A huge dark form leaped out of the forest, landing on the collie's back. The collie went down with yelps of pain, fighting to turn around and bite its attacker. The wolf and werewolf put on bursts of speed, racing to help their friend. Black and grey bodies flew through the air and landed on the struggling pair on the ground. Patches of colour that looked black in the moonlight bloomed on the collie's white ruff and red-gold coat as it bled from numerous wounds. Snarls of rage and anguished whines ripped the quiet of the night as the animals fought. Finally overwhelmed, the attacker fled, the werewolf hot on its heels. The green-eyed wolf sniffed the collie, which lay panting in pain. Ignoring its own wounds, the wolf became a phoenix and lifted the collie in its talons, then disappeared in a flash of light.

A fireburst lit up the darkened hospital wing as the phoenix arrived with its burden. It placed the collie gently on an empty bed, then changed into Harry Potter.

"Madam Pomfrey! Help!" Harry called as he pelted down the aisle toward her office.

"What's wrong? Who is it?" she cried as she emerged from her quarters, her hair up in wrappers, a dressing gown thrown hastily over her nightgown, her feet carelessly shoved into carpet slippers.

"It's Ron. He's been hurt," Harry said, wishing she'd move faster.

"What happened to you, Mr. Potter? You're covered with blood," she asked as she followed him to the bed where a wounded collie lay whining and panting in pain.

"Most of it's Ron's. He's hurt a lot worse than I am. We were running outside and something attacked him," Harry explained. He pulled out his wand and tapped the collie's body three times, revealing a badly injured Ron Weasley where the collie had been.

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"Where did this happen? What was it that attacked him?"

"By the forest on the far side of the lake. Remus chased it, whatever it was. It looked like a huge dog, but it's at least twice as big as Fang. It was a dull dark grey colour and had yellow eyes and a wide, square head. Big yellow teeth. I need to see if Remus is all right," Harry said, torn between staying with Ron and helping his godfather.

"Contact Professor Dumbledore, Potter," Madam Pomfrey said urgently. "He needs to know."

"I will," he promised. "I'll let Hermione and Ginny know he's hurt, as well. Take good care of him."

"You know I will," she said, giving him an admonishing look.

He gave her a small smile. "I know. Thanks." With that, he turned back into a phoenix and flashed to the headmaster's office. He stood in front of the gargoyle guarding the door. "Fizzing Whizbee," he said firmly. The gargoyle leaped aside, and Harry raced up the moving spiral staircase, and was soon standing outside the office door, pounding on it as hard as he could. "Professor, please! Wake up!"

"I'm awake, Harry. What seems to be the problem?" Dumbledore said as he opened the door. He was wearing a purple dressing gown richly embroidered with moons, stars and comets and fuzzy purple bunny slippers whose ears twitched toward Harry when they saw him.

Harry told him what had happened.

"I'll be right there," Dumbledore said. "Come sit down a moment and catch your breath. I'll send Fawkes to the hospital wing to help Madam Pomfrey."

Harry paced anxiously while Dumbledore checked several of his delicate silver instruments. While he paced, he sent the girls each an Adfero telling them Ron was hurt and to go to the hospital wing. As he finished sending the messages, Dumbledore came striding toward him.

"Let's go," he said. "You're bleeding rather badly. Are you sure you're strong enough to go back?"

"Most of this is Ron's blood," Harry snapped impatiently. They'd already delayed long enough. He was very worried about Remus and wanted to get back out there and find him. "I'm fine."

"Then, since you know where we need to go, can you flash me there? That would be fastest."

"Yes," Harry said, turning swiftly into a phoenix, fastening his talons in the old wizard's robes and flashing them to the edge of the forest where he'd last seen Remus.

Harry changed into himself swiftly and began pacing nervously as he studied the area, trying to find the way his godfather and the beast had gone. "This is where Ron was attacked. We fought from here to there," he said, indicating flattened spots in the long grass. "Then the beast took off and Remus went after it – that way."

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As they started following Remus's trail, Dumbledore responded to the tension in the young man's voice. "You did the right thing bringing Mr. Weasley to the hospital before going after Remus. From what you and Madam Pomfrey have told me, he needed immediate attention, and the werewolf can take care of itself very well. We need to be animals to be safe here." Dumbledore smiled as Harry instantly became a tremendous stag with a huge rack of antlers. "Well done!" the old wizard said approvingly, then himself turned into a phoenix and flew alongside the stag as it raced through the forest in great leaps.

They moved deep into the forest, so deep that no moonlight pierced the gloom. The stag stopped and froze in place, its ears pricked as it heard a slight sound at a distance. It leaped forward, jumping over fallen trees with ease, crashing through whatever undergrowth it couldn't clear, now following the phoenix which had surged ahead of it. The stag skidded to a stop at the top of a small cliff, staring into a clearing fifteen feet below. The monstrous beast had the werewolf down and was savaging it, but the werewolf was still fighting valiantly. The phoenix flew down quickly, landing in a tree nearby, where it changed back into Dumbledore. As he was changing, the old wizard saw the stag make a mighty leap and land right on the combatants. The beast turned toward the stag and raked it with its claws and teeth, leaving huge gashes in its side. The beast then threw the stag aside as if it weighed nothing. The stag jumped to its feet, lowered its antlers and charged, lifting the monster and tossing it away from the werewolf. The stag stood over the werewolf protectively as Dumbledore cast a Stunning Spell at the monster, which had opened its slathering jaws with a horrifying snarl and rushed to attack the stag and werewolf. The stag stepped in front of the werewolf's still form, lowering its head and pawing the ground, ready to do combat again, but the monster dissolved into mist when Dumbledore's Stunning Spell hit it.

"Interesting," Dumbledore mused, looking at the spot where the monster had been. He glanced at the bloodied stag, which was nosing the barely moving form of the werewolf sadly. "Harry, are you badly hurt?" No response. "Harry, listen to me. I'm going to turn into a phoenix and take you to the hospital wing. Then I'll take Remus to the dungeons. Madam Pomfrey will see to him in the morning. She wouldn't be safe with him now. Most of his wounds will heal on their own, but Fawkes and I will do what we can for him in the meantime."

The wounded stag stepped back from the werewolf's body and gazed at the phoenix now hovering in front of him. The phoenix flew toward him, but the stag hobbled away, then stared at the werewolf again. The phoenix came toward him once more, but the stag leaped out of the clearing and stood gazing at the phoenix, then at the werewolf. When the phoenix approached the stag the third time, the huge stag lowered its head threateningly, shook its rack and snorted while pawing the ground impatiently. The phoenix finally turned away from the stag and grabbed the werewolf's fur in its talons, then disappeared in a flash of light.

The stag stood staring at the spot where they'd been and dropped its head, blowing out a long, sad breath. It began moving back toward the school, leaping obstacles at first, then slowing to a walk as it weakened. When it reached the edge of the forest, it turned into Harry, who collapsed at the base of a tree to rest. He put pressure on the worst of his injuries, but there seemed to be some kind of anti-coagulant in the monster's saliva, because he couldn't stop the bleeding. "Merlin," he called quietly. "I need help."

Two phoenixes flashed above him at the same time. Merlin began pouring tears into Harry's wounds as the other phoenix turned into Dumbledore.

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Harry looked up at his headmaster as Merlin tended his wounds. "Why didn't you tell me you were a phoenix Animagus?" he asked wearily.

"There are a great many things I haven't told you yet, Harry," Dumbledore replied quietly. "There's so much I need to teach you, and our time together is always so full, there just hasn't been an opportunity. I will tell you everything I can when we have the time."

"When will that be?"

"We'll both know, I promise," Dumbledore said solemnly.

Harry sighed and nodded, knowing he wasn't going to get more information out of him just then.

Merlin was working hard on Harry's wounds, but they weren't closing up as quickly as wounds normally did when treated with phoenix tears.

"There must be something in the beast's saliva that keeps wounds from healing," Dumbledore observed as he watched Merlin work. He noticed the sudden worry in Harry's eyes. "Not to worry, dear boy. Once we get you to the hospital wing, you'll be healed quickly. I think Merlin's done about as much as he can for now." Dumbledore inspected Harry's wounds, then turned to the phoenix. "Thank you, Merlin. Could you take him to the hospital wing now? I'll be right there."

After Merlin had flashed Harry away from the forest, Dumbledore knelt and examined the blood-soaked ground. He pulled out several tiny glass vials and took samples of blood and saliva here and there, careful to not get any on his skin. Putting stoppers in each, he put them in his pocket and turned into a phoenix, then flashed to the hospital wing, arriving soon after Merlin and Harry.

In the hospital wing, Ginny was torn between watching her brother struggle through his pain and staring through the window, hoping to see Harry returning from the forest. Hermione held Ron's hand, twining her fingers in his hair, murmuring endearments to him as he hovered between consciousness and semi-consciousness. He'd lost a lot of blood.

"The Blood-Restoring Potion will have you sorted soon," Hermione said when Ron's eyes fluttered open once more.

"Harry? Remus?" Ron rasped weakly, a frown creasing his forehead.

"I don't know, sweetie. Harry seemed to be fine when he let us know you were hurt. I don't know what happened to Remus," she said anxiously.

A flash of light in the other end of the hospital wing caught their attention. "That's phoenix light. It must be Harry," Ginny said eagerly.

"He wouldn't bring Remus in here, would he? Remus is still a werewolf!" Hermione said, her voice shaking with nerves.

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"I don't know. He says Remus is safe when he's taken his potion," Ginny said uneasily.

"Yes, but the boys always make sure they're animals around him, even when he's had the potion," Hermione replied, growing more uneasy as they waited to hear who'd arrived.

"Miss Weasley," Madam Pomfrey called just as a second flash of light brightened the room.

"You're needed down here."

"That must be Harry, then!" Ginny cried, racing down the aisle to the bed where her unconscious boyfriend was now sprawled untidily. She gulped back the tears that sprang suddenly to her eyes and asked, "What happened?"

"He attacked the beast while it had Remus down," Dumbledore said sadly, having just changed back into himself from his phoenix form. "I couldn't get a spell off to protect him because he and the beast were fighting so closely."

"What kind of beast was it, Albus?" Madam Pomfrey said as she gave him a quick examination. "It must have something on its fangs that keeps blood from clotting. Fawkes had a very difficult time healing Mr. Weasley's wounds. The blood simply wouldn't clot for the longest time. I had to give him several doses of Blood Restoring Potion before Fawkes finally managed to heal enough of the wounds to give the potion a chance to work." She undressed Harry so Merlin could get to the rest of the boy's wounds more easily. The young man's face was ghostly pale, his black eyelashes startling against his white skin.

"It may have been some form of hellhound, but it only had one head," Dumbledore replied quietly. "I'll have to do some research to be certain. But, Poppy – it was a conjured beast, not a real one. When I hit it with a Stunning Spell, it vanished."

She looked at him in shock. "A conjured beast? Who would set such a thing loose in the forest?"

"Who, indeed," Dumbledore said, his face uncharacteristically grim. "We're just lucky the people it attacked could protect themselves as well as these three." He sighed. "How is Mr. Weasley doing?"

"He's doing well now. He just needs rest. He should be fine in a day or two. He lost a lot of blood, and the injury on his back was rather serious. That's what's going to take a day or two to heal. He's lost some tissue there. I'm working on restoring it."

"Does he need to go to St. Mungo's?" the headmaster asked in concern.

"No, he'll be fine," she assured him. "He just needs rest and more potion."

"What about Mr. Potter?" he murmured.

"His injuries aren't too serious," she said. "Those gashes in his side look nasty, but they aren't deep. The phoenix has them closing already. Those injuries must have been made with the beast's claws instead of its teeth. They're responding to the phoenix tears much better than the bites on Mr. Weasley's back and Mr. Potter's arms. Thank goodness we have phoenixes here. They make my job so much easier." She smiled in satisfaction at Merlin as he continued to

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work on Harry. "Once Potter gets enough Blood-Restoring Potion in him, he'll be much better. Give the phoenix tears some time to work, and then you can begin cleaning his wounds, Miss Weasley. The bleeding should be stopped as quickly as possible, and phoenix tears have some cleansing powers in wounds anyway."

"OK," Ginny replied. She sat quietly watching Merlin work, moving Harry's body a bit when Merlin had trouble reaching some injuries. She'd just taken Harry's hand and lifted his arm so the phoenix could get to the bites on it more easily when her boyfriend moaned softly and began stirring. "Harry? How are you feeling?" she said quietly.

"Oh, brilliant," he said tartly, moaning again when he tried to squeeze her hand. "Bloody damned beast anyway."

Ginny smiled sympathetically, then chuckled. "That sounds like my Harry. Welcome back!"

"Thanks. How's Ron? How's Remus?" He struggled, trying to sit up.

"Relax, baby, you have some healing to do. Ron's doing fine. I haven't heard about Remus yet."

Dumbledore moved into Harry's line of sight. "Remus is doing as well as can be expected. Fawkes is tending to him now. Merlin can take a bottle of Blood-Restoring Potion to him as soon as he's finished attending you. Madam Pomfrey will check on Remus in the morning."

"What was that thing?" Harry asked his headmaster.

"I'm not certain," Dumbledore replied. "I need to do some research. We've never had anything quite like that around here before."

"Why did it disappear?" Harry asked, his memory coming back to him.

"I did a Stunning Spell on it, and it vanished. That means it was a conjured beast, not a real one."

"What was the beast like?" Ginny asked. "Who would conjure it? And why?"

"Two or three times as big as Fang. Dark grey coat, broad head like Fang's. Yellow eyes," Harry snarled. "Ugly beast. And vicious."

"Exactly," Dumbledore agreed. "And as for who would conjure it. . ."

"Voldemort," Harry said with an angry sigh.

"Possibly. It would take quite a powerful wizard to conjure such a beast, because they are genuinely unruly and could turn on the wizard who created it. And this one was conjured with a control on it to make it vanish if any magic was used on it. Harry, did anyone know you three were going out running as animals tonight?"

"Just the girls," Harry said, nodding toward Ginny. "Why?"

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"I think someone may have noticed you three running during the full moon, perhaps in past months. Mr. Weasley's collie is most distinctive, and his white ruff would gleam in the moonlight, so it would be easiest to spot him. It's possible they decided to set a trap for you. But this is all speculation. There may be more such beasts out there, so I'll cancel the Care of Magical Creatures classes until Hagrid can set things up closer to the castle. I'll send for Aurors to help Hagrid search the forest in case there are more of those beasts out there. That's all we can do for the moment."

A shriek of terror from Ron's bed sent the nurse and headmaster racing to see what was wrong. Hermione was doing her best to keep Ron in the bed. His hands were struggling with something unseen in front of his face. His eyes were wild with fear and loathing. High-pitched screams burst from him as he fought to get away.

"Ron, what's wrong?" Hermione asked, trying desperately to grab his wrists and hold him still.

"Sp. . .spiders! Spiders, everywhere! HELP!" he cried, fighting frantically to push himself up and out of the bed.

"*Finite Incantatum*," Dumbledore intoned, but nothing happened. He tried several other spells and finally did a Stunning Spell, which worked just long enough for Madam Pomfrey to get a dose of the Draught of Peace into Ron, which calmed him a bit.

"What happened?" Hermione said, her face white with shock.

"What's wrong with him?" Ginny called anxiously from Harry's bedside.

"Hallucinations," Madam Pomfrey said, her face furrowed in concern. "I should have swabbed those wounds to test them for potions or chemicals."

Dumbledore looked at her sharply. "Harry hasn't been cleaned up much yet, has he? Or Remus?"

"Neither," the nurse replied distractedly. "They've had phoenix tear healing, that's all." She thought a moment longer, then sighed. "Well, no one can deal with Remus in his present form. Potter will have to do. Could you get Severus up here, please?"

A short time later, Professor Snape and the nurse had collected samples from Harry's wounds. "I know what to test for," Snape said. "I'll let you know as soon as I find something."

"Severus, I took samples from the site of the attack – blood and something clear, as well," Dumbledore said, carefully pulling the small flasks from his pocket. "I don't whose blood it is, but most of it is probably Ron's. It's from the place where they were first attacked."

"Thank you, Headmaster. These should be some help," Snape replied, pocketing the vials. With that, he swept from the room.

"GINNY! NO!" Harry screamed suddenly. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO. . .EXPECT. . .EX. . .GINNY!*"

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"I'm here, Harry," Ginny soothed, stroking his cheek and his hair repeatedly. "I'm fine. I'm right here. There are no Dementors here, baby. Everything's fine! Wake up!"

Harry's eyes were fixed on some point beyond her left shoulder. He raised his hand and cried, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" again, and a thin silvery mist came out of his fingers. "*GINNY!*" He began writhing uncontrollably on the bed, flailing his arms and pushing with his legs as if fighting with several invisible enemies. Ginny tried to hold his hand, pin his arms down, anything to calm him, but was having no luck.

Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey quickly restrained Harry and got a dose of the Draught of Peace in him, as well. They looked at each other over his still-writhing form, their faces sad and concerned.

"I'll take Harry to my office and care for him there. We can't leave him where he could hurt someone in his delirium," Dumbledore told the nurse. "Can you handle Mr. Weasley?"

"Not in here. I need to keep the hospital wing open as much as possible so I can take care of the other students when they need me," Madam Pomfrey said, obviously frustrated. "Perhaps we should send them to St. Mungo's."

"I'd rather keep them here at Hogwarts if we can manage them," Dumbledore said quietly.

Meanwhile, Harry was desperately muttering, "No! No, not Ginny! Take me! Not Ginny! *Expecto. . .expect. . .EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" Silvery mist flew from his fingers again despite his arms being tied down.

Ginny stood next to him in tears. She'd been talking to him constantly, touching him, kissing his forehead where he wasn't injured, and nothing had got through to him. "I'll go with you," she told her headmaster. "I can help."

"I know you're very capable, but this time, I think you'd better stay away from him," Dumbledore said kindly. "He is out of control, and far too powerful a wizard even without a wand for anyone to be around. I'll take good care of him, I promise. And you and Miss Granger will need to stay away from Mr. Weasley, as well, at least until we learn how to deal with these hallucinations. We don't want you girls to get hurt. I know the boys would agree with me on this."

A short time later, Ron was settled into a locked room with Professor McGonagall watching over him. Harry was in Dumbledore's quarters, Remus, who would be in werewolf form until dawn, in a locked dungeon. All of them were firmly restrained by magical bonds, because they'd begun attacking anyone who came near them. And so it went for two very long days and nights. All of them hallucinated nearly continuously, neither eating nor drinking, with extremely rare breaks when they were lucid. On those few occasions, they asked what was going on and where their friends were, but before they could hear the answer, they were lost in horrible hallucinations again.

"How's he doing?" Madam Pomfrey asked when she came to Dumbledore's office to check on Harry the second night.

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"He's weakening. I haven't been able to get any food into him at all. When he's lucid, I give him his potions, but those periods are so far apart," he said sadly. "He's been asking about Remus and Ron. How are they?"

"Remus is doing better. The phoenixes helped him heal his wounds. His hallucinations are wearing him down, too."

"Have his hallucinations changed at all?"

"He still thinks it's the full moon and, in his hallucination, he keeps fighting the werewolf change. But he's not really changing, since the full moon is past. Mostly, he's just exhausting himself. The worst times are when he thinks he's attacking Harry or Tonks as a werewolf. Minerva has her hands full with him."

Professor McGonagall had moved from watching Ron to caring for Remus when it became apparent that Remus was also going through the hallucinations, and thinking he was a werewolf. When she was a cat, he wouldn't try to attack her, and she could change forms quickly enough to give him his potions during his rare lucid moments. Professor Flitwick was now watching over Ron, taking turns with Professor Sprout.

The nurse shook her head sadly. "Mr. Weasley is exhausting himself, just like Mr. Potter. If we don't find a way to stop these hallucinations. . . ."

"I know. It seems as though I can actually see Harry growing weaker. He's worn out and getting no rest at all. Has Severus made any progress with his tests?"

Madam Pomfrey sat next to Harry, who was momentarily calm, and smoothed the hair off his sweaty forehead. "He says there's a powerful hallucinogenic in the beast's saliva. He believes that's what caused the problem. It took a while to get into their bloodstreams and become active. He's created several antidotes and is testing them on mice now."

"How long before it can be used on our patients?" Dumbledore asked, excited that a cure was in sight.

"I don't know. All the mice he's tested it on have died so far," she said sadly.

Hours later, Harry was fighting Dementors in his hallucinations again. Dumbledore's office was filled with stag Patronuses looking for something to attack. Suddenly, Harry screamed differently than he had before, a sound of heartbreak, anguish, total despair. "GINNY! NO!" He broke off in sobs, struggling against his bonds, his body writhing in total devastation. "No. Not her. No," he moaned, tears streaming down his face.

Dumbledore looked sadly at the exhausted boy before him and made a decision. "Fawkes! Come here, please. Take this to Miss Weasley," he said as he scribbled a note on some parchment. "Bring her here at once." With a flash, the phoenix was gone, Dumbledore's note held in its beak.

Ginny was in Charms class, trying to concentrate but heartsick with worry about Harry, Ron and Remus. She and Hermione and Tonks hadn't been allowed to see any of them since they'd

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been put in isolation. They'd heard from Madam Pomfrey that the boys and Remus were holding their own, and that Professor Snape was nearing success on an antidote, but they all felt she was hiding the truth from them somehow. Tonks was staying in the castle to be close to Remus, but hadn't left his quarters since her arrival.

A flash of light burst over Ginny's head and Fawkes landed in the middle of her desk, spilling her ink bottle and pushing her book to the floor.

"What is it, Fawkes?" she asked nervously as she took the note from the bird's beak. "Oh," she said quietly as she read the note. She turned and handed it to Colin Creevy, who sat next to her in class. "Give this to Professor Flitwick, will you?" she said, then grasped the phoenix's tail in her hand and disappeared in a flash of light.

When she arrived in Dumbledore's quarters, she looked toward Harry's still form and burst into tears. He was pale, his hair plastered to his head with sweat, bright red feverish patches that looked like burns on his cheeks, his breathing rapid and shallow. His wrists and ankles were tied to the frame of his bed. Every so often he struggled feebly against them, obviously weakening. Dumbledore moved to her quickly, laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"He's resting for the moment, but he needs you," Dumbledore said quietly. "He believes the Dementors have finally succeeded in Kissing you."

"Oh, no!" Ginny said. "What can I do for him?"

"Convince him you're alive," Dumbledore said gravely. "He's not asleep – he's more what you might call 'semi-conscious,' but that's not exactly the right term either. I can't always get through to him when he's in this state, and there's no telling when he'll hallucinate again. The hallucinations became quite violent, but he's weakening. He still fills my office with stags whenever he can, but there are fewer each time, and they're much less substantial."

"He has his wand?" Ginny asked, astonished.

"No, he's doing them wandlessly."

"I didn't think that was possible!" she said, her eyes wide. She moved to stand beside Harry's bed, her hands gliding over his cheeks and forehead, wiping tears and sweat away, hoping to soothe him somehow.

"Nor did I. He kept trying to cast Patronus Charms, but they were merely mist for quite a while. At some point, they became misty, abstract stags, but the stags he cast later were more defined and stronger. None of them have been like Harry's normal stags, but they got quite close before he became too weak to cast them anymore. It's remarkable he could cast anything at all, between being magically restrained and not having his wand." He shook his head, amazed as always by his student's extraordinary powers.

"What should I do?" she asked, sitting on the side of the bed.

"Whatever you can," Dumbledore said sadly. "Professor Snape still doesn't have a proper antidote and I . . . I honestly don't know how much more time he has."

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Ginny blanched. That was the kind of news she didn't want to hear. She swallowed hard, determined to help Harry. She could have hysterics some other time. Taking a deep breath, she calmed herself. "Have you called Hermione for Ron? Or Tonks for Remus?" Ginny asked after a long moment, still gently stroking Harry's face, which was grey with exhaustion and illness.

"Harry seems to believe you've been Kissed now, so he has stopped fighting. I don't believe he's dangerous anymore. Your brother is still violently battling spiders, and I don't imagine the presence of Miss Granger would help him with that, but I will send Fawkes to fetch her if you think it would comfort him in any way." Ginny nodded. "And Remus still is quite dangerous. Tonks wouldn't be safe with him." He sighed heavily. "They all need an antidote, and quickly."

"I'll do what I can," Ginny vowed. "Can you remove his restraints? I don't think he's going to hurt me."

"He's more likely to hurt himself, but he's so weak now. . .," Dumbledore said, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. Harry wasn't merely his favourite student; he had worked his way into the headmaster's heart. The old wizard shook his head sadly, then removed the restraints with a wave of his wand.

"Thanks. You look exhausted, Professor. Why don't you get some rest while I'm here? I'll look after Harry."

"Thank you, I believe I will lie down for a little while. This whole experience has been quite draining," he said, patting her absently on the shoulder as he slowly passed her. "Call me if you need me, for anything at all. All right?"

"Yes, Professor," Ginny said, then turned back to Harry. She lifted a flannel from a bowl of cool water by the bed and wrung it out, then wiped his face and neck, pushing his hair away from his forehead. His scar was livid, so red it looked as if it would be hot to touch. He moaned, rocking his head back and forth as she worked on him, then sighed as the cool flannel passed over his scar. Ginny held it there and began talking to him.

"Hi, baby. I've missed you so much," she began. "You need to wake up now. It's a beautiful day outside. I want to go walk down by the lake and sit under the beech tree with you. Can you wake up so we can go outside? C'mon, sweetheart, wake up."

Harry became agitated, his unrestrained arms flying up as he tried to cast his Patronus Charm over and over, his voice hoarse and whispery. Silvery mist that was vaguely stag-shaped emerged from his fingers, one after the other, until a whole herd of malformed misty stags galloped pointlessly around the headmaster's office. Harry tried to scream, calling Ginny's name out despairingly, but his voice was nearly gone, he'd screamed so much already. He groaned and tears streamed down his face as he called Ginny's name in a broken-hearted whisper. He dropped his arms and the stags all dissolved.

"I'm here, sweetheart, right here!" Ginny said in a strong voice. "Harry, I'm here! I'm fine! We're in Dumbledore's office. I've been in class. Nothing's wrong, sweetie, you've just been a bit sick. I'm *fine*, though. Come on, wake up!"

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He didn't seem to hear her, but went on keening over the loss of his love.

Ginny rinsed out the flannel and wrung it out again, washing his face and letting the cool cloth rest on his scar. He was still thrashing about in the bed, but weakly. She put her hands on either side of his face and held his head still, then bent down and kissed him soundly. "I'm here! Wake up and kiss me back! Come on, baby, wake up!" She kissed him again and he quietened for a moment. "That's it, calm down. I'm fine! Wake up and look at me." She leaned down and kissed him once more, nibbling on his lip a bit as she often did while teasing him. When she straightened up, he was looking at her, his eyes puzzled, but aware.

"Ginny?" he croaked, a frown of confusion on his face.

"Hi!" she said brightly. "It's good to see you awake! How do you feel?"

"Tired. . .hungry. . .," he said, still looking at her as if he couldn't believe his eyes. He lifted a hand and touched her arm, then twined his fingers in the ends of her hair. "Ginny?" he said, disbelieving. "Ginny?"

"I'm here. I'm fine, baby. You've been having horrible dreams."

"Dreams?" He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, staring at her avidly. "Dreams! Oh, Ginny!" he cried at last, and pulled her down into his arms. "I thought. . .I. . ." He couldn't speak anymore. He held on to her desperately, both arms wrapped around her as tightly as he could manage. Harry gasped, doing his best not to cry, but failing. "I thought you. . .were gone," he finally choked out. He brushed his lips over her forehead and the top of her head repeatedly.

"I know, baby. It was just a really awful dream," she assured him, snuggling into his shoulder and kissing the side of his neck. With her arms around him, she could feel how thin he'd become. "No wonder you're hungry. It's been days since you've eaten properly."

She sat up, planning to send for some food for him, but when she straightened, she saw his eyes were unfocused and the look of horror was on his face again. He was beginning another hallucination. She did her best to help him through it.

As he tired and the stags began to fade again, there was a knock on the door. Ginny ran to it and let Snape in.

"This should work," he said briskly as he bent over Harry's bed. "Open up, Potter."

"What's your password, Professor?" Ginny asked, putting her hand over his to stop him from giving Harry the potion.

"His father saved my life once. Happy?" Snape snarled, then bent over Harry again, forcing his mouth open just as Harry came to awareness after his hallucination.

"AAAAAAH!" Harry cried, scrambling to escape the man above him.

"It's OK, Harry, I've got his password," Ginny said comfortingly. "He has a potion for you that will make you well. Let him give it to you."

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Harry still looked frightened, but nodded, keeping his eyes firmly on Ginny's as he grimaced at the taste and then swallowed the potion. "Ugh."

"Sorry, but I didn't have time to make it *tasty*," Snape sneered. "I thought you'd prefer that I save your life rather than making the potion sweet."

Harry flicked his eyes toward Snape. "Yeah, you're right," he said, his voice still whispery. "Thanks."

"What's wrong with your voice?" Snape asked, his head tilted.

"I imagine it's because he's been *screaming* for three days," Ginny said, a bit more tartly than she'd intended.

"Indeed. Open your mouth, Potter," Snape drawled, then lit his wand and gazed inside Harry's mouth. "Say 'ah.'" Harry complied. "Yes. You need to drink a lot of water, Potter, but I also have something that should help. Open again." He held out a green bottle he'd pulled from his pocket and pointed its squirt top at Harry's mouth. "It will soothe your throat." He squeezed the squirt top twice, dispensing two large sprays of some green liquid into Harry's throat.

"What is it?" Harry asked after he swallowed, amazed that his throat already felt a little better, and his voice even sounded a bit stronger.

"A Muggle potion for sore throats. Quite useful, actually," Snape said as he put the bottle away. He saw their raised eyebrows. "Why should I go to the trouble of making a potion for such things when a simple, inexpensive Muggle remedy exists?" he said loftily, then turned to go.

"Professor? How are Ron and Remus?" Ginny asked as he reached for the door handle.

"I've already treated them. They're doing well. They were both as hoarse as Potter. That's why I had this Muggle potion with me. I'd heard all of them were quite hoarse from yelling, and thought it would help. Potter will sleep for a while, then wake up feeling much better, and with no more hallucinations. Try to get him to eat and drink something then. When he falls asleep, leave him alone and let him wake up when he's ready. He won't need any other potions for a while."

"All right. Thanks, Professor," Ginny said, a relieved smile on her face. Snape swept out of the room, and Ginny turned back to Harry, who was already asleep, looking peaceful for the first time in days.

It was evening, and Ginny was eating her dinner by Harry's bedside while trying to study. He'd been sleeping soundly for hours, snoring softly on occasion, but finally getting some much-needed rest. Dumbledore had taken advantage of Harry's rest to go and check on Ron and Remus, then attend the weekly staff meeting.

As Ginny lifted a forkful of shepherd's pie to her mouth, she heard a soft sound. She lowered her fork and lifted her eyes to see Harry's brilliant green eyes twinkling at her.

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"Hi, beautiful," he said with a loving smile. "It's so good to see you."

"Oh, Harry!" Ginny cried, leaning over to kiss his forehead. "I'm so glad you're awake!"

He lifted his face expecting a kiss on the lips, but she sat back down. A puzzled expression crossed his face.

"I'm sorry, but you had the antidote potion not that long ago, and I don't imagine it would be a good idea for me to kiss you right now. It could make me ill," she said reasonably. "I love you."

"I love you, too, and I'm glad you didn't kiss me if it might make you ill," he said, reaching out to take her hand.

"How do you feel?"

"Hungry! Is that shepherd's pie?" he said eagerly, inhaling deeply and savouring the fragrance of the food.

"Yes," Ginny replied, her eyes amused.

"And baked apples!" he moaned, his face rapturous. "Can I have some? Please?"

"Harry, it's been three days since you've eaten. You should have soup," she said righteously, but her heart was already softening. When he looked at her that way, his big green eyes begging, that crooked smile on his face, she couldn't deny him anything.

"Pretty please?" he whinged. He reached out and grabbed a handful of her hair. "I'll have to eat this instead, then," he said with a shrug. "I've heard there's protein in hair. It might hold me up for a while. . . ." He pulled the silky tendril toward his mouth but didn't bite, just giving her a cheeky look over the wad of bright red hair in his hand.

Ginny was laughing by this time. "All right, but if you chuck. . ."

"I won't, I promise!" He let go of her hair and held his mouth open expectantly, gazing avidly at her fork.

"Nope, not until you sit up a bit," she chided him. "I don't want you choking!" She helped him sit up and fluffed the pillows behind him, then slowly, tantalizingly filled her fork and waved it around out of his reach.

"I'm STARVING here!" Harry cried, finally reaching out to grab the fork himself.

She pulled it just out of his reach. "Ah-ah-ah!" she teased. "Sit still and behave yourself and then I'll feed you."

He sat with his hands in his lap, his fingers determinedly laced together and his mouth open expectantly, his eyes bright and teasing. Charmed by his determinedly angelic expression, Ginny put his glasses on his face then started feeding him, causing a lot of laughter in the process.

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"Ah, that sounds wonderful!" Dumbledore said with a broad grin as he entered his office.
"Feeling better now, Harry?"

"Yeah, loads!" Harry agreed cheerfully. "How are Ron and Remus?"

"Much the same as you, awake, hungry and cheerful," Dumbledore replied.

"I'm sorry to be so much trouble, Professor," Harry said sincerely. "I mean, I'm in your office and all. . . ."

"And you've entertained me royally by casting Patronus Charms while magically restrained AND without a wand!" Dumbledore said with a fond chuckle. "We will have to sort out how you managed that."

"What? I . . . *wandless*?"

"Yes, dear boy, and restrained as well. A remarkable achievement! Now if you can manage it without being desperately ill, that will be quite something!"

Dumbledore ordered food to be brought up for himself and Ginny, then watched her feed Harry the rest of her original dinner. Harry finished every bite, including the baked apples, and looked quite pleased with himself as he finally rested against his pillows and patted his bulging stomach.

"Ah, that's better!" he said happily. He grinned at Ginny and Dumbledore, who were finishing their own dinners.

"You sound exactly like Ron," Ginny said with a laugh. "It seems he can never get enough food to satisfy him."

"I suspect *he* sounds exactly like *me* right now," Harry retorted teasingly. "You don't starve growing boys!"

"You were the ones who were starving yourselves," Ginny chided him gently.

"I'll never do that again!" Harry vowed, laughing at his own silliness.

"Why are you so giddy?" Ginny asked him. "I thought you'd be tired and grumpy and . . ."

"I imagine it's something in the potion," Dumbledore said wisely. "Harry, Ron and Remus all went through crushing depression and anxiety while they were ill. I asked Professor Snape to take that into consideration, if possible, when he created the antidote. I believe he added something that would help them recover more quickly by being cheerful rather than depressed."

"Sort of a Cheering Charm in a bottle?" Ginny said with a smile.

"Something like that, yes," Dumbledore agreed.

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Harry was sitting with his arms crossed over his bulging tummy, a silly grin on his face. "Well, I'm glad for whatever he put in there. I feel GREAT!" He leered at Ginny. "Wanna dance?"

Ginny burst out laughing. "Not right now, silly. You've been sick!"

"I'm not sick now. . .only sick of being in bed!" he said, then burst out of the bed and onto his feet. He wobbled a bit and then grabbed her hands, pulling her to her feet. "Shall we dance, m'lady?"

"No, we shall not, good sir! You need to rest!" she said, laughing as he tried to spin her around. She wound up having to support him as he nearly fell over, but he was laughing in spite of his weakness.

"I think Professor Snape overdid the cheering part of the potion," Ginny chuckled as she pushed Harry down on the bed.

"Maybe," Harry agreed, grinning up at her. "But it's better than whatever's in second place!"

"What does that mean?" Ginny asked as she tucked him in.

"I have no idea!" Harry said gleefully. He slid down in the bed, suddenly sleepy. A jaw-cracking yawn escaped him, making him laugh. "I'm sleepy again."

"Then go to sleep, silly," Ginny said, stroking his cheek affectionately.

"Get a good night's rest, Harry," Dumbledore said with a fond smile. "By morning, you may be ready to go back to your dormitory and classes."

"Yay!" Ginny said.

"Classes?" Harry said, suddenly serious and more awake. "How many days have I missed? With N.E.W.T.s coming up. . . ."

"You've only missed one day," Dumbledore assured him. "You three got hurt on Friday evening, remember? Today is Monday. You won't have any problem making up one day's work."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and settled back in his bed. "That's good."

"Go to sleep," Ginny insisted.

"Will you be here when I wake up?" he asked her suddenly. She looked questioningly at Dumbledore.

"I think Miss Weasley should go back to her dormitory so she can finish her homework and rest before tomorrow's classes," Dumbledore said. "I'll stay with you tonight, and then Miss Weasley can come for you in the morning and go with you to breakfast. How's that?"

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"All right. Thanks, Professor." Harry turned to Ginny again. "Night," he said, pulling her hand to his lips and kissing it softly. "Thanks."

"Thanks for getting well!" she said brightly, then leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Your scar doesn't look hot and painful anymore. It looked awful while you were sick."

"It hurt," he said quietly. "It's fine now."

"Good! See you in the morning," she said, picking up her bag and waving as she left the office.

"So what kind of beast was it that attacked you lot?" Neville asked at breakfast the next day.

"Dunno," Ron said. "Dumbledore said it was conjured. He said it seemed like a hellhound, but smaller, and it only had one head, instead of three."

"One head was plenty!" Harry said with sincerity. "Did they find any more of those things?"

"No, they said the Aurors who searched the forest didn't find any signs of such animals. The Centaurs were even asked about them," Hermione replied. "They said it didn't appear until just before it attacked Ron." She shuddered at the thought.

Ron covered her trembling hands with his, his big hand totally engulfing both of her small ones. "We're OK now, 'Mione," he assured her.

"Please tell me you lot won't go running like that again," she whispered nervously. "I don't know that I can take it."

"Not until they find out who did it and lock him up," Ron promised.

"Professor Dumbledore said it had to be a powerful wizard to conjure that kind of a beast," Ginny said, worry flitting across her face.

"Gee, I wonder who it could be," Harry said acerbically.

"But if it was Voldemort, why wouldn't he attack directly, if he was that close to you?" Hermione said logically.

"Dunno. But if he didn't do it, he probably told someone else how to do it," Ron muttered.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "That beast even smelled like Voldemort, come to think of it." He sat quietly thinking about the animal, trying to remember every sensation, every scent, all the visual details he could think of. "It vanished when Dumbledore Stunned it, so it couldn't be a real animal Voldemort possessed," he mused.

"Dumbledore said it was conjured. He should know how to recognize a conjured animal, shouldn't he?" Neville said, a bit confused.

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"Yeah, he should," Harry agreed. "But he didn't *smell* it. I did. And I've smelled Voldemort, too. I was a wolf when it attacked Ron, and the wolf has a really keen sense of smell. If that wasn't Voldemort, he certainly had a lot to do in the creation of it. This is going to require some thinking to work out."

"And some research," Hermione said with determination. "Let's meet in the library after class today and start working on it."

Many hours of research later, they were no closer to a solution than they'd been when they started.

"I'm knackered," Ron said, stretching until the bones in his back cracked loudly. "Ouch!"

"That sounded painful," Hermione said, looking at him in concern.

"Growing boys, you know," he said, grinning. "I'm all right."

"If you grow any more, your head will hit the doorways," Ginny teased.

"Yeah, and you'll always be short stuff," Ron teased right back, reaching over to ruffle her hair.

"Hey! It took me a while to reach this level of perfection!" she protested, laughing as she tried to undo the mess he'd made.

"No worries," Harry said merrily as he straightened out her hair for her. "I'll take any excuse to play with your hair." He grinned cheekily at Ron. "Thanks, mate!"

"Anytime," Ron replied airily.

"You two are still a bit giddy from that potion, aren't you?" Hermione said, looking from one boy to the other.

"Giddy?" Ron protested. "I'm not giddy, I'm just cheerful!"

"Quite a bit more cheerful than normal," Hermione said darkly. "Perhaps you should speak to Madam Pomfrey, get checked over again."

"For being *cheerful*?" Harry said in amazement.

"Well. . .unusually so," she said in a small voice, a bit nervous in the face of both boys' annoyance. She straightened her back with determination and continued. "Anything out of the ordinary should be looked into, don't you think? I mean, you two and Remus were attacked by a conjured beast that made you have hallucinations for days! Who knows what else it might have put in your systems when it bit you?"

"Well, *that's* a cheery thought," Ron said darkly. "Thanks for killing off my good mood!"

"She's right, though," Ginny said quietly. "We don't know what else that thing might have done to you. If you feel odd or different in some way, you probably should see the nurse."

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Harry and Ron looked at each other. "Been feeling a bit off, mate?" Ron asked.

"Nah. I'm fine. You?"

"Fine."

Both boys looked at the girls. "Do we *seem* to be 'off' to you?" Ron asked seriously.

"A bit," Hermione said. Ginny nodded.

"All right then. Take us to the nurse if you must," Ron conceded.

A short time later, Madam Pomfrey looked at the girls and said, "What did you think was wrong with them?"

"They were both so cheerful and it seemed rather unnatural," Hermione said uneasily.

"Professor Snape's antidote included a strong Cheering Charm type of ingredient. You both were aware of that," the nurse reminded them.

"Yes, but something just doesn't seem right about them," Ginny said, glancing uneasily at the boys who were sitting quietly on the side of a bed.

"I know you girls know them best, so I'm not discounting that something seems odd to you, but I can't find anything right now. Just keep an eye on them and let me know if there's any change, all right?" Madam Pomfrey turned to the boys. "You aren't hiding anything, are you? You're both feeling all right?"

"I'm fine," Harry said. Ron nodded.

"Right, then. Off with you. Come and see me when you actually have something wrong with you," she said with a smile, shooing them toward the door.

It was Harry's and Ron's first D.A. meeting since being attacked. The school had been informed of the attack, but Dumbledore had told the students to leave the victims alone, that they'd talk about it when they were ready to. As the D.A. members sorted themselves into their practice groups, Colin said, "Harry, may I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Harry said absentmindedly as he passed out cushions for the students to land on when they practiced various spells.

"Did you really cast a Patronus Charm wandless?"

"What?" Harry said, startled. The rest of the group stilled instantly, every one of them waiting eagerly for Harry's response.

"I heard Professor Dumbledore and McGonagall talking," Colin explained. "He said you kept casting Patronus Charms over and over, and you didn't have your wand, and you were tied up with magical bonds. How is it possible to do that?"

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"I honestly don't know," Harry replied. "I was sick. I don't know how I did it."

"Why were you trying to cast Patronus Charms wandlessly?" a young student asked.

Harry sighed. Answering the questions was the fastest way out of the problem, he knew that. But still. . . "Erm. . .well, I was having hallucinations. You lot were told about that, right?" They nodded. "I was hallucinating about Dementors." His eyes caught Ginny's for a moment. "They were. . .they were attacking Ginny, over and over," he said, his voice growing softer, his eyes unfocused, looking inward and seeing horrors they couldn't even imagine. "I was trying to protect her. That's why I was casting the Patronuses."

"Did they work?" someone asked.

"No," Harry murmured. He shook himself and focused on the group again. "No, they didn't chase the Dementors away, because the Dementors were in my mind. The stags filled Dumbledore's office, but they didn't *do* anything, because there were no real Dementors around."

"Have you tried doing them wandless since then?" Ernie McMillan asked.

"No."

"Why not?" Ernie pressed. "That's a pretty amazing skill, to be able to cast such a spell wandlessly. I would think you'd want to perfect it."

"I haven't really wanted to think about Dementors since then," Harry said, doing his best to suppress a shudder of revulsion.

"Can't you do it without thinking about Dementors?" a young Hufflepuff girl with curly blond hair piped up. "We don't think about Dementors when we try to do the Patronus Charm – we just hold on to our happy thought. That's what you told us to do."

Harry sighed. "You're right. That's how you do it. All right, I'll have a go." He sighed again as he put his wand in his pocket. He held his hand out in front of him, trying to think of his happy thought, but the memories of Dementors kept getting in the way. Finally, his eyes found Ginny. She smiled at him encouragingly, and his heart lifted. "*Expecto Patronum!*" he cried, and a silvery mist came out of his fingertips – mist, but no stag. He chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. If he could do this when he was sick, surely he could do it when he was well, right? The challenge of it appealed to his competitive nature and he chose an even happier thought. He glanced at Ginny and winked. Her "Weasley Plot," when she and Harry had first made love, was the happiest of all possible happy thoughts. Straightening his shoulders, he held his hand out strongly and cried, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" A misty but misshapen stag emerged and trotted around, looking confused. The D.A. members cheered when the stag appeared and continued until it vanished. Harry shrugged. "I guess I need to work on it a bit." Everyone laughed.

"You lot need to understand that wandless magic is very difficult to do, and not everyone can do it," Hermione said. She'd been researching everything she could find about it and asking Harry endless questions, but she wasn't having much success with wandless magic herself yet. "If you have accidentally done wandless magic in the past, you have a better chance of

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learning how to do it properly. I've seen Harry Summon his wand and light his wand at a distance without thinking about what he was doing, and that was before he started learning how to do wandless magic. His being able to do those things showed he had an aptitude for it. I can do a few tiny things wandless when I don't think about it too much, but I'm still struggling with trying to cast real spells without a wand. My lack of real success so far doesn't mean I'll stop trying, anymore than I'll stop trying to do the Animagus transformation. We all need to work on perfecting the spells we've been working on with wands. Trying to learn how to do wandless magic is 'extra' stuff you can do outside of these meetings. But it is inspirational to watch Harry do such things, and give us goals to shoot for." With that, she got the group started on that day's spells.

When they were all busily practicing, Harry walked up behind Hermione and leaned down to whisper in her ear, "Thanks."

She turned around and smiled up at him. "For what?"

"For drawing their attention away from me so neatly," he said. "I was getting a bit uncomfortable. Some of them were looking at me as if I'm a freak."

"You're no freak – you're just an extremely talented wizard and they're jealous! I am, too, for that matter," she said calmly. "But that doesn't mean we can't try to do the things you do. We just need to concentrate on the important spells, and leave the fancy stuff for outside practice, I think."

"Yeah," he said, draping his arm around her shoulders and giving her an affectionate squeeze. "I mean it. Thanks."

"No problem, Harry. You were beginning to look a bit uncomfortable, and I thought you'd been on the spot long enough." She smiled at him again, then turned away to help some younger students whose wand work was not nearly as good as it should be.

A few weeks later, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny went to the Flying Squad's training session at Madam Hooch's request. The Squad used the Quidditch pitch as their practice area.

"Right, then, you lot! Pay attention!" Madam Hooch called as her squad hovered in formation in front of her. "Your leaders are here, and I want them to be impressed with what you've learned so far." In moments, the squad was flying in formation doing various aerobatic manoeuvres. When they finished, they landed and stood watching Madam Hooch expectantly, grins on their faces.

"Well done, well done!" she said encouragingly. "What do you think?" she asked Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny.

"They look great!" Harry said happily. "Good flying, all of you!" He grinned at Euan Abercrombie, who had jumped at the chance to be in the Flying Squad and improve his flying skills.

"We'd like you to help us with something," Madam Hooch said, a twinkle in her hawk-like eyes.

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"Sure, what?" Harry replied.

"Squad – load up!" she said, and the squad members ran over to several boxes sitting on the edge of the pitch, loading pouches attached to their brooms with small brown objects.

"What do you want us to do?" Ron said, watching the squad's activities warily.

"I want you to attack the squad with some harmless spell – a Stinging Hex, perhaps – so they can practice flying while under attack. They will drop their bombs while you're attacking them," Madam Hooch said confidently. "We want to see how accurate they can be while under attack."

"Accurate? As in hitting us with something?" Hermione said with concern.

"Yes, of course! With their bombs!" Madam Hooch said briskly. She turned to her squad. "Mount up!"

"Uh. . .what's in the bombs?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Powdered sugar," she replied. "I had the house elves make them. It won't hurt you, but it will mark where the bombs land quite nicely. Just don't use any shield charms, all right? They do need to see how accurate they are with the bombs."

"Sugar? Oh, OK then," Ron said with a grin, thinking this might not be too bad after all.

Before long, a royal battle was raging in the Quidditch pitch, amid shouts of laughter, catcalls, and squeals of pain. The four on the ground had started defending themselves gently, not wanting to hurt or scare the Flying Squad, but the Flying Squad was having entirely too much fun pelting them with sugar bombs. Harry's hair was solidly grey now from all the bombs that had hit his head despite his best efforts to dodge them. He was a favourite target of the Squad members – cheers erupted whenever they managed to tag him with a bomb. Ron, Hermione and Ginny weren't faring much better, but they were giving as good as they got now, and the Flying Squad was gaining battle experience without actually being wounded in any way. They'd squawk when the Stinging Hexes hit them, but then would come back with renewed determination to bomb whoever had stung them. It was a fun and very useful practice session. Madam Hooch finally called a halt when they ran out of sugar bombs. Harry and Ron were both solidly white now. Hermione and Ginny stood giggling as they watched the boys scrub at their faces, then lick sugar off of their hands, grinning hugely.

"That was brilliant!" Harry enthused as Madam Hooch landed beside him.

"And you lot gave us excellent practical experience," she said. "Thank you so much!"

"I think they're going to do quite well," Ron said, looking the Squad over proudly. "You guys were fantastic. Keep up the good work!" He turned to his sister and held his arms out at his sides. "A little help, please?"

"*Scourgify*," Ginny said, then repeated the charm on Harry and Hermione, and finally herself. "That got most of it," she said with satisfaction as she ruffled Harry's hair, sending a shower of sugar down on his black robes. "Looks as if you have dandruff, sweetie."

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"Oh, lovely," he said, rubbing the sugar off of his shoulders with his hands, which only smeared it and rubbed it in. "I thought you were going to help me?" he said, giving Ginny a pained look. She did another Cleaning Charm on him and he was finally relatively tidy.

"Good work, everyone!" Madam Hooch called to the Squad. "You're dismissed."

"They're awesome," Ron told the flying instructor. "What a great idea. When are Fred and George coming to see how they're doing?"

"Next week, and they'll be bringing us some sample bombs to work with, as well. We need to practice in a wide variety of weather conditions – rain, wind, and so on – so they've made sample bombs that stay intact when they're dropped, but are the same size and weight as the real ones. That way, we can use them over and over. They'll be flying with us then," she said as she walked toward the castle with Ron, Harry, Hermione and Ginny. "I wanted to ask you, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter – will the twins be the Squad Leaders, or do you want me to do it?"

"I'll have to talk with Fred and George and see what they think will work best," Ron said immediately. "I expect they'll want you to do it, so they can keep everyone supplied with more bombs. We'll get it all sorted out soon. Great work, Madam Hooch, really."

"Yeah, they've come a long way," Harry said. "And all this practice is improving the ones who play Quidditch, as well. Thanks for this idea, Madam Hooch. It's brilliant. I can see they'll be a huge help in battle."

"I hope so. If what we do can end the battle more quickly and save some lives, it will be well worth the effort," Madam Hooch said with conviction.

"Absolutely," Harry agreed whole-heartedly.

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Chapter 16 – A Variety of Lessons

Due to the attack of the conjured beast, Professor McGonagall decided to postpone the assembly she'd planned on the Animagus transformation. She rescheduled the date to a Saturday evening in mid-October, which gave her a chance to introduce the topic in her younger classes. Finally, the evening was upon them. She was looking forward to it far more than the boys were, but they had stoically accepted their fates and were as ready as they could manage.

"Now that we've finished our delicious dinner," Professor Dumbledore said as the last of the puddings were consumed, "I'd like you to get out your parchments and quills. Professor McGonagall and some students will be leading an assembly in which you will learn more about the Animagus transformation." With a clap of his hands, the tables were cleared of all dishes and the students quietened, looking toward Professor McGonagall expectantly, quills poised to take notes on the lesson.

"As I've told all of you in class, there have been only seven registered Animagi in the twentieth century," McGonagall began. "There are also unregistered Animagi – we know of four of them. Three of those were students who taught themselves how to do the transfiguration in order to help a friend. You all know Professor Lupin is a werewolf, which is in *no way* his fault. He was bitten as a very young child and suffered horribly, and quite alone, through a very painful transformation each month for many years."

She glared around the room to let everyone know her opinion of anyone who thought badly of Remus because of his affliction, then looked at Harry before continuing. His eyes were calm. He knew what she was going to say, and he no longer minded her use of the examples she'd chosen.

"When Professor Lupin was a student here, his best friends, James Potter and Sirius Black, decided to become Animagi so they could keep him company during his transformation. Their company at such times was a great comfort to him. James and Sirius were the best students in school. James, as you may know, was Harry Potter's father, and Sirius Black was Harry's godfather. They are both, sadly, deceased, and are sorely missed by those of us who knew them." She paused, her nostrils suddenly thin and disapproving as she went on. "They had another friend, Peter Pettigrew, to whom they taught the transformation so he could join them. Mr. Pettigrew became a Death Eater and worked in the service of Lord Voldemort. He was killed in the battle of *Cascade Prele du Chevaux* last spring. The fourth unregistered Animagus of this century is Rita Skeeter, who took the form of a green beetle in order to spy on people for her newspaper stories. I'm glad to say the Ministry has put an Anti-Transformation Spell on her because of the many evil things she's done with her writing."

She looked around the Great Hall, her gaze falling on Harry and Ron. "I told you there were seven registered Animagi in this century, but I'm very pleased to tell you that Hogwarts is home to two new Animagi, bringing the total of registered Animagi in this century up to nine. It has been many years since we've had students who openly pursued the transformation with such dedication, and with such great success. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, would you come forward, please?"

The two boys got up from their seats and walked slowly to the front, uncomfortably aware of all the eyes following their progress. When they reached the staff table, they looked up at

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Professor McGonagall, who spun her finger in a circle, indicating they should turn around and face their fellow students. Both boys took deep breaths to settle their nerves, then complied, facing the crowd stoically.

"I've asked Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley to share their expertise in this area. Having Animagi in the student body is such a rare thing, I thought we should take advantage of it. I can explain until I'm blue in the face, and demonstrate until I'm spitting hairballs," she said tartly, "but when someone your own age achieves such a difficult and significant goal, I believe it makes a difference in how you look at that achievement. I think if they explain what they did to learn how to do the transformation, and if they answer your questions, you may learn something that will be of help to you in your own efforts."

She glanced around the room. Nearly everyone was paying close attention, except the Slytherins, who were being obviously inattentive, doing such things as Levitating their quills, drawing on each other's parchments, whispering. She turned toward them, her small square glasses flashing furiously. "This information may very well be in your examinations, so be sure to pay close attention to everything that's said here tonight." She waited until even the Slytherins had their parchments and quills at the ready, then said, "Mr. Potter, please tell us how you achieved your Animagus transformation."

Harry launched into the tale, much as he'd done in his class the previous term, explaining how he'd done a cat simply because they'd started in class turning a hand into a cat's paw and he just went on from there. He turned back to McGonagall for a clue on what else she wanted him to say.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall prompted, "would you do your explanation of how to choose your animal, and about 'soft focus' and magic flowing like water? I think that's a very effective way to express how the transfiguration feels."

"Oh. Right. Well, um. . . . It's a bit hard to explain. I didn't really work out how I actually did it until I had to explain it to Ron, so I suppose I can use him as an example." He glanced at Ron, who grinned at him briefly and nodded. Harry took a deep breath and went on. "He was trying to do the transformation but having a lot of trouble with it. When he and I talked about it, I realized he hadn't focused on his animal precisely enough. He wanted to be a dog, but hadn't chosen any particular kind of dog. We got quite specific about the dog he wanted to be, and it became easier for him. He'd been working on doing a paw and was blocked on it. He'd become frustrated, which is understandable, but isn't the best way to get past a block like that. I suggested he try doing a different part, and he managed a ruff fairly soon after that. And the rest, as they say, is history," he said, grinning mischievously at his best mate, who promptly turned into the sable collie. "See?" Harry said, gesturing to Ron with great pride in his friend's achievement.

The students who had never seen Ron transform burst into applause. The collie barked, then ran to Harry and bounced around, inviting him to play. Harry shoved on the collie's shoulders, pushing it backwards, and the collie bounded back toward him, barking cheerfully. When the applause died down, the dog stood calmly next to Harry.

"He really loves being a collie. I think it suits him," Harry said fondly as he scratched the dog behind its ears. It leaned into Harry's fingers, obviously enjoying the attention.

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"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall prompted. "Soft focus? Water?"

"Oh, yeah! Sorry." He smiled at the collie, who turned back into Ron and slouched against the staff table once more, a shy but self-satisfied grin on his blushing face. "Well. . .soft focus. That's a term I've used with the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and it seems to work well with explaining how to do this type of magic, as well. I think we sometimes block our magic by concentrating too hard on what we're trying to do, such as the Animagus transformation. I tell the team to fly with soft focus rather than tunnel vision so they're concentrating on what's in front of them as they're flying, but at the same time, they're also completely aware of what's around them – such as approaching Bludgers," he said with a chuckle, which earned a laugh from many of the listening students. "Flying with soft focus means you're flying the broom by instinct, by feel, rather than you looking at your hands and legs and the broom handle and thinking, 'if I want to turn left, I have to push the handle and lean this much to the left and to use the left braking pedal if I want to turn sharply, and use the pedal more softly if I want a softer turn.' Well, that's if you have a broom with brake pedals like mine, anyway," he added with a blush and a shrug. "But that kind of thinking, considering every detail while you're trying to do something, is what makes kids fall off of brooms when they're trying to learn to fly. You overcorrect, you focus on the wrong things, you don't react quickly because you're thinking too hard about how to do what you're doing. You need to trust your body to work in coordination with the broom, and that takes a relaxation of sorts. A 'soft focus.' I think the same is true of magic. If you can learn how to relax and focus at the same time, I think the magic becomes more pure, more concentrated. I can't focus my magic as well if I don't relax first, using that 'soft focus' concept. Once you learn how to do it, it's easy, but it takes some time to learn how to concentrate fully while you're relaxed. It's a lot harder than it sounds, but I think nearly anyone can do it if they work on it long enough." He grinned suddenly. "And I didn't just give away one of our training tips – it takes a lot of training to do the soft focus thing well in the middle of a Quidditch game. It's much easier to do when working on a spell like this."

He stopped and reorganized his thoughts a bit. "One of the things I've learned is different in me than in some of my classmates is that I feel my magic flowing like water through me. It kind of, erm, 'sings' in my veins. When I have that feeling, my magic is at its most focused, most powerful. If you can find that feeling in your magic, the more difficult spells like the Animagus transformation may come easier to you." He blew out a breath and relaxed, having done all the explanation he could think of for now.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall said with delight. "Harry has done an excellent job of explaining his concepts, which I believe are very applicable to the Animagus transformation. I wish I'd thought of them myself, but Harry brought his Quidditch perspective to bear on the problem, and came up with his process for doing the transformation from a different angle than I did. It pleases me immensely that he's done so and is able to articulate it. Thank you again, Mr. Potter."

She glanced around the Great Hall, noting many students still frantically scribbling notes on their parchment. When they'd caught up, she continued.

"Mr. Potter's registered Animagus form is a cat. As you've heard in class, each Animagus has identifying marks which are used on the registration forms. Mr. Potter, would you change into the cat for me?" A moment later, a black cat leaped up onto the staff table and stood in front of her. "Thank you, Mr. Potter," she said with a smile, running her hand down the length of

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the cat's back and making it purr. "If you'll look closely, you can see that Mr. Potter's cat has green eyes like his, and has a faint white marking over his right eye which resembles his scar. This is his identifying mark. Mr. Potter, would you trot down the tables and let every one look at you?" As he jumped off of the table and hopped onto the Gryffindor table, she added, "Please don't bother him – remember, there's a young man inside that cat's fur, and the cat is fully equipped with lovely sharp claws. You don't want to annoy him." The cat trotted amiably down the table, stopping in front of Ginny and rubbing its cheek on hers, purring loudly. It bumped its hip against Hermione's shoulder, still purring, and flicked its tail at Neville, then continued on its way, stopping to visit various D.A. members and other friends as it progressed along the various tables. He trotted the length of the Slytherin table swiftly, not spending any more time there than necessary. McGonagall continued her discussion of the Animagus transformation as he moved through the Great Hall. When he returned to the staff table and changed back into himself, she was ready to move on.

"Mr. Weasley, would you please tell us about your transformation, how you got started, how it feels to you, any problems you've experienced, and so on?" she prompted.

"Sure. Well, Harry told you most of it. I wanted to do a dog, but hadn't narrowed it down enough, didn't have enough detail, enough 'focus' on my particular dog. Turns out it's very important to know exactly what kind of animal you want to be, not just a dog, but a collie, a lab, a hound. Whatever it is, you need to know everything you can about that animal before you can change into it." He was using some of the information Harry had told him about how Harry had achieved other forms, as well as his own experience. "Once I thought things through, I remembered the collie our neighbour had, and decided I wanted to do that kind of dog. With those details in my mind, it was much easier to get somewhere with the transformation. I got a bit stuck sometimes, and Harry had to talk me through it or even rescue me a few times, but those experiences helped me really conquer this spell. I know it inside and out now, because I've made mistakes and had to get out of them somehow. The main problem I had was losing concentration or losing confidence. I'd get to a certain point and just get stuck."

Harry snorted with laughter.

"What?" Ron said, turning to him.

"Sorry," Harry said, trying to stop grinning. "Go on."

Ron gave Harry a curious look, which made Harry laugh out loud. "Now you *have* to tell," Ron said finally. "Or is it going to really embarrass me if you do tell?"

"I'm sorry, mate. I was just remembering when your collie had Ron's feet one time," Harry said, snorting with amusement. "Poor dog's skinny white legs with Ron's big feet." The room erupted with laughter.

"Yeah, and I can remember having to take you to McGonagall – sorry, Professor McGonagall – when you got stuck and couldn't change back!" Ron retorted with equal laughter.

McGonagall let the laughter go on a while, then calmed the room. "As you can see, the transformation is not without its difficulties, but with a good sense of humour and a nearby friend who's capable of reversing the spell, learning to be an Animagus can be quite an

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adventure," she said with a smile. "And add this to your notes – to reverse the spell on someone else, you tap the animal with your wand three times and think of him in his original form. There is no incantation. And if you have problems with reversing the spell on a friend who gets stuck, do come to me or Professor Dumbledore so we can sort things out." She looked at Harry, wondering if he was ready for the next stage in this presentation.

He felt her eyes on him and glanced up at her, his grin fading when he saw the questioning expression on her face. He gulped and nodded, then faced the other students again, his face much more serious than before.

"As I told you earlier," McGonagall continued, "James Potter and Sirius Black became Animagi in order to be able to accompany Professor Lupin when he changed into a werewolf. They protected him and helped him through very difficult times by doing this. It was a marvellously generous thing for them to do. Professor Lupin now has a potion that helps him through his transformation, but it's still a lonely business, and at times, he is still drawn to run under the moon. As I understand it, sometimes the feeling is so compelling, it's nearly impossible to resist, yet it isn't safe for him to run on the grounds alone, so he locks himself up and suffers through those nights alone.

"Harry is Professor Lupin's godson, as many of you know, and he, like his father, wanted to help his godfather through his time of transformation. So Harry has done what's nearly impossible and learned how to do more than one Animagus transformation. I would not be revealing this to you except for the fact that many of you have seen a black wolf and a collie running with the werewolf under the moon, and some of you know that they were all attacked while running together recently. That black wolf is Harry Potter. Having more than one Animagus form will be greatly helpful to Mr. Potter when he's an Auror, which is his ambition. Mr. Potter, would you mind changing into the wolf for us?"

In seconds, a black wolf stood in front of the staff table. A collective "oooooooo" passed through both the students and staff, and then they applauded.

"Up here, please, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, patting the table beside her. With one easy spring, the huge beast stood on top of the table beside her. "If you'll just turn toward the students," she encouraged him. "Please notice, this wolf has green eyes, not golden or brown ones as wolves usually do. These green eyes are his identifying mark, as is the faint shadow of his scar in the fur here," she said, touching the wolf's head just over his right eye. "I'm going to ask the wolf and – Mr. Weasley, if you'd turn into the collie, please? – to go down the tables as the cat did before, so everyone can see you up close. Mr. Weasley's collie has his bright blue eyes, did you notice? Those and the speckles on his nose, which resemble his freckles, are his identifying marks."

Rather than trotting on top of the tables as the cat had, the wolf and dog moved between the tables. As they progressed through the crowd, some people couldn't resist reaching out to touch them, patting the collie's silky fur as it passed, barely touching the wolf's rough coat before it turned and glared at them with brilliant but fierce green eyes. Again, the animals stopped to visit their girlfriends, and spent a bit more time with their own friends and D.A. members. Halfway down the Slytherin table, the wolf stopped, its hackles up and a growl forming as it swiftly turned toward a student. All at once, there was a flash of spellfire close to the floor. The collie leaped over the table and knocked Blaise Zabini over just as Harry swiftly turned back into himself, wand at the ready.

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"Get off him, Ron!" Harry cried, aiming his wand at Zabini's heart.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Weasley!" Professor McGonagall cried. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Zabini was trying to hex us," Harry snarled, his growl sounding amazingly like the wolf's. Ron had changed back into himself and had Harry's attacker by the collar, dragging him to his feet. Zabini's wand clattered to the floor.

Professor Snape strode quickly down the aisle and took matters in hand. He gave the Slytherin a look of utmost disgust. "Zabini, come with me," he said, pocketing the boy's wand.

Harry and Ron stood glaring at the boy's back as he was half-dragged from the Great Hall by Snape. Ron looked at Harry. "Are you all right, mate?" he asked.

"Yeah, fine," he said, rubbing the spell burn on his arm. The full hex had just missed him. "Thanks."

"No problem," Ron said with a shrug.

They looked up at McGonagall. "We haven't quite finished this table. Do you want us to change back?" Harry asked as calmly as possible.

"Are you all right, Mr. Potter?" she asked, greatly concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little burn," he said, rubbing the pain away as he spoke.

"Well, if you're up to it, yes, please, boys," she said, shaken by the near disaster. If Harry or Ron had hurt Zabini while in Animagus form. . .and if Zabini's spell had actually caught Harry. . . . She took a deep breath and went back to her instruction as the boys became animals again and finished their tour of the tables.

"As you could see, it's possible to do the change very quickly," she said. There was no point in trying to disguise how quickly Harry could change. One moment he'd been a wolf, the next, a very angry Harry with wand at the ready – it had happened in the blink of an eye. "Changing that quickly requires great discipline and control, and as we all know from watching Mr. Potter play Quidditch, he has very fast reflexes. I know some of you are wondering if the wolf and collie were following animal instincts or the wizard's instincts. I assure you, the Animagus has control of his animal, although he is fully aware of the animal's instincts. This is unlike the Human-to-Animal Transfigurations such as the Seventh Years have been doing, in which the animal's instincts can, at times, take over, with the wizard not being able to control the animal."

The boys reached the front of the room again, and became themselves.

"All right. We'll take questions now," Professor McGonagall said. "Raise your hands and when you ask your question, if you want an answer from a specific person, make sure you mention his name."

Many hands were raised, many questions asked, most of them aimed at Harry and Ron. Both boys handled the questions admirably, although Harry had a few difficult moments when

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someone asked pointed questions about the multiple Animagus transformation. Many of them had seen the two phoenixes during the Battle of Little Hangleton, and heard Ginny screaming Harry's name over the phoenix that had taken the Killing Curse for her. Finally, with a glance toward Dumbledore where he saw an approving nod, Harry admitted it was him.

"You mean you can do three Animagi forms?" Zacharias Smith demanded without raising his hand.

"I just said that, didn't I?" Harry said, his patience wearing thin.

"What's the phoenix's identifying mark?" Ernie McMillan asked eagerly.

"Green eyes and a hint of my scar," Harry replied.

"Show us!" someone called.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore again, who again gave an approving nod. In the blink of an eye, a beautiful scarlet-and-gold phoenix sat on the staff table surveying the gathered students regally with its bright green eyes. There were many "ooooo's" and "aaaaaah's" in the crowd, which was too stunned by the idea of someone becoming a magical creature to applaud. The bird lifted into flight and soared over each table, giving them a chance to look at him, but staying out of their reach. The Gryffindor D.A. members, who'd seen him become a phoenix to help ferry Professor Sinistra and Hermione from the Astronomy Tower to the hospital wing after Draco Malfoy's attack last spring, cheered loudly as he soared overhead. When it reached the far end of the Great Hall, the bird disappeared in a flash of light, reappearing over the staff table in another flash, then landed on the floor by Ron's feet, quickly changing back into Harry Potter. The gathered students and staff applauded again, with cheers and whistles and the excited stamping of many feet included.

"How can he be a multiple Animagus when most wizards can't even do one form?" Zacharias Smith demanded when the room quieted.

"Harry is a very talented wizard, and has worked extremely hard on these transformations," McGonagall answered. "Those who were in class with him when we first discussed the Animagus transformation may remember that he asked about magical creatures then. I think he'd planned to become a phoenix all along." Harry glanced back at her and nodded, blushing a bit.

"So do you have healing tears and all that, Harry?" someone else asked.

"I honestly forget that I can do that most of the time," Harry said with a shrug. "Silly, that, but there it is. Usually when I need to do that kind of thing, there's so much else going on that I just don't think of it."

"Why did you keep this multiple Animagus form thing a secret?" someone else called.

"I think the forms will be useful to me when I'm an Auror, just as Professor McGonagall said," Harry replied. "I think that the fewer people who know about it, the better. The only reason I showed them tonight is because so many people saw me as a phoenix during the

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battle or on the Astronomy Tower when Malfoy attacked us there, and a lot have seen the collie and wolf with the werewolf. So those secrets were out anyway."

"What other forms can you do?" Ernie McMillan asked.

"Who said I can do others?" Harry asked cheekily.

"Who said you couldn't?" Ernie snapped back with a grin, equally cheeky.

"Three are enough for now," Harry said, hoping he could keep his seven or eight – he'd lost count again – other forms secret.

"And I think we've had a long enough lesson for this evening, as well," McGonagall said. "I appreciate your attention, and Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, I am very grateful for your help this evening. Thirty points to Gryffindor for each of you for your help in this lesson. Hopefully, what you've shared tonight will help others in their efforts to conquer the Animagus transformation." Harry and Ron went back to their seats as McGonagall sat down and Dumbledore stood up for a last word.

"This has been a very interesting lesson," Dumbledore said with a smile. "I think Professor McGonagall had a marvellous idea to have an assembly so students of every year could benefit from hearing from their classmates about how they managed to accomplish something that is extremely difficult to do. Thank you, Professor. Thank you, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley!" He clapped his hands, leading everyone in a round of applause. "You are dismissed. Good night!"

"Professor?" Harry said several days later when he saw Dumbledore walking down the hall alone. "May I have a word?"

"Of course, Harry! How are you?" the old wizard said genially.

"I'm fine, thanks," the boy replied with a smile. "I was wondering if you'd ever found out how that beast got into the forest. The one that attacked us?"

"I haven't found a definitive answer, merely suppositions," Dumbledore said with a sigh, "but they may be the only 'answers' we ever find."

"And what are the suppositions?" Harry prompted.

"It's possible that Voldemort and an accomplice – since he's still at least partially blind, as far as we know, I imagine he'd need a guide – set a spell in the forest that would be triggered by the presence of a collie. Mr. Weasley's form is registered, and whoever informed Voldemort about your runs would know that Mr. Weasley doesn't run at night without you. They might not have been able to see what your form was. That black wolf is very difficult to see even in full moonlight, after all. So the presence of the collie would mean you were probably close by, and would be the trigger that would set off the spell. At least, that seems logical to me."

"But what about the wards set around Hogwarts?" Harry said in concern. "They should have prevented Voldemort from coming that close to the castle."

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"You're right, Harry. The wards extend quite a way into the forest, but he found some way to get that spell past them. We're working on it, don't worry. In the meantime, just stay away from the edge of the forest, all right?"

"Right," Harry said darkly, angry that Voldemort had imposed on his life once more.

The days were passing swiftly. Quidditch (Gryffindor had soundly beaten Slytherin, and were off to a decent start toward the Quidditch cup), D.A., the all-too-rare Hogsmeade weekends, and endless, everlasting study filled the days. October faded into November, which blustered into December far too soon. The Seventh Years could feel the N.E.W.T.s breathing harsh, hot, expectant breath down their necks. Whatever time wasn't spent in class, Quidditch practice, D.A. meetings, eating or sleeping, was spent with their noses in books, doing this year's homework and revising everything they'd learned in previous years.

Harry still had his private lessons with Dumbledore and research with Remus to deal with. Sleep was a rare commodity for him, and even when he was asleep, he had troubled dreams about exams he hadn't studied for, homework he hadn't finished, classes he hadn't attended, yet had to sit the exam. He could see the same kind of stress on the faces of all the Seventh Years, and the Fifth Years weren't doing much better.

Harry thought his brain was going to explode. He, Ron and Hermione had been working hard for hours, days, weeks. His eyes were aching, his brain hurt, his back muscles were locked up, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd held Ginny in his arms. As soon as he thought of her, he felt gentle hands on his back, massaging the knots in his muscles.

"Oh," he groaned, "that feels so good!" He slouched down in his chair and turned his face up so he could see her. Laughing brown eyes twinkled at him, soft lips brushed his in a tender, upside-down kiss. "I've missed you," he breathed against her mouth.

"Mmmm, me too," she said, kissing him again. "You're working too hard."

"It's Seventh Year, Ginny!" Hermione snapped impatiently. "We have N.E.W.T.s coming up, our admission interviews to deal with for those of us going into jobs or university, research papers to do. . ."

"I know, I know," Ginny said, raising a placating hand. Hermione was driving herself and the boys into the ground, she was working all of them so hard. "You do know it's Friday, right?"

"Yeah, Friday, so?" Hermione said, quite impatient already.

"Date night. Close the books. It's time you had a night off!" Ginny said merrily.

"No, it isn't!" Hermione said hotly. "We don't have time! Our schedule—"

"Hermione, I can't even see anymore," Ron whinged. "I've been trying to read the same sentence for half an hour and my eyes are just crossed. I can't focus at all."

Harry smiled at Ron. Ron was working so hard this year to get good grades, especially with Hermione pushing him, but he could see his best mate was about to break from so many hours

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of unrelieved work. "Hermione. . .all work and no play. . .and my brain just shut down," Harry said mildly, spreading his hands in a placating gesture.

"FINE! *FINE!* If you don't do well on your N.E.W.T.s, it won't be my fault!" Hermione snarled, packing up her books and preparing to storm away.

"Oh, no, you don't," Ron said, wrapping one long arm around her waist and pulling her to him. "You need a break too." He kissed her temple tenderly, smoothed her hair back off her neck and nibbled her ear. "Come on, 'Mione. You know a break will refresh your mind," a soft kiss to her neck, since she was keeping her face turned determinedly away, "renew your energy," another soft kiss, "relax you so you can concentrate better. . . ." He chuckled as he felt the tension begin to leave her body. He was finally getting through to her.

"Ron, I . . .," she began righteously, but the protest died unspoken on her lips as he kept working on her, nibbling gently on the spot where her neck joined her shoulder, then wherever else his lips could reach easily. "Oh, do that again, yeah, right there," she moaned suddenly as he kissed the tender skin behind her ear. He chuckled again softly and complied until she was completely relaxed in his arms.

"So?" Ron said expectantly.

"So what do you want to do, then?" Hermione said, her eyes languid as she nestled her head into his shoulder comfortably.

"Snogging works for me!" Ginny said brightly.

"Me too," Harry agreed, tugging on her hair, "but we honestly do need to finish this bit of study tonight. I could use some fresh air, at the very least." He looked across the table at Ron and Hermione. "Now that you two have your snogging out of the way," he teased, "we haven't been to visit Hagrid in a while, and it's a beautiful evening. Let's walk down there. The cold air will recharge my brain, anyway."

A short time later, they were trudging through the snow toward Hagrid's hut, the crisp, clear air truly refreshing their minds and making them cheerfully playful. Two snowball fights and four snow angels later, they were knocking on Hagrid's door. Fang's booming bark greeted them.

"Harry!" Hagrid said in delight. "Ginny, Hermione, Ron! It's good ter see ya! You lot haven't been ter visit me for a while! Come in, come in, I was just about to have a cuppa."

When they were all settled around his table, they chatted about inconsequential things, just enjoying the warmth of their friendship. Fang had his head in Harry's lap, looking up at him with adoring eyes. Harry scratched him behind his ears, knowing even better, now that he'd become a dog and a wolf as an Animagus, how much dogs loved to be scratched behind the ears.

"How's the decorating going?" Hermione asked, knowing Hagrid had been dragging huge Christmas trees to the castle over the last few days.

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"Oh, it's lovely, honestly. I dunno how Professor Flitwick does it, making it more beautiful each year, but he does. They're doing some special stuff for the Yule Ball, y'know. It's goin' ter be brilliant!"

"What kind of special stuff?" Ron asked.

"Top secret! I can't even tell you lot!" Hagrid said, his beard bristling in what they knew was a grin.

"Are you going to the Ball?" Ginny asked.

Hagrid blushed. "Well, I thought I might look in on it."

"Who are you going with?" Harry teased, his green eyes dancing with mischief.

"Turns out Olympe – that's Madame Maxime ter you lot – has some free time. She's coming with me." Hagrid looked so pleased, his beetle black eyes nearly disappeared in the hugeness of his smile.

"Are you two an 'item' now?" Hermione said, happy for him.

"Oh, I don't know about that," he said shyly, his blush deepening.

"You fancy her, don't you?" Ron said with a grin.

"Well. . .a bit," Hagrid admitted.

"And does she fancy you as well?" Hermione said.

"Now yer bein' nosy!" Hagrid growled, but with a pleased grin.

"It will be nice to see her again," Ginny said, hoping Madame Maxime would be as happy to see Hagrid as the mere thought of her seemed to make him. She'd never seen him blush so much.

"You lot are all going, aren't you?" Hagrid asked, trying to get their attention off of him.

"Yeah, wouldn't miss it," Harry said, looking at Ginny with love in his eyes. The idea of spending an evening dancing had been horrible to him that first Yule Ball, but now, spending an evening dancing with Ginny was a delightful prospect.

"How are the dragons doing?" Ron asked. He knew his brother Charlie and the other dragon keepers came to check the gate-guarding dragons' health regularly, but their day-to-day care was Hagrid's greatest pleasure. Charlie had brought two mated pairs of Common Welsh Greens, the most trainable of the dragon breeds, to guard Hogwarts' gates the previous term. Charlie had got Hagrid permission to do limited breeding, which was the thrill of Hagrid's life so far.

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"Oh, they're thrivin', just thrivin'!" Hagrid said with delight. "Never better! They got over their injuries from the battle quite well, actually. The females have been getting a bit broody. I think we may have eggs soon."

"Really? Wow!" Ginny said.

"Yeah, Charlie's goin' ter come help me with the hatchin', and he'll take the babies back with him ter raise in Rumania when they're ready ter leave their mummies," he said, tearing up a bit at the thought.

"Wicked!" Ron said approvingly.

"Yeah, he's shown me how ter build the nesting boxes an' all," Hagrid continued. "You Seventh Years are goin' ter have some lessons on dragon breedin' later this year. Oops, I shouldn'ta told ya that!" He chuckled, knowing he could trust them.

They passed a very pleasant time visiting with Hagrid, then left reluctantly, knowing they still had mountains of homework facing them. It had started snowing seriously while they were in Hagrid's hut. As they trudged back up toward the castle through the heavy, blowing snowfall, they passed the Quidditch pitch.

"I'm freezing," Ginny said. "Let's stop in the locker rooms to warm up, OK?"

"Yeah, it's a lot colder than it was earlier," Harry agreed. He did a Warming Charm on Ginny and she smiled up at him, but still shivered.

"My feet are wet. I just want to sit down, dry my socks, and warm up for a few minutes," she said.

"No problem," Harry replied.

Ron went ahead of all of them, ploughing a path through the deepening snow. He was the tallest boy in school now, and had filled out considerably, his frame no longer gangly and gaunt but well-muscled, broad-chested and strong. Harry followed him, helping to stamp the snow flatter so it was easier for the girls to get through. The snow was heavy and wet and still coming down hard. Even the Warming Charms they directed at the ground weren't strong enough to clear their path.

Soon the four of them had collapsed on the benches in Gryffindor's locker rooms. Ginny was shivering harder now. Harry pulled her shoes and socks off before she could protest, and was rubbing her feet as he renewed the Warming Charm on her. Hermione removed her own shoes and socks and put them in a pile with Ginny's, casting a Drying Charm that soon had steam rising from all the wet socks, which now included Harry's and Ron's as well.

"Somebody remind me why we decided it was a good evening to go to Hagrid's in this awful weather," Ron commented as he leaned against the wall, enjoying the warmth of the locker room.

"We were tired of studying, remember? It seemed like a good idea at the time!" Ginny said brightly. "But my toes are still frozen!"

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"Seriously?" Harry said, concerned. He took her feet in his hands and rubbed them again. "Maybe we should put them in warm water."

"No, I just wanted you to rub my feet again," she said, pleased her plan had worked.

"You're silly," he said, tossing a dry sock at her head. Soon socks were flying everywhere as they got into a mad mock-battle which ended up with all of them in a laughing heap on the floor, Harry on top of the pile declaring himself the winner.

"Winner of what?" Ginny asked tartly as he helped her up.

"I get a kiss from the lady of my choice," he said, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Oh, and where are you going to find a lady who's willing to kiss you?" she retorted pertly.

"I said it was the lady of *my* choice," he responded confidently, then swung her up into his arms. "And I choose you."

"Good decision," she said, then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

"Well, shall we stay here and snog, or get back to the castle?" Ron asked, glancing out of the window by the entry door. "It's snowing harder."

"I'd vote for snogging, but the way the snow looks, we'd better get back up there," Harry said. "Come on, ladies, let's cover those dainty toes!"

With all of them re-shod, they opened the door to find themselves facing a real blizzard. The snow was well above the girls' knees now.

"Tell you what," Harry said, "we'll carry you girls piggy-back, and you clear a path for us with your wands. That should work."

"Can't you turn into a thestral and just fly us up there?" Hermione asked.

"You'd freeze if I tried to fly you, and the wind is so strong, it would make for a rough ride all round," Harry said. "It just isn't good flying weather, or I'd do that or the phoenix. But it isn't that far. We can carry you. Our legs are long enough to get through the snow easily. Besides, this way will be fun!"

"If you say so, mate," Ron agreed, then bent down so Hermione could climb onto his back. Before long the four of them were trudging through the snow, the girls reducing the snow on the ground ahead of them as much as possible with their wands while the boys' long legs slogged through the heavy, drifting snow with increasing difficulty. Finally, they made their way up the marble steps, which were magically clear of snow thanks to some well-placed housekeeping charms. They pushed open the huge doors and closed them on the blustery storm, glad to finally be inside again. The girls slid off of the boys' backs and the two boys collapsed in laughing, exhausted heaps on the marble floor.

"That was hard work!" Ron gasped.

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"Are you saying I'm heavy?" Hermione challenged him, her eyebrow raised threateningly.

"No, sweetie, but the snow was deep even with your spells getting so much of it out of the way! I'm knackered!"

Hermione forgave him – not that she'd truly been cross with him, but it was a good excuse to kiss him anyway.

"I could stand some hot chocolate," Harry mused from his spread-eagled position on the floor.

"Butterbeer," Ron countered.

"Even better!" Harry agreed.

Both boys sat up and grinned at each other. "Kitchen raid!" they said together, and climbed to their feet, grabbed the girls' hands and tore off down the stairs to the kitchen. A short time later, they were happily ensconced at a well-scrubbed table, hot chocolate, hot tea, warm butterbeer and coffee all arrayed in front of them, as well as a huge tray of éclairs and scones. The house-elves had outdone themselves again.

"Nwub duhs," Ron mumbled around a mouthful of éclair, "sway hab stbbbrk!"

"Huh?" Harry said helpfully.

Ron made a manful effort at swallowing. "I said very plainly, 'now this is the way to have a study break!'" All of his friends laughed.

The Yule Ball was to be held on December 23 so students would have time to get home for Christmas if they wanted to. It had been changed from Christmas Day by Dumbledore because he knew Remus and Tonks wanted to get married on Christmas Eve. The wedding needed to be at Grimmauld Place so all the Order members could attend without revealing to prying eyes that they knew each other.

The evening of the Yule Ball, Harry and Ron dressed carefully, checking each other's robes to make sure they were as well-turned-out as possible. As required by law and custom, both had all their medals arrayed on their robes, their Orders of Merlin hanging by gorgeous ribbons around their necks.

Harry stood in front of the mirror quite a while trying to do something with his hair.

"Ooo, it's so sad, you do try so hard," the mirror crooned helpfully. "You may as well give it up as a bad job, though."

"Oh, shut up," Harry said, glad he'd remembered to tell Dobby to only put non-talking mirrors in the Grimmauld Place house when he redecorated the bathrooms and bedrooms.

"You look fine," Ron assured him with a smile.

"And you're such an authority?" Harry teased, ruffling Ron's perfect waves a bit out of place.

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"Hey!"

"Sorry. But now you know how I feel," Harry said, grinning as Ron made a face at him.

With Ron's hair neatly back in place, the two boys followed the crowd down the stairs and stood waiting in the Common Room for Hermione and Ginny. They watched the spiral staircase to the girls' dormitory for several minutes before the girls appeared.

Ginny was wearing her beautiful deep gold dress robes, her medals glinting elegantly, her hair flowing down her back in ringlets, with bits of it caught up in a jewelled clip at the back of her head. When he looked closer, Harry could see the clip was the Firebolt one he'd given her months ago.

Harry took her hands and leaned down to kiss her bare shoulder. "You look spectacular – and you taste good, too!" He straightened the ruby Gryffindor lion pendant she wore, which matched her earrings as well as the single earring he wore.

She giggled and smoothed his unruly hair. "You look quite handsome, sir!" she said approvingly.

Hermione's robes were a deep midnight blue with silver sparkles strewn across them, her medals lined up with military precision over her heart. Her shoulders were bare, the silver necklace Ron had given her months before glinting beautifully against her skin. She also wore her charm bracelet with the book charm full of pictures of her friends. Glittering at her ears were the silver-and-sapphire earrings Ron had given her after she recovered from being attacked by Draco Malfoy on the Astronomy Tower during exams last term.

"Hi, beautiful," Ron said, leaning down and kissing her.

Hermione blushed prettily and smiled up at him. "Hi, yourself! You look wonderful!"

"Thanks," Ron replied, then held up his arm like a posh gentleman. "Shall we?"

"Absolutely!" Hermione said with a smile, taking his arm. She and Ron climbed through the portrait hole, followed by Harry and Ginny. Parvati and Dean were close behind them, Parvati in dress robes of a striking deep scarlet with shimmering gold designs embroidered on them.

"Parvati's going to loan me her dress robes for the wedding," Hermione told her friends. "They'll look great with Ginny's gold robes, and will go with the wedding colours better than mine." It turned out Tonks was also a Gryffindor, so Harry's house, the site of the wedding and reception, was being decorated in Gryffindor red and gold.

"That will be wonderful!" Ginny said, looking at Parvati's robes approvingly. "Thanks for helping out, Parvati!"

"No problem," Parvati said with a smile. "I wish I could see this wedding! Professor Lupin getting married – who would have thought? What's his bride like?"

"She's great. You've seen her. She's come here to visit a few times. She always makes a great fuss over Harry," Hermione said, making Harry blush.

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"Who doesn't?" Parvati teased.

"Hello? I'm right here, in case you forgot," Harry said patiently.

"We know, but you're just so cute when you blush!" Parvati teased. "So Professor Lupin is marrying that woman with the spiked pink hair? Or is it purple?"

"It's been pink, purple, turquoise, pale blue, long, short, all kinds of ways," Ginny said as they continued down the corridor. "She's a Metamorphmagus and can change her appearance at will."

"Wow, that's neat!" Dean said approvingly. "What's her real hair look like?"

"Those are all her real hair," Hermione explained.

"I think Dean means her original hair," Ginny said with a smile. "Sometimes she'll have her hair as long as mine, and it's nearly the same colour. She says that's her 'original' hair."

"How's she going to do it for the wedding?" Parvati asked.

"Whose wedding?" Lavender said as she came up behind them on Neville's arm. She and Neville had just started going out, after Neville's quite amicable break-up with Susan Bones. Lavender hadn't dated anyone since Seamus's death, so this Yule Ball was quite important to her. She wore robes of pale green that looked very pretty against the golden brown of her hair.

"Professor Lupin's marrying an Auror over the holiday," Parvati told her. "Hermione and Ginny are her bridesmaids."

"Actually, Ginny's maid-of-honour," Hermione amended. "And Harry's best man. Ron's a groomsman as well."

"Anyway," Parvati went on to Lavender, "Hermione's borrowing my dress robes so she'll look good in the wedding."

"So the colour will match the wedding colours," Hermione corrected a bit impatiently. "Tonks is a Gryffindor, as is Professor Lupin, and the wedding colours are red and gold." She forced her temper down and said, "I appreciate your loaning me your dress robes, Parvati. I'll take good care of them."

"I'm sure you will," Parvati said archly.

"So where's the wedding going to be?" Lavender asked.

"At Harry's house in London," Hermione said before she thought about it.

"Harry's house?" Lavender said, looking at Harry curiously. "Harry has his own house? Or do you mean the house those Muggles live in? I thought you lived in Surrey, Harry."

"My aunt and uncle live in Surrey. I don't live with them anymore. I have a house in London," Harry said, hoping he wouldn't have to go into long explanations.

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"When did you get a house? Where is it?" Lavender said excitedly. "I'm from London. We can visit during the holidays!"

"Erm. . . I don't spend a lot of time there, since I'll be living alone now that Remus is getting married. I inherited it from my godfather," Harry said uncomfortably.

"Professor Lupin?" Lavender asked, confused.

"No, Sirius Black," Harry replied.

"Oh, I see. Where are you going if you're not staying in London?" Lavender said.

"I'll probably go to the Weasleys," Harry said with a shrug.

"I thought—" Ron began, but Hermione trod on his toe. "Oh," he said meekly, cottoning on.

"So back to this wedding," Parvati urged. "Who's coming to it?"

"Just a few friends of theirs," Hermione replied. "It's very small. That's how they want it."

"How are you doing your hair?" Lavender asked Ginny. Talk of hairstyles carried the four couples the rest of the way to the Great Hall.

The Great Hall was, as usual, richly decorated with twelve magnificent Christmas trees, candles floating in shimmering bubbles, real fairies creating fairy lights in the trees, icicles hanging from every horizontal surface. The walls glistened as if they were icy, reflecting the candles' glow over and over. Dumbledore's great surprise, which Hagrid had hinted at, was the performance by the hot new band, Toads in the Loo, featuring the wildly popular Dan Jacobs on bass guitar and Emma Prince as lead singer.

Emma was very pretty, with a luxurious fall of wavy brown hair and dark eyes that glimmered with both humour and sensuality. Her voice went from light, crystalline delicacy to deep, rich fullness, filling the room easily and enticing everyone to dance. Dan was a handsome, well-built young man with shaggy brown hair, big blue eyes full of mischief and the hint of a dimple in his chin. He played his guitar with great energy, gyrating wildly, shaking his hair and jumping around the stage with abandon, much to the delight of the girls in the audience. The other band members' visual performances paled in comparison to these two, but they managed to keep up with them musically quite well.

The band's songs ranged from traditional dance tunes to the latest hard-edged teen music. They were funny, cheeky, and acted quite silly on stage, apparently having as much fun playing as the students were dancing. Toads in the Loo was a huge hit with the audience.

"Hello, Hogwarts!" Emma cried happily when they finished their first set of songs. "We're Toads in the Loo, and we hope you're enjoying our performance!" This statement was met with approving cheers. Emma smiled and began to introduce the band members.

"On lead guitar, we have Bob Minster from Killiecrankie near Pitlochrie!" Minster was a redheaded young man with loads of freckles and a roguish glint in his eye. He played a

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strident chord on his guitar and bowed flamboyantly when the crowd cheered for him. He, the drummer, and Dan Jacobs, the band leader, were the most popular members of the band, with crowds screaming their names wherever they played.

Emma waited for the applause to die down before going on. "On rhythm guitar, we have Seamus O'Roark from Upton Snodsbury!" O'Roark grinned cheekily and did a little jig as he played a few notes and the crowd cheered for him.

"On celestial keyboards, we have Kevin Pitcairn, from Kirkby Overblow in South Yorkshire!" Pitcairn appeared to be shy. He hung his head so his fringe covered his eyes and barely nodded when his name was announced, although he did play a rather dramatic flourish on the keyboard.

"On drums, we have Scott Old Crow, of Norman, Oklahoma, USA!" The crowd cheered especially hard for Old Crow, a Native American wizard who had arrived in England on holiday several years before and decided to stay a while. His exotic good looks made him quite popular with the fans. His blue-black hair hung nearly to his waist, and his dark eyes flashed playfully in a handsome, high-cheekboned face, with skin that looked like burnished copper. He grinned wickedly and twirled his drumsticks as he shook his long hair behind his shoulders, making the girls scream for him again.

Emma waited for the room to quiet a bit, then waved dramatically at the bass guitarist. "And on bass guitar, our leader, songwriter, backup singer, all around good guy and cute as he can be – Dan Jacobs, from Fulham, near London!"

The girls in the crowd squealed raucously as he stepped forward and bowed with a dramatic little flourish of his hand, a cheeky grin on his face. The cheers went on for several minutes. When the excited crowd settled down again, he lifted his wand, murmured *Sonorus*, and spoke to the crowd.

"Thank you very much for that warm welcome, Hogwarts! We're glad to be here!" As he spoke, Emma poked him in the back and frowned at him spectacularly. He jumped dramatically in response to her poking him, making everyone laugh.

"Oh. I guess we forgot something," he said, trying his best to look guilty. He moved aside and held his arm out toward Emma as he said, "On vocals, our lead singer and by far the prettiest one of us, Emma Prince, who's from Oxford!" He stepped away from the centre of the stage, leading the applause and giving her a rascally grin.

Emma tilted her head and smiled at him coquettishly, then waved in acknowledgement of her applause.

Dan muttered *Quietus* and put his wand away, then started a throbbing rhythm on his guitar that had everyone dancing before the song actually began.

Hagrid and Madame Maxime were showing amazing grace on the dance floor, both of them beaming. Hagrid was wearing a new black suit which wasn't nearly as horrible as the hairy brown one he usually wore on special occasions. Madam Maxime wore robes of the deepest possible blue, with her magnificent opals gleaming softly against her olive skin.

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"Look at them," Ginny said to Harry as they danced past the giant couple. "Do you think they're in love?"

"I think Hagrid is," Harry said with a grin. "The only time I've seen him that happy is when he's talking about dragons."

"I hope she doesn't break his heart," Ginny said, studying the French woman seriously.

"Yeah, me too," Harry agreed. They smiled and nodded to friends they passed as they whirled around the floor.

Dumbledore danced with all the women on the staff, and took a turn with Madame Maxime while Hagrid danced with Professor McGonagall. Even Snape danced occasionally, eventually doing an amazing tango with Professor Sinistra that had everyone applauding when they were finished. Snape bowed formally to Professor Sinistra and then shook his greasy black hair out of his eyes and strode back to his seat to watch the others enjoy the Ball. Professor Flitwick was doing his best to dance with Professor Sprout, but between his short arms and her stoutness, the picture they presented was far more humorous than elegant.

The band played for an hour, then took a break, during which time recordings of their music were played for those who wanted to keep dancing.

"I'm knackered," Ginny said. "Can we sit down?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "Do you want me to get you a drink?"

"That would be great!"

"Be right back," he promised as he helped her into her chair.

Harry returned to the table with drinks for Ginny and himself and sat beside her, watching other couples still dancing, and chatting with their friends who joined them at the table for a moment. At one such point, Hermione and Ron, Parvati and Dean and Lavender and Neville were all at the table with them when the girls, in one of those intuitive moments women everywhere shared, all decided to go to the loo at once. The boys helped them with their chairs, then settled back to wait for their return.

"May I join you?" a beautifully modulated voice said behind Harry. He turned around and found himself facing the magnificent breasts of Emma Prince.

"Yeah!" Dean enthused. "Have a seat!" He started to pull out the chair beside him, but she had already slipped into Ginny's chair next to Harry.

"Harry Potter, isn't it?" she said, turning to face him.

"Uh. . . yeah," Harry said, feeling stupid somehow. He fought his impulse to lean away from her. There seemed to be entirely too much of her for the space she was occupying, yet she wasn't a big woman.

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"I've wanted to meet you for some time," she said, completely ignoring all the other boys at the table. She put her hand on his arm in a strangely intimate gesture and leaned toward him as she spoke, giving him a view of those luscious breasts that the other boys were craning their necks to see.

Dean was practically drooling, Neville's mouth hung open in shock at being so close to a beautiful celebrity, and Ron. . . Ron was torn between awe and anger. Awe that he was so close to Emma Prince – her chair was between his and Harry's, and her leg brushed his on occasion as she moved in her seat – and anger that this woman seemed to be making a pass at his sister's boyfriend. While he trusted Harry to stay true to his sister, the woman's advances were so obvious, Ron's temper was simmering close to the surface.

"Uh. . .that's nice," Harry said, uncertain what to do.

"We're. . .we're really enjoying your music," Neville said when he could get his mouth to work properly again.

Emma turned her charms on Neville, making him gasp in shock. "You are *so kind!*" she said in a voice so filled with gratitude, it suggested she rarely got compliments and was absolutely thrilled to get this one. "What's your name?"

"Neville. Neville Longbottom," he said nervously.

"It's *lovely* to meet you, Neville," she said sweetly. She turned to Dean, who immediately turned on the charm. "And you are?"

"Dean Thomas, very happy to make your acquaintance," he said, standing up and bowing a bit as he offered his hand. She laid the tips of her fingers in his hand, as if she expected him to kiss it, but Dean just shook it, not having progressed in his lady-killer skills to the hand-kissing stage.

"Ron Weasley," Ron muttered without prompting when she looked at him.

"Oh, yes. You're the general in Dumbledore's Army, aren't you?" she said, smiling up at him. "I've read about you in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Uh. . .yeah," Ron replied, wondering briefly if she had Veela blood, because his brain turned to mush as soon as their eyes met. When she turned away, the feeling was gone, leaving him scowling as he puzzled over what had happened.

She turned back to Harry. "Would you dance with me, Harry? I love to dance, and very rarely have the chance to. I saw you dancing with that pretty little girl. You're quite good."

"Uh. . .," Harry said, feeling even more stupid. "I'm not that good, honestly. Ginny makes me look much better than I am."

"I'll be the judge of that," she said, taking his hand as she rose to her feet. "Come on, I love this song. Let's dance."

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Harry looked around at his friends, uncertain what to do. Neville just stared, awestruck, at Emma. Dean looked quite jealous of Harry's luck. Ron was still scowling but looked uncertain somehow. Harry gulped. What should he do? This woman was his headmaster's guest. He should be polite to her. Yes. That was the best thing to do.

Glad he'd settled that in his mind, he stood up and followed her to the dance floor. He glanced toward the stage and noticed Dan Jacobs was standing in front of it, totally surrounded by girls who were fawning all over him. The guitarist was smiling widely, signing autographs, laughing and carrying on conversations with several girls at once, and seemed completely at ease. He didn't seem to mind the attention one bit. Harry wished he was as comfortable with his own celebrity status as Jacobs seemed to be.

Fast music was playing when Emma asked Harry to dance, so they bounced and jumped giddily in time to the music for the remainder of the song. The next piece was a slow love song. Harry started to thank her for the dance and leave, but she moved close to him, pulling his arms around her waist and putting hers around his neck, then leaning her head on his shoulder.

"This is so nice, Harry," she said as they danced, Harry trying desperately to keep some distance between their bodies and failing spectacularly. "I've wanted to meet you for so long." She raised her head and looked deeply into his eyes, her body soft, warm and pliant in his arms. "I've read everything about you. I understand, the way few others would, how awful it is when the press makes things up about you. They do the same thing to me. Being a celebrity isn't as much fun as the rest of the world thinks, is it?"

"I guess," he said uncomfortably. She fit in his arms as if she was made for them. She moulded her body to his, her scent filling his nostrils and making him dizzy somehow. He felt a bit drunk, or how he thought it might feel to be drunk, without the nasty sick part of it, anyway. It was kind of a floaty, unreal sensation. He couldn't hear the music anymore, didn't see the other people around them, and felt as if he were falling into those dark eyes that smiled up at him so enticingly.

"You and I are alike in so many ways," Emma said, her voice low and intimate. "We're both celebrities. People expect things of us, sometimes things we don't want to give, right? Autographs, handshakes, hugs, kisses, friendship, when they aren't really interested in being friends – they just want to be able to say they're our friends."

Harry nodded. A lot of what she was saying made sense to him.

"I think celebrities should stick together. We understand each other," she said, smiling at him sweetly. "I'm staying in Hogsmeade tonight. Would you like to join me for dinner after the Ball? And perhaps," she added, her fingers tracing the sharply defined muscles of his chest through his robes as she subtly ground her body against his crotch, "some recreation?" Her hands slid around his slim waist, then glided sensuously over his back.

Harry blinked hard, once, twice, forced himself to glance around the room. He cleared his mind as well as he could, then concentrated on remembering a complex potion recipe, forcing himself to list the ingredients in order as he attempted to disengage her body from his crotch without being too obvious to anyone who was watching. Finally, whatever spell she was weaving was broken. "Uh, no, thank you. I have a girlfriend."

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"That little redhead I saw you dancing with?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't you like to spend time with a real woman, rather than a little girl?" she said in a husky voice, putting her hands on either side of his face and bending his head down so that he could see all the way down her cleavage.

Harry blushed magnificently. She had nothing on under her robes, nothing, not one thing, and he'd seen it. Gasping with embarrassment, he dropped his arms and said, "Uh. . .no. No, thank you. Ginny's all the woman I can manage." He stepped away from her and inclined his head in a small, polite bow. "Thank you for the dance. I look forward to hearing the rest of the concert," he said stiffly, then moved quickly back to his table, his cheeks flaming.

His cheeks were nothing to the flames coming out of Ginny's eyes. "What was *that* all about?" she hissed.

"She asked me to dance," Harry said lamely.

"Spill, Harry," Dean encouraged him excitedly. "What did she talk about?"

"Uh, nothing much. Music. Being a celebrity. That kind of thing," he said uncomfortably.

"There was more to it than that!" Dean prompted eagerly.

"Yeah, Harry! The rest of us didn't get to talk with her. What's she like?" Lavender said, her voice breathless with excitement. "I can't believe we were in the loo when she came over!"

"She wouldn't have come over if you girls had been here," Harry said shortly, his temper suddenly dangerously near the surface.

"What do you mean?" Hermione said, leaning forward to see his face better in the dim light. He was keeping his head down, his fringe and long hair hiding his eyes and his blushing cheeks.

"Harry?" Ginny said gently, all anger gone as quickly as it had flared. She knew him well enough to recognize when he was troubled. "What's wrong? What did she do?"

"Nothing," he snapped.

"Not nothing," Ginny said sympathetically. "What happened?"

"She. . .she came over all fan-girl on me," he growled. "Thought we should be 'friends.'"

"What's wrong with being friends with Emma Prince?" Parvati asked innocently.

"She. . .she didn't want to be 'just' friends," Harry said repressively, hoping nobody would push for more information. As realization hit, his friends either gasped or laughed in surprise.

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"I wouldn't mind being her *friend*," Dean said cockily. Parvati gave him a filthy look, but he ignored it.

"You're welcome to her, then," Harry snapped, sounding thoroughly disgusted.

Ginny looked up at the stage in confusion for a moment. Emma Prince, acting like a fan girl over Harry? She shook her head as if to clear it, then leaned down to peep under his fringe. She was more concerned about Harry's feelings at the moment than about hexing the singer in revenge for her advances on Harry. "Do you want to leave?"

"I came here to dance with you, and that's what I intend to do," he said, standing up abruptly and taking her hand. "Would you like to dance, Ginny?"

"Aw, come on, Harry, tell us about Emma!" Dean whinged.

Harry sighed, then turned furious eyes on his friend. "You want to know about her? OK. She seems nice enough, but she has a way of casting a spell that makes you dizzy, makes you forget yourself," he said in an angry whisper.

"You mean she came on to you?" Dean said eagerly. "For real? Wow!"

"Not 'wow,'" Harry growled. "Annoying. Irritating. Embarrassing. Humiliating. Are you happy now?"

"And what, exactly, did she do?" Ginny bristled, ready to do battle for her man.

"She just. . .made me blush," Harry said quietly, forcibly stifling his temper. "Let's forget it and dance, all right?"

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked uneasily.

"Yes, please. Come on," he said, then led her to the dance floor and put his arms around her waist, pulling hers around his neck. "That's better," he said as he rested his cheek on her hair.

Ginny pulled back and looked up at him. "She really got you upset, didn't she?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "But what upset me most was that she managed to get me under her spell even for a minute. I love you, Ginny. I'm not interested in anyone else. She used some kind of magic on me, maybe in her fragrance, I don't know, but it made me dizzy and forgetful and just. . .weird." He glanced up at the stage, where Emma was singing a slow love song. Her eyes caught his and she sang the song right to him. Many people noticed. Harry broke eye contact and danced farther away from the stage, glad to have a buffer of numerous bodies between him and the singer.

Ginny held him closely as they danced, glaring around his arm at the singer each time their dancing turned her toward the stage. If she could find a nice quiet way to hex the thick, wavy hair off of Emma's head in front of everyone, she'd do it. She'd probably look good with purple pustules across her face saying "slut," too, but Ginny didn't want to disrupt the dance or upset Harry any more than he was already. She smiled up at him and stroked his cheek

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tenderly, her love for him shining in her eyes. He finally responded with a slight, bemused smile, and bent and kissed her as they danced.

When the song ended and everyone clapped, Emma smiled and said, "We're so glad Professor Dumbledore invited us to perform at Hogwarts. I don't believe any of us have been here since we finished school." She looked at the others in the band, all of whom shook their heads except for Old Crow, who shrugged and grinned. "Right, all of us but Scott. So it's been years since we were here. I don't know about the boys in the band," she said, turning and smiling at the band members again. Dan gave her a cheeky grin and leering wink, which made her giggle, "but I've missed it. I can't tell you how moved I was by the reports I read about your participation in the battles this past Spring. I couldn't imagine students facing Death Eaters and surviving, but I understand you survived because of the training you received from Harry Potter. I have the greatest admiration for him, as I told him a little while ago. I also have tremendous respect for those of you who've fought by his side, and for those who fell in battle. Dan's just written a new song that will be coming out on our next album. We're performing it here for the first time in public. It's dedicated to the heroes of Hogwarts."

"Let's get out of here," Harry said, taking Ginny's hand, but she'd already been caught by the gorgeous opening strains of the song. They stood and listened, along with everyone else, not dancing, not talking, just listening to the haunting melody and heartbreaking lyrics that recalled the battles and honoured their dead in a way none of them could have imagined. If it extolled the virtues of 'Heroic Harry Potter' a bit heavy-handedly, there were few who objected. Those who'd been there knew he deserved the praise, even if it grated on Harry's nerves horribly to hear her flattering him so. There were few dry eyes when the song ended.

"Please, Ginny, let's go," Harry said, tugging on her hand as the band swung into an upbeat song and the crowd started dancing again.

Ginny looked up at him and saw the pain in his eyes. "OK. Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere but here," he muttered, leading her out of the Great Hall and down toward the main doors. "Let's get some air."

"Harry, are you all right?" Remus said as Harry and Ginny neared the doors. He had Tonks by the hand. Apparently, they'd just come in from outside, because their cheeks were pinked with cold – or were they blushing?

"Fine. Just needed some air," Harry said abruptly.

"Are you excited about the wedding?" Ginny asked Tonks. They hadn't had time to talk since Tonks and Remus had arrived at the Ball.

"You betcha!" Tonks said cheerily. "But what's with our young man here? He looks as if he's been coshed between the eyes with a cold fish."

"Huh?" Harry said, startled into looking at her.

"Gotcha!" Tonks laughed, then quieted as she looked at him more seriously. "What's wrong?"

"Have you two been outside snogging?" Harry countered. "Is it very cold?"

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"Yes, and yes," Tonks replied, "but that doesn't answer my question."

"Don't push it, Tonks," Remus advised her. "He'll tell us when he's ready."

Harry stood fuming for a moment, then looked up at his godfather. "Does anyone know if Emma Prince is a Death Eater?"

"*What?*" Remus and Tonks said together.

"She put me under some kind of enchantment earlier," Harry said, suddenly bursting to tell the story. When he was finished, he looked from one adult to the other, hoping for an explanation of some kind.

"I'll tell Albus," Remus said. "He checked her out, and there didn't seem to be any problems with her being here. Maybe she really does just fancy you."

"Isn't it illegal for an adult to . . .to . . .proposition a student?" Harry said desperately.

"Well, you're seventeen now, so you're legally of age, but it isn't legal for her to put a spell on you," Tonks said seriously, suddenly all business. "Do you want me to arrest her? Or I could at least have a serious talk with her."

"I don't know what to tell you. I don't know if she'd do it to anyone else or not, but she's certainly not getting another chance at me," Harry said uncomfortably. Suddenly he glanced at Ginny. "Ron!" He grabbed her hand and started back to the Great Hall, Remus and Tonks close behind them.

"What about Ron?" Ginny said, panting as she struggled in her dress shoes to keep up with his long strides.

"She mentioned him. She might go after him as well, and I didn't warn him."

"After the way you reacted to dancing with her, do you honestly think Hermione would let him out of her sight?" Ginny said, still trying hard to keep up with him.

"I have to be sure he knows," Harry replied, slowing a bit as he noticed how much trouble she was having keeping up with him. "You can wait here if you want."

"Nope, you're not going to be in the same room with that witch without me right beside you," Ginny declared. She stopped for a moment, bent down and took off her shoes, and then ran with Harry, her elegant dress shoes clutched in her hand.

Once the four of them reached the Great Hall, Harry and Ginny headed for Ron, Remus and Tonks for Dumbledore.

"Ron! Ron, are you all right?" Ginny called as she neared him. He was sitting glassy-eyed and dazed, and Hermione looked furious.

"Huh?" Ron said, turning toward Harry and Ginny.

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Harry pulled his wand. "*Finite Incantatum*," he said determinedly. Ron immediately looked more awake, and quite confused.

"What happened?" he said dazedly.

"You tell me," Harry said grimly. "Was Emma over here?"

"Yeah!" Ron said, a vapid smile on his face. "She got off the stage and sang right to me!"

"Ron! Focus!" Harry ordered, snapping his fingers under his best friend's nose.

"Focus. Yeah. On what?" Ron said, still bemused.

Harry turned toward Hermione. "Has he been drinking anything but butterbeer or pumpkin juice?"

"Dean offered him some firewhisky, but he turned it down," she replied quickly.

"Good. At least that lesson's held," he said grimly. "What happened?"

"Emma came and sang to him while I was over there talking to Parvati and Padma," Hermione said, looking disgusted as she gestured toward a table by the wall laden with snacks and drinks. "I didn't think Emma could enchant Ron while she was just singing to him, or I would have come back sooner. She did say something to him when she finished, but I couldn't hear what it was. It didn't seem to be an incantation, just some conversation, but I hurried over here anyway. When I reached him, he was like this." She looked at her boyfriend, shaking her head in frustration. "Well, he was worse. Your Finite seems to have helped."

"What did I miss?" Ron said, his face confused.

"Blink, Ron," Harry ordered. "Blink and look around. Clear your mind. Then think about something specific that has nothing to do with the Ball. Think of a list of ingredients for a potion or something. Something detailed." As Ron followed Harry's directions, they could see his face clearing and awareness returning.

"That's some spell, if a Finite didn't end it," Ginny murmured.

"Why is she putting spells on Harry and Ron?" Neville said, having noticed what was going on.

"I don't know, but I mean to find out," Harry said, getting up from the table and striding over to Dumbledore, who was still speaking to Remus and Tonks. "Sir, she spelled both me and Ron. What's going on?"

"Let's find out, shall we? Let's let her finish what we paid her to do, and then we'll get to the bottom of this," Dumbledore said. "We'll make certain that she doesn't get near any more male students in the meantime. Tonks, if you'd be so kind as to help with the interrogation, we won't have to trouble the Ministry for other Aurors."

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"No problem," she said, her eyes glinting dangerously as she glared at the singer, who was still wooing the crowd with her music, apparently unaware that she was in trouble.

When the Ball was over, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Remus and Tonks sat at a table together waiting for the crowds to leave. Professor Dumbledore chatted with Emma Prince, apparently cordially, as the Great Hall emptied. Finally, there were only a few staff members left, the band members packing up their instruments (a few girls stood nearby, hanging on every word and gesture of Dan, Bob and Old Crow), the group at the table, Dumbledore and the singer. He brought her over to the table and held a chair for her to sit down, deliberately putting her between Tonks and himself.

"Ah, we meet again," Emma said, smiling warmly at Harry, then at Ron. Both boys scowled back at her, which didn't seem to faze her at all.

"I'd like you to meet Professor Remus Lupin, who is a member of the staff here, as well as being Harry Potter's godfather," Dumbledore said, indicating Remus, who nodded stiffly, his face cold, "and Professor Lupin's fiancée, Miss Nymphadora Tonks, who's an Auror." Emma beamed at Remus, barely nodded at Tonks. "We'd like to talk to you about something."

"We enjoyed ourselves a great deal tonight. I'm sure the lads and I would be delighted to come back and do another concert," the singer said, anticipating what Dumbledore was about to say.

"I don't see that happening, although the music was lovely and your performance quite enchanting," Dumbledore said mildly. "It's the 'enchanting' you were doing on at least two of our students that concerns us."

"Sorry?"

"You put some kind of spell on Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said, his genial expression growing hard and stern. "That is not acceptable behaviour. You're an adult, nearly thirty years old now, aren't you?"

Emma gasped. "I am nowhere near thirty years old!" she protested vehemently. "I'm twenty-two!"

"You were twenty-two at least seven years ago," Dumbledore said, "because I remember when you came through Hogwarts, and it wasn't that recently. So not only did you put spells on these young men, but you, as an adult, were behaving very inappropriately."

"They're both over seventeen!" she snapped. "They're not minors."

"Nor are they anywhere near your age. And both of them have girlfriends to whom they are quite devoted. Your behaviour was completely out of order. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Emma looked around the table, seeing no friendliness anywhere, only hard eyes glaring at her in shades of blue, brown and green. She looked at those green eyes, her face growing sad. "I thought you would understand, Harry," she said meekly.

"Understand what?" he snapped.

"How hard it is to find a suitable partner," she said, spreading her hands humbly.

"That's ridiculous," Hermione growled, "and you're just acting right now. Stop it!"

"And you are?" the singer said, attempting to be sweet and genteel, but coming off as cloying.

"My girlfriend," Ron said stoutly, taking Hermione's hand. "You spoiled the evening for us."

"And us," Ginny said, her eyes flashing in fury.

"Our last-ever Yule Ball, and you just had to mess it up," Harry snarled.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean. . ." Emma said uneasily.

"Miss Tonks and I are going to ask you some questions," Dumbledore said quietly. "Anyone who attacks Harry is immediately suspected of being a Death Eater. Push up your sleeve, Miss Prince."

"What? I'll do no such thing!" she said, suddenly frightened.

"Oh, yes, you will, ducks," Tonks said, grabbing the woman's arm and sliding the sleeve up, revealing a Dark Mark. Everyone gasped in shock. "How long have you had this?" Tonks asked as she Summoned and neatly caught the woman's wand, then pulled her hands behind her back and magically bound them. "You may as well answer me now, because that man," she said, indicating Snape, who was walking toward their table with something in his hand, "is bringing over a dose of Veritaserum for you. So talk!"

"I . . . I haven't had it long," she said, her face ashen. "Our old manager embezzled the profits from our last album and we needed money to produce the new one. Each of us had to put in our share to pay for it. The lads were talking about splitting up the band if we couldn't come up with the money for a new album soon. Dan carries the group – none of us would succeed without him. He writes the songs, he does the arrangements, he draws the fans to the concerts. . . I was desperate to stay in the band. Girl singers are easy to find – I didn't want to be replaced, but I didn't have enough money for my share of the album. I spent my share of the profits on new costumes and holidays – I didn't know we were being robbed by our manager!" She looked around for sympathy, but saw none. She sighed and went on with her story. "Early this year, a man offered to fund my bit of the album if I'd do some small tasks for him. He had me, um, 'entertain' various men over the next several months, and then he disappeared, back in May. At one point, he took me to a meeting and this mark was put on me." She hesitated, glancing at the angry faces around her. "I didn't want to be a Death Eater! I needed the money! I just wanted to stay in the band!" she said desperately.

"What was the man's name?" Tonks asked in a stern voice.

"Lucius Malfoy."

"Well, that figures," Harry said with a disgusted sigh.

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"When you got your Dark Mark, surely you met Lord Voldemort?" Dumbledore said quietly. "You need to admit it if it's true."

"Yes, he's the one who gave me the Mark. He said I was doing what he wanted and that was all he was going to ask of me," the singer replied reluctantly.

"That was all. . .what do you mean?" Remus said.

"He just wanted me to, um, entertain certain men," she said.

"By 'entertain,' you mean seduce?" Tonks prompted. Emma nodded. "And when you had them in your bed, what were you supposed to do then?"

Emma froze up, shuddering in her seat, apparently unable to speak.

"Memory Charm, I imagine," Tonks said wisely. "Got that Veritaserum handy, Severus? We'll try that first."

"Right here," he said smoothly. The dose was soon administered.

"What were you supposed to do to the men you seduced?" Tonks asked when the serum had taken effect.

"Can't say. . .mustn't say. . ." Emma said, her head rocking back and forth as she tried to resist the potion.

Tonks reversed the Memory Charm spell and asked her question again.

"I was supposed to kill them," the singer said in a dead-sounding voice.

"How many have you killed so far?" Tonks demanded. "And who?"

She named two men none of them had ever heard of.

"Why them?"

"Practice. It was training for when I'd have a chance to kill Harry Potter. If I couldn't get Potter, I was supposed to get Ron Weasley."

Hermione gasped, while Ron's and Ginny's faces blanched and Harry's grew red with fury.

"Why Ron?" Harry snarled.

"Because he's the general," Emma replied, sounding a bit tired. "With him gone, the Dark Lord told me the students wouldn't have a chance against the Death Eaters."

"How were you going to kill them?" Tonks asked. She suddenly glanced at Harry warily. "Harry, temper!" she hissed, as the table began vibrating in reflection of his rage.

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Harry did his best to quell his anger. He pushed back from the table and paced, running his hand through his hair every so often as he thought about the implications. Now contracts were being put out on Ron's life as well as his? How was he going to protect Ron?

"I have potion and a knife," Emma said. "Once I had him alone and interested, I'd put the potion in his drink and it would kill him. If he didn't drink enough to kill him, it would slow him down enough for me to use the knife. I was told that, if I liked him, I could take him to bed first, then do it."

"Where are the potion and knife now?" Tonks asked.

"In my bag," she replied. Tonks moved the bag carefully away from the other woman's seat and set it down well away from her.

"We checked each of you for a Dark Mark when you arrived, and did so when we hired you, as well," Dumbledore said. "How did you disguise it?"

"I was warned by the Dark Lord that you would be checking for it both times, so I took the time to hide it with a Glamour Charm before our first meeting, and before we arrived tonight," she replied.

"Are the other members of the band Death Eaters as well?" Tonks demanded.

"No, just me. And they don't know about me. Dan would hate what I've done. He's a very sweet, honourable man, no matter how wild he acts on stage. He's very much against the Death Eaters, but I couldn't find another way to raise the funds for my share of the album," she replied, shaking her head. Tears began to slide down her cheeks. "I didn't want to kill those boys. I admire them. They're both handsome boys, and heroes. I just wanted to enjoy some time with them. I would have taken them to bed first." She sighed. The girls looked at Harry and Ron, who were both shuddering in disgust.

"Seducing young men and even thinking about killing them is not the way to show your admiration, Miss Prince," Dumbledore said sternly. He looked at the young people across the table from him. "I checked her out thoroughly. She should have been fine. I'm so sorry. We won't have any more outside entertainment until Voldemort's been destroyed. It's simply too dangerous." His suddenly sad eyes locked with Harry's. "I wanted this to be a very special Yule Ball for all of you."

"I know, Professor. Sometimes things happen no matter how hard you try to avoid them," Harry said quietly.

"Come on, I've got to deliver you to the Ministry for processing and I have a wedding to get to tomorrow! Let's go!" Tonks said, dragging the woman up to her feet, grabbing the singer's bag as she stood up.

"I'll come with you," Remus said.

Tonks smiled at him. "I was hoping you'd say that." She shoved the singer in the back. "Move!"

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The four students, Dumbledore and Snape watched the other three leaving the Great Hall.

Dan Jacobs approached the group hesitantly. "Excuse me? Where's Emma going?" he asked politely, his face confused.

"I'm afraid she's got herself in a bit of trouble," Dumbledore said sadly. "You'll need to replace her."

"Bloody hell," Dan grumbled, then blushed as he glanced at Ginny and Hermione. "Sorry, ladies."

"No problem," Ginny said, smiling warmly at him.

Harry and Ron looked at her oddly, but she just tossed her head defiantly when she noticed their looks and continued to smile at the guitarist. Harry glanced at Hermione and saw she was smiling at the young man too. Were the girls going all fan-girl over this musician?

"What happened? Is it serious?" Dan asked.

"Serious enough. I'll have the Aurors send you an owl telling you all about it, all right?" Dumbledore said kindly.

"But what did she do?" Dan insisted anxiously. "I'd like to know. I need to find out if she's coming back soon so I'll know if I really need to replace her. We're starting a tour in a few weeks. I'll have to tell the lads what's going on."

Dumbledore sighed, then said, "She's a Death Eater. She was sent to try to seduce and kill Harry Potter and Ron Weasley."

"WHAT?" Dan said, his blue eyes wide with shock. "No way!"

"It's the truth," Harry said, not certain if he felt sympathy for the man or not. The band's leader should have known what was going on with his associates, shouldn't he? But then again, Harry forced himself to admit, it was sometimes hard to know what your friends were up to, what they were thinking, why they did various things. He felt a bit more sympathetic after he worked through these ideas.

"You're both all right, aren't you?" Dan said in concern, looking Harry over, then turning to Ron.

"We're fine. We managed to break the enchantment she was casting," Harry replied.

"Oh. Well, that's good then, isn't it? You're both OK, I mean. That's good. Damn. I had no idea Emma was like that." He shook his head in confusion. "Why would she do such a thing? I don't get it. All of us have the greatest admiration for you lot! She helped me with the lyrics for that tribute song we did about your battles." He turned and looked seriously at Harry. "Did she say why she did it?"

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"She said a man promised to give her the money she needed for her share of your album if she'd, um, seduce and kill certain men," Harry replied, wishing he knew some way to soften the blow. The look on Dan's face showed how badly this information hurt him.

"I would have loaned her the money!" he said, raking his hands distractedly through his thick, untidy hair. "She didn't have to do that." He looked thoroughly miserable.

"She said girl singers were easy to come by," Hermione said quietly. "She thought she'd be replaced if she couldn't pay her share."

"That's bloody sod Bob talking, that is," Dan growled. "He told her that because he couldn't get her to go out with him. SHIT!" He glanced at the girls again. "I'm sorry. Normally I'm not so foul-mouthed." He stood there panting, his anger growing. "Excuse me. I need to go throw bloody Bob off a tower – or the stage at the very least." He stormed away, grabbed the lead guitar player by the neck of his robes and threw him bodily off the stage, then jumped down and stood over him, berating him loudly just before firing him from the band.

"Well, that was interesting," Ron said finally, when the last of the band members hurried out of the Great Hall with Dan, still fuming, bringing up the rear.

Harry turned to Ginny. "Be right back," he said quietly.

"Where. . .?"

"Be right back," he repeated as he jogged after the band. "Mr. Jacobs?"

"Dan, please, Mr. Potter."

"Harry," Harry said, holding out his hand to shake the band leader's. "I just wanted to tell you – you lot were brilliant tonight. It's a shame that what she did messed up the Yule Ball for us, but it messed things up for you, too. I know it wasn't my fault, but in a way. . .well, the man who did this to her was an enemy of mine, so in a way it is my fault. I'm sorry about all this."

"You have nothing to feel guilty about, Harry," Dan said sincerely. He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "You said the bloke who did this 'was' an enemy of yours?"

"Yeah. He's dead now," Harry said with a shrug.

"He's. . .dead. And she still –" Dan stopped and shook his head, unable to comprehend everything he was hearing.

"That's how Voldemort works. The man who hired her, Lucius Malfoy, died back in May. But once Voldemort sets a plan in motion, it goes on until it either succeeds, or someone stops it."

"Well, I don't understand why people act that way, but I know it happens. I'm sorry about her part in it. I wish I'd known what was going on. Maybe I could have done something to prevent it." He shook his head sadly. "Emma made a bad choice."

"Yeah, she did," Harry agreed. He was quiet a moment as he appraised the man standing uneasily before him. From what he'd seen of Dan tonight, Harry respected him. It was obvious

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he was quite distressed about what his singer had done, and wished he could do something to change how things were. Harry suddenly realized how much trouble the band might be in without their singer. "You're going on tour, right? Will it be hard to replace her?"

Dan sighed resignedly. "As Bob told her, girl singers are relatively easy to find," he said. "She's good, but I should be able to replace her fairly easily." His eyes danced mischievously for a moment as he grinned and nodded toward Ginny. "That pretty little redhead doesn't sing, does she?"

Harry laughed. He knew the man was teasing him. "If she does, it's only for me," he assured the older man. "Good luck finding new people for your band. My girlfriend and I really enjoy your music. She has all of your albums."

"All two of them, eh?" Dan teased with a grin. "No, really, that's great! I appreciate that. Hey, it's wonderful to meet you, Harry, even under such ridiculous circumstances."

"You, too."

"I'll send you tickets for a concert sometime. What town would be the best place for you to hear us?"

"London."

"You're from London? Cool! I'm from Fulham, just outside London. All right, you're on. We'll have a concert there next summer – July, I believe. I'll owl you some tickets. What, four, so your friends can come too?"

"That would be great, thanks," Harry said, grinning.

"Good night. Have a nice holiday," Dan said, shaking Harry's hand again.

"And you, as well." Harry waved and jogged back to his friends.

When Harry left to speak to Dan, Dumbledore turned to Snape. "Severus, did you know about this?"

"No, Headmaster. The Dark Lord keeps his people separate as much as possible so we can't identify each other," the Potions Master said darkly. "I had not heard of this particular plot, or I would have warned you. I do my best, but I'm not privy to every plan he makes."

"I understand," Dumbledore said with a heavy sigh. "I appreciate what you do for us, Severus. I simply can't believe that none of my research showed her to be any kind of a threat."

"If she's a fairly new Death Eater, and has only killed two people none of us have ever heard of, then it would be easier to make such a mistake – she has no criminal record," Snape said quietly. "There are many Death Eaters who pass security checks with no problem. You know that."

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"Yes, I do," Dumbledore said heavily. Just then, Harry returned to Ginny's side. "He seems like a nice young man," Dumbledore said to Harry, nodding toward the door Dan had just passed through.

"Yeah, he does. He's pretty upset about this," Harry said seriously. "He seems to want to do the right thing." He turned to his friends and added, "He's sending us concert tickets when they play London next summer."

"Does he think he'll be able to replace her easily?" Ginny asked.

"He actually asked if you could sing," Harry said, grinning at her. "I told him you only sing for me." Ginny smiled warmly at him, her eyes dancing.

"It's obvious he hasn't heard you sing!" Ron teased, then changed his mind about saying more when his sister gave him a warning look.

"Ronald!" Hermione warned, poking him in the ribs. "Don't be rude!"

Ron pretended to be quite seriously wounded by Hermione's poke, which made all four Gryffindors giggle.

Dumbledore watched the young people, who were trying to make the best of a bad evening, and smiled. "It's late. You should go up to your dormitories. We have a busy day tomorrow, what with Remus and Tonks' wedding and everything. How are you travelling to Grimmauld Place?"

"I'm going to flash Ginny there as a phoenix," Harry said, "since she can't Apparate yet."

"And we're going to walk to Hogsmeade and then Apparate," Hermione replied.

"Very good. Well, I'll see you tomorrow! Hopefully, that will be a much less stressful party than this one turned out to be. Again, my apologies. Good night, all." He stood and gave them a small smile, then walked slowly away, looking as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

"Good night, sir," Harry said as he helped Ginny with her chair. Ron did the same for Hermione. Harry's heart went out to Dumbledore, who he was certain had done his best to ensure their safety this evening. It saddened Harry to see his headmaster look so defeated.

As they walked back to Gryffindor Tower, the four friends were silent. Finally, Ginny said, "Well, that was interesting."

Ron snorted derisively. "Interesting? I'm glad you thought so! I just found out a mad murderer is after *me* now!"

"Well, you were second choice," Ginny said tartly, startling all of them into uneasy laughter.

"Let's forget that part of the evening," Hermione said practically. "Before she came on to Harry, we were having a lovely time. At least, I was," she said, smiling up at Ron.

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"It was fun, wasn't it?" Ron said. "Hard to believe a few years ago we thought dances were torture."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "It's much better with the right partner." He leaned down and kissed Ginny on the temple. "And you, m'lady, are the right partner for me!" She smiled warmly up at him.

"Oh, I've got to get those robes from Parvati!" Hermione said suddenly. "We need to hurry so I can make sure I get all the accessories and so on lined up before she goes to bed!"

When they got to Gryffindor Tower, after quick but heartfelt goodnight kisses, the two couples went their separate ways up to their dormitories.

"Harry?" Ron said, sounding nervous.

"Yeah?"

"I feel creepy."

"Why?"

"Because. . .because she had me on her list too," Ron said, "and she got to me. I was under her spell! I'm such a bleeding idiot!"

"No, you're not. She had me under her spell for a while too," Harry said with a sigh as they neared their door. "It's just lucky she did it when there were people around to help."

"Yeah." Ron was quiet for a minute, standing unmoving in front of their door. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"How do you manage?" He frowned and studied his friend's face quite seriously.

"Manage what?" Harry said, a bit flummoxed.

"You have people trying to kill you all the time, and you know it, yet you just go on and live your life normally. How do you do it? I feel so weird, I'm probably going to jump at every sound, look over my shoulder all the time, and not trust anyone."

"That's not such a bad thing, Ron," Harry said philosophically.

Ron's face fell, his eyes wide and anxious. "I can't bear it! It feels horrible! How do you live with this kind of stress?"

"I decided a long time ago that Voldemort isn't going to impose on my life any more than necessary, so I just do what I want and deal with the threats when they pop up," he said with a shrug, hoping he was calming his friend a bit.

"Yeah?"

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"Yeah."

"Huh. I'll try that," Ron said quietly as he opened the door.

"You'll be fine. And remember, you've got Hermione, Ginny and me watching your back."

"I have, haven't I?" Ron said with a sudden smile. "Thanks, Harry."

"No problem."

Chapter 17 – The Wedding

Ginny gasped with amazement as the phoenix set her down in the living room of Number 12 Grimmauld Place the next morning. The phoenix changed back into Harry Potter, whose face split in a broad grin as he looked around his house.

"Dobby! Winky! I'm . . . I'm home!" Harry called, calling this house his "home" for the very first time.

"Harry Potter, sir! Ginny Wheezy! We isn't hearing you knock!" Dobby panted, having raced up the stairs from the kitchen.

"We didn't knock, we just popped in," Harry said, smiling happily at the house-elf. "I can't tell you what a shock it was to see this room!" During Harry's summertime stay at Grimmauld Place, the house-elves had cleaned industriously and begun removing curtains, wallpaper, Slytherin-style décor and so on. When Harry had left for school, the house was still in a turmoil, but now it looked and felt like a gracious, well-kept home.

Dobby's face fell. "Dobby is sorry, sir! What would Harry Potter like changed?"

"Nothing! I'm sorry, I didn't say that right. It was a fantastic surprise to see what you've done with the place! The shock was just at seeing how bright and beautiful everything is!" He put a comforting hand on the house-elf's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "You and Winky have done wonders with the place, Dobby. Thanks."

Dobby's face lit up with a huge smile. "Dobby and Winky wishes to please Harry Potter, sir. We is happy you likes what we has done here."

Harry looked around, his eyes bright and happy, smiling at the miraculous transformation in the house. No longer gloomy and grim, the rooms were now painted in light, airy, elegant colours. The natural wood on the window and door trim, the staircase and the floors was still the rich dark walnut it had been, but it had been cleaned and polished until it shone with a lovely satiny light. The walls were a creamy pale yellow, the curtains deep scarlet with gold patterns worked in metallic thread, with golden sheer curtains filtering the sunlight through the sparkling clean windows. The brass chandelier had been buffed to a soft lustre. Bright, cheerful paintings of flowers and country scenes filled this room.

In the library across the hall, Harry could see the books had all been cleaned – no more dust-covered tomes in there – and the walls painted, the curtains replaced, the chandelier and wall sconces polished. Quidditch posters featuring the Gryffindor team and the Chudley Cannons brightened the library's walls. A huge, beautifully decorated Christmas tree stood in the corner, twinkling with small lights that turned out to be glittery insects spelled to stay in place.

"Cool! And what a beautiful Christmas tree! Wow, I wouldn't have thought of putting the Quidditch posters in here, but I like it a lot," Harry said, following Ginny into the room and looking around.

"Harry Potter seemed to like this room best, so Winky and Dobby thought he'd like his Quidditch pictures in here," Dobby said.

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"I think it's brilliant!" Harry replied, grinning at the elf. "What else have you done?"

"The drawing room, several of the bedrooms, and some other areas," Dobby replied eagerly.

As he started to follow the elf toward the drawing room, Harry said, "The others should be arriving soon."

"We is ready for them, Harry Potter, sir. We has food prepared, and we has decorated the drawing room for the wedding."

Harry's heart lurched a bit at the idea of the house-elves decorating for the wedding. Knowing Dobby's way of decorating, Harry pictured Christmas baubles with pictures of Remus and Tonks on them dangling from the ceiling, but he didn't say anything. When he nervously opened the drawing room door, he laughed out loud in delight. "Dobby, this is wonderful!"

Ginny slid under Harry's arm, which was still holding the door, and spun around, taking everything in. This room also had creamy yellow walls and deep scarlet drapes, but it also had cream-coloured candles floating in bubbles all around the ceiling, giving off a soft, romantic light. Scarlet ribbons were festooned from the chandelier, each wall scone and the centre of each curtain rod. Mistletoe hung over the doorway, and greenery interspersed with scarlet and gold ornaments decorated the mantle of the fireplace. A handsome plaque with the Gryffindor seal was centred over the fireplace. Paintings featuring country scenes graced the walls, along with several of Harry's mosaics. A delicate-looking table stood near the fireplace, bearing two small brass candlesticks and a large one centred between them, all set on a handmade lace tablecloth. A runner of sheer gold fabric with a large gold tassel on each end ran down the centre of the table, the tassels hanging over the edges of the table elegantly. Chairs had been placed in rows facing toward the small table. The chair closest to the centre aisle on each row had a scarlet bow with small gold tassels hanging from it on the aisle-side of the chair. The worn carpet had been replaced by a new Oriental-style rug with a simple but elegant pattern, scarlet flowers in an oval medallion in the centre and clustered in each corner of the pale gold rug. Everything gleamed with a soft, lovely lustre.

"This is the most beautiful room I've ever seen," Ginny breathed. "It's gorgeous!"

Dobby was looking at Harry seriously. Harry finally stopped perusing the room and looked back at him. "Dobby, you and Winky have outdone yourselves. This is spectacular! What a lovely place for a wedding. Thank you."

"Harry Potter is pleased?" Dobby asked seriously.

"More than pleased. It's brilliant! I would never have believed it could turn out like this," Harry said. He pulled Ginny into his arms. "You and your mum deserve a lot of credit too, you know," he said, kissing her soundly.

"It was fun!" Ginny said. "I honestly didn't know it would look this good, though. I'm just . . . shocked!"

Her statement made Harry laugh. Just then, they heard a knock at the front door.

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"Honey, I'm home!" Ron called as he entered, laughter in his voice. "Hi, Winky! Ah, there you are, Harry!" he added when he saw Harry appear in the drawing room doorway. He stood looking around, his eyes wide in amazement. "WOW! The place looks great!"

"Oh, my!" Hermione said, her mouth hanging open in surprise. "I had no idea. . . ."

"That's what we've just been saying," Harry said with a laugh, his arm around Ginny.

"Dobby, Winky, it's brilliant!" Ron said, patting the house-elves on the back. "Good work!"

"Thank you, Ron Wheezy, sir!" Dobby said, delighted with their reaction. Winky ducked her head and blushed, a pleased smile on her face. "Winky and Dobby are glad our work pleases Harry Potter and his friends."

"May Winky be excused?" she asked Harry quietly. "Winky has more work to do in the kitchen."

"Yes, go ahead," Harry said, smiling at her.

"Your work pleases me a lot, Dobby!" Ron said, continuing the conversation with a grin at the house elf. "It's a Gryffindor house now! That door knocker and door knob are brilliant!"

"We flashed inside the house and didn't see them," Harry said, opening the front door. "Wow! You found gold Gryffindor lions, Dobby!"

"They is bronze, Harry Potter, sir. Gold is too soft and the detail would soften over time. These bronze ones will look good for many years. We has replaced nearly all the door knobs, drawer pulls and candelabrum in the house with either brass or bronze Gryffindor ones. Dobby and Winky is not quite finished with that work yet."

"It's brilliant, really, Dobby," Harry assured him. "You're going to love the drawing room and library – they're gorgeous," he told Ron and Hermione.

"What about our rooms? Have they done anything up there?" Ron asked.

"Dunno. Let's go see!" Harry said, and the four of them trooped up the stairs, followed closely by Dobby.

Harry opened the door to his and Ron's room and grinned. Gone were the two small and lumpy beds they'd been using. Now there were two grand four-posters similar to those at Hogwarts, as well as two handsome wardrobes replacing the beaten-up dresser they'd had to use before. The walls were painted, new curtains hung, and Quidditch players waved at them from posters on the walls. A plush rug with a simple geometric design in red and gold was on the floor.

"Wow!" Ginny said, looking around. She looked at Hermione and said, "Let's see our room!"

The girls' room had two big four-posters like those in the boys' room, two wardrobes and two dressing tables with big mirrors. Quidditch posters and floral paintings hung on the walls. A

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beautiful floral rug similar to the one in the drawing room, but more colourful, was on the floor.

"Fantastic!" Ginny cried, looking at the dressing tables, which were far more elegant than anything she'd ever seen. "Where did you find these?"

"In a catalogue Dobby sent me," Harry said. "I told him what I wanted, he sent me catalogues with those kinds of things, and I picked what I liked. I like the furniture at Hogwarts a lot. I hope you don't mind that it resembles a dorm room."

"We don't have nice dressing tables like these in our rooms," Hermione said, sitting down at one.

"Well, I've only been in the girls' dorms once and then I was flying, trying to find Ginny," he reminded them with a laugh, "so I wasn't paying much attention to the furniture." He glanced at Ron, a sly grin on his face. "I didn't show you what the carpet in our room does."

"What's it do, fly?" Ron said, laughing.

"Just about! Come and see." Harry led them back to the boys' room. "I haven't had a chance to try it, of course, but when I saw this one in the catalogue, I thought it would be a good choice for us." His eyes were twinkling as he looked at his best mate. He pulled out his wand, pointed it at the rug and said, "*Nuovo Partita*." Instantly, the geometric design morphed into a Quidditch pitch with fourteen players moving across it, one team in red and gold, the other in blue and silver.

"Gryffindor and Ravenclaw?" Ron said, his eyes bright with amusement. "Why Ravenclaw?"

"Why not? I certainly didn't want Slytherin!" Harry chuckled.

"Why not? They're our biggest rivals," Ron countered.

"I don't want anything Slytherin left in this house, that's all," Harry said with a shrug. "I can add them later if I want. Isn't it brilliant, though? You can either just let them play, or you can direct the play as the captain of one team, or you can take the place of one player with your wand." He pointed his wand at the Gryffindor Seeker, who had messy black hair, and the player went zooming off wherever Harry's wand pointed.

Ron pulled out his wand and pointed it at the red-haired Gryffindor Keeper. "You had them put us on the team? Wicked! Look there's Ginny!" Ron's Keeper hit the Quaffle back toward the red-haired Gryffindor Chaser, who caught it neatly and raced toward the Ravenclaw goal, her long plait flapping in the non-existent breeze as she flew. "And she scores!" Ron yelled, jumping up and down in his excitement.

"Does our rug do this too?" Ginny asked curiously.

"No, I'm sorry, but I could only manage one," Harry said with a "please forgive me" look in his eyes. "And I thought you girls might enjoy playing along with us, anyway."

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"That's an amazing spell," Hermione said, sitting on the floor and smiling as the Quidditch game progressed.

"Yeah, it is. You can change the teams, too. I have these two as the primary teams, but I also have the Chudley Cannons and Puddlemere United. The Puddlemere team has Oliver Wood as the Keeper," he said with a grin. "For an extra fee, I could get more teams, but I thought four was enough to be going on with."

"Can you make Gryffindor play the Cannons?" Ron said eagerly.

"Yeah, I think so. I'll have to get the owner's manual out to see how to do that, though," Harry said, grinning at his friend's enthusiasm.

"Gryffindor versus the Cannons – that's so cool! Who do you think would win?" Ron said, his eyes dancing.

"Students against professionals?" Harry teased him. "Who do *you* think would win?"

"Gryffindor!" Ron chortled, and gave Harry a high-five.

"Dobby, brilliant job on the rooms up here, really," Harry said as his friends continued to watch the game on the Quidditch rug.

"Dobby has remodelled the bathroom, as well," Dobby said. "Only the one, so far. Would Harry Potter like to see?"

"Yeah!" Harry said, following the elf out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Ron called. He'd been concentrating on the game playing on the carpet and hadn't listened to Harry's conversation.

"Dobby's going to show me what he's done with the loo," Harry called from the hallway. "Come and see, if you want." His friends all dutifully got up and followed him.

The bathroom was brightly polished, all the surfaces gleaming beautifully.

"I didn't know this was a marble counter," Harry said in surprise looking at the luminous white counter. It had been so encrusted with dirt and limescale from the water that it had appeared to be old porcelain.

"The bottom part of the walls is marble as well, not tile," Dobby said. "Kreacher was a very bad house-elf to let it get so dirty you couldn't tell it was marble."

"Wow," Ginny said, admiring the softly glowing walls. "Beautiful."

"Yeah. Good work, Dobby!" Harry said, and then his eyes fell on the basin. "What's this?"

"Dobby hopes you like it, sir," Dobby said nervously.

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The basin's taps had been replaced. Previously, it had been a spout with two attached handles, all of which looked like snakes. Now, it was a Golden Snitch whose spread wings were the handles, the ball itself being the spout. A golden broomstick was the flush handle on the toilet. The room's upper walls were painted a lovely sky blue, with Golden Snitches painted as a border along the top of the walls. The bath now had a shower door with a Golden Snitch as the handle, the ball's wings bent back to touch the doorframe. Leaning into the bath, Harry saw that the taps had been replaced by a huge lion's head as the spout, with golden Gryffindor lions facing each other as the handles. The shower head was another lion, but with the ability to change the shower settings at a touch. Golden spouts along the back wall of the tub had jewelled handles of varying colours, much like the Prefects' bath tub at Hogwarts.

"This is the coolest bathroom I've ever seen," Harry said sincerely, "and that includes the Prefects' bathroom at Hogwarts!"

"You is liking it, sir?" Dobby asked carefully.

"Absolutely!" Harry said. "It's wonderful! Where did you find Snitch taps and all that?"

"There is a shop in Diagon Alley where you can order such things, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby explained. "Dobby requested the catalogue and used some of the money from the sale of the silver door knobs to buy these things. Dobby wanted to surprise Harry Potter."

"You did! It's great!" Harry looked at the house elf, and saw a hint of worry in his eyes. "And I did give you permission to use that money for whatever you needed for the house, Dobby. You did very well. I'm proud of you. And grateful! Thanks. I mean that."

Dobby's eyes lit up. "Dobby is happy to please Harry Potter, sir!"

"You have pleased me very much indeed," Harry said sincerely. "Did you paint the Snitches on the walls?"

"No, Dobby isn't painting those – Winky is. Winky is a good painter," Dobby said, showing obvious pride in his wife's talents.

"Yes she is. You've both done very well," Harry said with a huge grin. He looked around the room again, amazed at how hard work, ingenuity and love had transformed the dark, nasty room it had been into a thing of both fun and beauty.

"Dobby hears people arriving. Dobby will greet your guests," the elf said, then snapped his fingers and disappeared.

"I can't wait to use this," Hermione said, admiring the bath.

"Me, too!" Ginny agreed.

Harry had stepped out into the hall to see who had arrived. "Your parents are here," he told Ron and Ginny.

"How did you lot beat us here?" Molly exclaimed as she hugged everyone.

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"Harry flashed us here since I can't Apparate," Ginny said, "and then Ron and Hermione Apparated. You should see what Dobby and Winky have done with the house! The bathroom is brilliant! And the wedding decorations!"

"We haven't seen those yet either," Hermione said eagerly.

"Let's go," Ginny said, grabbing her mother's and Hermione's hands and calling "Girl stuff!" over her shoulder to Harry.

"How are you, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked as he led his friends into the kitchen. "Would you like something warm to drink? It's awfully cold out."

"Yes, some tea would be lovely," Arthur responded. "Hello, Winky. The house looks beautiful!"

"Yes, Winky, I can't tell you how pleased I am with everything," Harry added. "And you did a fantastic job of painting the Snitches upstairs!" The elf blushed and dropped her eyes shyly, a happy smile on her face.

Before long, Remus and Tonks, Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and Flitwick (who'd recently joined the Order), Mad-Eye Moody, Mundungus Fletcher, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Arabella Figg, Charlie, Bill, Fred and George Weasley, and other Order members arrived, filling the house with noise and laughter. Tonks' dad, Ted, who was also a new member of the Order, seemed overwhelmed by the number of people who had come to his daughter's wedding. Tonks was swiftly whisked upstairs to the girls' room, along with Ginny, Hermione and Molly, to get ready for the wedding. Harry and Ron had already changed into their dress robes, ready to support Remus. Remus was being teased a lot, and taking it very good-naturedly. The house-elves served tea and biscuits to those who were waiting for the wedding ceremony to begin.

"So where are you going to honeymoon?" Arthur asked Remus.

"Rumania, actually. There's some research going on there I want to check into," Remus said with a smile.

"Research on what?"

"Lycanthropy. This researcher believes he's developed a cure. I've been in touch with him for months. Harry and I were going to visit him this summer, but there was too much going on for us to be able to travel safely. I think Tonks and I will be all right to travel now," Remus said with a smile. "And she's never been on holiday out of the country. She's quite excited about it."

"I imagine so! A cure, you say?" Arthur said in amazement.

"We'll see if it is or not," Remus replied cautiously, but an excited gleam was in his eye.

"Wonderful! Oh, I hope it works for you!" Arthur said sincerely. "So will Tonks be moving into your quarters at Hogwarts, or will you live somewhere else?"

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"Harry invited us to live in this house, bless him. It was such a kind offer, but we don't want to impose on him. Tonks and I have bought a small house in Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade? Then you aren't going to stay at Hogwarts at all anymore?" Arthur said.

"We'll stay in my quarters sometimes, and I'll certainly stay at school when she's away on business, but it will be easier for her to Apparate to work from Hogsmeade. I can walk from Hogwarts' gates with no real problem, or I can fly in on my broom. It will work out," Remus said confidently.

"I've never seen you so happy," Arthur said approvingly. "You're simply glowing."

"Thanks. She's good for me," Remus said simply.

"Yes, I've noticed that," Arthur said with a smile. "What's her married name going to be, since 'Tonks' is her last name? Are you going to call her 'Nymphadora'?"

"No, she'd hex me for that," Remus said with a laugh. "She'll be 'Tonks Lupin,' if you can imagine that."

"It suits her," Arthur replied, smiling.

Molly came down the stairs and said, "It's time! Places, everyone!"

The guests moved into the drawing room, taking chairs wherever they wanted. Remus, Harry and Ron stood to one side of the small table in front, looking nervous. Harry kept checking his pocket for the ring. Albus Dumbledore, resplendent in robes of cobalt blue with silver galaxies sewn in metallic thread, stood facing the crowd. He would be officiating at the wedding in his position as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. With a wave of his wand, music filled the air.

Molly Weasley opened the door of the drawing room and Hermione came slowly down the aisle, holding a small bouquet of red and yellow roses. She was wearing Parvati's scarlet dress robes from the Yule Ball, and had her hair up in a fancy concoction of curls, with small jewels sparkling here and there in her hair. She moved to the opposite side of the table from the men, standing across from Ron. She smiled into his eyes and his heart melted.

"*Someday, this could be us,*" Ron thought, looking at her with eyes filled with love.

Ginny came next, her red mane pulled up into an elegant twist on the back of her head, with a few long tendrils spiralling down from the twist and spilling over her shoulders and down the back of her deep gold dress robes. She, too, had jewels in her hair, which twinkled as she moved. She kept her eyes on Harry from the moment she entered the room. She held her bouquet in trembling hands, her heart full, wishing it were she and Harry getting married today.

Why couldn't it be a double ceremony, or even a triple? she thought as she noticed the look on her brother's face. She felt a brief burst of anger at her youth, then settled her smile back on her face. *When we get married. . .*, she thought, looking directly into Harry's eyes as she settled into her place across from him.

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Harry didn't need his Legilimency to read Ginny's thoughts, for the same ones were in his mind. He, too, felt frustrated that she was so young. *It won't be long*, he vowed.

The music swelled and Tonks and her father stood in the doorway. As Tonks took her first step, Molly bent down and lifted the train of her new dress robes, filling them with air so it would appear she floated down the aisle. Tonks' hair was a long red mane similar to Ginny's, now done up in a cascade of curls that were caught in a jewelled clip at the top of her head and tumbled tumultuously down her back. Her wedding robes were palest ivory, with an illusion of stars winking all over them. Her father wore dress robes of deep maroon and seemed to be fighting back tears as he led his daughter down the aisle. Soon they stood in front of Dumbledore, and Remus stood next to them, warm smiles spreading over his and Tonks' faces.

"Who gives this woman to be married?" Dumbledore asked in time-honoured tradition.

"I do," Ted said, then tenderly kissed Tonks on the cheek before putting her hand in Remus's. He sighed once as he smiled at the pair of them, then turned and sat down in the front row seat reserved for him.

"Dear friends," Dumbledore began with a benign smile and twinkling eyes, "we are gathered here in this beautiful place to celebrate the joining of two beautiful souls." He waved his wand and the ceiling suddenly became the crystal clear night sky, galaxies whirling silently above them. "The most powerful force in the entire universe is love. Love has brought these two people together. Love heals all wounds and forgives all wrongs. Love trusts. Love never fails. Love stands through everything life throws at us. These two people are publicly declaring their love for each other by the exchanging of vows and rings." He turned his eyes to Tonks. "Nymphadora Tonks, do you take this man to be your husband? Do you promise to love and cherish him, to be faithful and true to him, to stand by his side no matter what happens?"

"Yes!" she said in a firm, determined voice, her face split in a huge grin.

"Remus Lupin, do you take this woman to be your wife? Do you promise to love and cherish her, to be faithful and true to her, to stand by her side no matter what happens?"

"Yes, absolutely," Remus said, gazing at her intently.

"May I have the rings, please?" Dumbledore waved his wand over the rings in Harry's and Ginny's open palms, Levitating them and giving them a halo of light so everyone could see them well. "These rings are circles, unbroken. They are a symbol of your love, which is endless, circling each other forever." The two rings circled each other in mid-air, then linked together. "The circle goes on forever, as does the love between two people whose souls are mated." He separated the rings and plucked them out of the air, then handed Remus's ring to Tonks. "Place the ring on his hand and repeat after me."

Tonks held Remus's left hand and started sliding the ring on his finger as she said what Dumbledore had. "With this ring, I promise to be true to you, to love you, cherish you, and be your partner all of my life. My soul and yours are one."

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Then it was Remus's turn. He slid the simple gold band on Tonks's finger, and vowed, "With this ring, I promise to be true to you, to love you, cherish you, and be your partner all of my life. My soul and yours are one."

"The wands, please," Dumbledore said quietly. Remus and Tonks pulled out their freshly polished wands and turned toward each other, touching the tips together.

Dumbledore waved his wand over the joined wands. "These wands can never be used against each other. They shall be partners in all that they do."

Remus and Tonks repeated, "These wands can never be used against each other. They shall be partners in all that they do." The wands were haloed in golden light as they spoke. When the light faded, they lowered their wands and gazed deeply into each other's eyes.

Dumbledore stepped aside, revealing the three candles behind him. Tonks and Remus each passed a hand over a side candle, then lifted the now-lighted candles at the same time and lit the larger, central one together. They looked at each other for a long moment as slow smiles spread across their faces. They set the candles down and held hands again.

"And thus two souls become one in an unbreakable bond. You may kiss your bride," Dumbledore said, grinning broadly, his eyes sparkling with joy. When they finally broke apart, Dumbledore gently touched their shoulders and turned them toward the audience, then said, "May I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Remus Lupin!" The guests all applauded, while Fred, George, Mundungus and Mrs. Figg whistled and stamped their feet in celebration and Molly and Minerva wiped happy tears from their eyes.

The party went on for hours. Dobby and Winky had outdone themselves on the food, and had cleared the centre of the dining room floor to make it useful as a ballroom. The wedding and reception were Harry's present to Remus and Tonks.

When the dancing began, the bride and groom danced alone in the centre of the floor while their friends applauded them. Then Remus waited while Tonks danced with her dad in the Parents' Dance. Next, Harry danced with Tonks, Ginny with Remus, and then they switched partners, Remus with Tonks, Harry with Ginny, and the others joined them on the floor.

The food was excellent, the music was lovely, and everyone was having a marvellous time. Suddenly, Mundungus Fletcher turned into a large canary with a loud "pop."

Molly Weasley exploded as the room dissolved into laughter. She stormed over to the twins and hissed, "Fred! George! Did you give Mundungus a Canary Cream?"

"He asked for it, Mum," George said, holding his sides as he laughed madly at the man, who was just beginning to moult, a bewildered but somehow pleased look on his face.

"What else have you planted in the buffet?" Molly demanded.

"Nothing, honest!" Fred said, holding his empty hands out as if that would prove his innocence.

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"Why don't I believe you? Oh yeah, nearly twenty years of you lot pulling pranks, that's why!" Molly growled. She pointed her wand at a pocket George seemed to be protecting. "Accio!" she cried, and a bag full of galleons flew into her hands. "What's this, fake galleons?"

Both twins were blushing. "No, Mum," George said quietly as he held out his hand for the bag. "It's our present to Remus and Tonks. We didn't know what to buy them."

It was Molly's turn to blush. "Oh. Well. Um. . .I'm sorry, boys, it's just that . . . well, with the Canary Cream and all. . ."

"Dung asked for it, honest. He wanted to see what it was like. He's planning to order some," Fred said helpfully. George nodded his agreement.

"All right then," Molly said, handing George the money bag. "That's a lovely present, boys, truly. I shouldn't have mistrusted you so much."

"S'OK, Mum," George said brightly. "We forgive you." Behind his back, as he and Fred planted twin kisses on their mum's still-blushing cheeks, George signalled Ron to remove the Butterfly BonBons that they'd put on the buffet table just before Molly had come to that side of the room.

"In the umbrella stand," Ron whispered as he passed Fred a few moments later.

"Good one, Ron," Fred replied with a wink.

"And you, as well," Ron said, grinning in admiration for his brothers' audacity as well as their ability to get away with things.

At last, the bride stood a few steps up the staircase, ready to throw her bouquet. Hermione, Ginny, Mrs. Figg and Professor McGonagall stood waiting to see which of them would catch it.

Tonks made quite a production of getting ready to throw the bouquet. She gave Harry a huge wink with her back turned toward Arthur and Molly, then tossed the bouquet over her shoulder toward the waiting ladies behind her. It landed squarely in Ginny's outstretched hands, making both her and Harry blush madly.

"No fair! She plays Quidditch! She can catch anything!" Mrs. Figg teased merrily.

"Yeah, that was a bit of an unfair advantage," Hermione said, grinning at her friend.

"It helps that I spelled it to go to her," Tonks said cheekily, then leaned down and kissed Ginny and then Hermione on the cheek. "Thanks for supporting me, you two. And I expect an invitation to your weddings, both of them!"

"You and Remus will be at the top of the list," Ginny promised. "This was great fun. Congratulations and good wishes and all that kind of thing!"

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"I know you'll be happy! I can't wait to see your new house!" Hermione said.

"Thanks! You lot are invited for the next Hogsmeade weekend, how's that?" Tonks said.

"Great!" both girls said together, then laughed.

Tonks giggled as Remus whirled her away from the girls.

"Time to go, Mrs. Lupin," he said with a tender smile, his face glowing with delight in his beautiful bride.

"I'm with you, Professor," she said, taking his arm like a grand lady and following him to the door. Ginny helped Tonks with her cloak while Harry helped Remus.

"You kids behave yourselves now," Harry teased. His face grew more serious, his love for his godfather shining in his eyes. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks for everything, Harry," Remus said, pulling him into a hug. "And no, we don't plan to behave ourselves at all!" Harry snorted with laughter and Remus blushed madly as they parted.

With a wave to their friends, Remus and Tonks stepped outside into the snowy square and Apparated to the coast, where they would take a ferry to France on their way to Rumania.

"My feet are killing me!" Ginny said, kicking off her elegant dress shoes as she collapsed in a chair in the living room.

"Mine too," Hermione agreed, also removing her shoes and starting to sit down. "Uh-oh," she said suddenly.

"What?" Ron said.

"These are Parvati's robes. If I sit in them, they'll get wrinkled. I'm going up to change," Hermione said sensibly. She picked up her shoes in one hand, the long skirt of her robes in the other and ran up the stairs.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Ginny said, trying to get up but moaning and sinking back. "I'm so tired!" Since there were so few women in the group, those who'd been there had danced with all the men present who wanted to, so the girls had been on their feet much longer than the men had.

Harry sat on the pouf by Ginny's chair and pulled her feet into his lap, then began massaging them.

"Ooooooooooh, that's so good," Ginny said, throwing her head back and closing her eyes. "Don't ever stop."

"I might need to eat or go to the loo at some point in my life," Harry teased, "but for now, I'll stay."

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"Oh you," she said with a pretty pout and tossed a pillow at him. "No, wait, give that back," she said, reaching for the pillow he had so deftly caught. "Maybe it will help my back."

Harry laughed and handed it back to her, then went back to working on her feet.

"Tired, are we?" Fred said brightly when he saw Ginny relaxing with her eyes closed and Harry still massaging her feet.

His sister opened one eye and glared at him. "Why is it you two never, ever seem to get tired?"

"Good living!" Fred chortled. "Here, have one of these," he said, holding out a sweet.

"What is it?" Ginny said suspiciously.

"Everlasting Energy," he said. "It's basically caffeine with some vitamins. This late at night, you'll want to eat just one corner of it, but it will definitely perk you up!"

"Not now, thanks," she said with a weary smile. "I'd like to get some sleep tonight."

"Why?" Fred said cheekily. "Party on!" With that, he cruised back to the buffet table and loaded up another plate of food.

"Fifth time he's been back to the buffet," Ginny said, amazed. "Yet he and George haven't put on an ounce. I wonder how they do it?"

"Probably something like Diet Delights," Ron said with a grin.

"Is that real?" Ginny said, looking at him with interest. "If it works and doesn't hurt people, they could be the richest wizards in the world!"

"I made it up," Ron said with a shrug, "but I wouldn't put it past them to develop something like that if they can see a profit in it."

"Of course there would be a profit in it!" Ginny said, sitting up a bit straighter.

"Yeah, and among Muggles, it would be huge!" Harry said with a laugh. "And we could say we knew them when they were just snotty school kids!"

"Hmm. Maybe I should suggest it to them, and make sure they give me a cut of the profits, since I had the idea," Ron said with a chuckle. A moment later, he rose to his feet and went to talk with his twin brothers.

Hermione returned to the party in comfortable clothes and began helping Molly and Winky clean up.

"I guess that's my cue to go change as well," Ginny said, struggling to her feet. "Ow. Mad-Eye must have trodden on my toes fifty times," she groaned. "Remind me not to dance with him again!"

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"Poor baby," Harry said tenderly. "I think a soak in the bath with Remus's bath salts will fix you right up."

"Yeah, that sounds good! Later, though," she said, gathering up her skirt, picking up her shoes and heading upstairs.

Harry joined those who were cleaning up, but Molly shooed him away. "These are your guests, Harry," she reminded him quietly. "You need to say goodnight to them when they leave."

"Oh, yeah," he said, looking surprised. "I'm not used to being a host yet." He grinned, then moved toward the front door, where people were clustered, getting their cloaks on in preparation for leaving.

"Thank you for coming. I know it meant a lot to Remus and Tonks," Harry said politely to his departing guests.

"Great party, Harry, really, but we've got a couple of girls who are expecting us," Fred said, his eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

"We'll be back over here for Christmas tomorrow," George added brightly. "See you then!"

"Have fun, guys! See you tomorrow," Harry said, grinning at them as they bounded out of the door, still full of energy and ready to party on late into the night.

"Harry, your house looks lovely," Professor McGonagall said with a rare smile. "You and your house elves are to be commended."

"Thanks," he said sincerely. "I'll tell Dobby and Winky that. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny helped too."

"I've already spoken to them. Have a nice holiday, Harry," she said. "See you at school. Good night."

"Good night," Harry replied, opening the door so his guests could leave, shaking hands and chatting briefly with each person as he or she left. Finally, only Arthur, Molly, Charlie, Bill, Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Harry were left in the house with the house-elves.

"Whew!" Harry said, plopping in a chair with a huge grin on his face. "That went well, don't you think?"

"It was great, mate!" Charlie said, then yawned hugely. "Sorry, long trip."

"No problem," Harry said, laughing at Charlie's rueful expression. "I'm just glad you could make it."

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," Charlie grinned. "Remus Lupin, married! Amazing."

"Yeah," Bill agreed. "And to Tonks, of all people! I would never have thought of them being a couple until I saw them together. She's good for him."

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"Yeah, she makes him happy," Harry said, smiling at the mental picture that had just popped into his head of his normally serious godfather giggling madly because of Tonks' silliness. Yes, she was very good indeed for Remus Lupin.

"That was one of the nicest weddings I've ever been to," Molly said sincerely, "and the reception was wonderful. Well done, Harry!"

"It was Dobby and Winky, really. I never thought I'd have anything to thank the Malfoys or Barty Crouch for, but Dobby and Winky really knows how to throw a fancy party!" Harry said.

"It's late. You lot should go up to bed," Molly told the teenagers as she picked up some dirty dishes.

"Mrs. Weasley, Dobby and Winky can finish cleaning up," Harry said as he got to his feet and pulled Ginny to hers. "You don't need to do any more."

"Oh, Harry, dear, I don't mind at all," Molly said, gathering more dishes in her arms. Then she straightened up and looked at him curiously. "Unless you think I'll insult them by helping?"

"I don't think they'll be insulted," he assured her. "There's just no reason for you to wear yourself out."

"I won't be long," she promised. Arthur followed her around dutifully, helping her carry things to the kitchen.

"Well, we've been dismissed," Harry said brightly. "Who's first in that wonderful bathtub?"

Once they'd worked out a schedule for the loo, Harry, Ron, Charlie, Bill, Ginny and Hermione went upstairs. Harry and Ron went to their room and got ready for bed, then sat on the floor playing with the Quidditch rug for quite a while. Charlie and Bill, who Ron had told about the rug, soon joined them. The girls took turns taking long, hot baths. Fragrant from their baths, with their hair still in damp tendrils around their faces, Hermione and Ginny joined the boys, Charlie and Bill to watch Gryffindor trounce Ravenclaw soundly on the Quidditch rug. Their cheers were interrupted by Molly.

"Really, now, kids, it's terribly late. You need to go to bed," she said, smiling at their happy faces.

"Have you seen this rug Harry got?" Ron enthused. "We're playing Quidditch!"

"Really?" She bent over the rug, watching the players for a moment, then stuck her head out of the door. "Arthur? Arthur, come and see this, you'll like it!"

"What is it?" he asked as he came in. "Ah, I see the party moved upstairs," he said with a smile.

"Look at this, Dad," Charlie said with a huge grin. "Isn't this the best use of a rug you've ever seen?"

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"Now I know what to get you next Christmas," Harry teased the former Seeker.

"You do know I live in a small cabin with a bunch of blokes who all smell strongly of dragon dung, don't you?" Charlie laughed. "It would be criminal to put such a nice rug in that setting. But thanks for the thought."

"It would make a lovely wedding present," Molly said, smiling at her two oldest sons.

"That's not happening anytime soon, Mum," Charlie countered with a grin. "Not many ladies to choose from out there in the mountains."

"You won't be there forever, Charlie. You'll meet someone. Why don't you stay in London for a while, visit friends, take a short holiday? Maybe you'll meet someone. The twins know loads of girls." Molly looked hopeful.

"Can't, Mum, but it would be fun. I'll see what I can do in the next few months," he promised.

Molly looked at Bill, who threw up his hands in surrender. "I'm looking, I'm looking!" he said with a laugh, which made her laugh as well.

"All right, then," she said with satisfaction. "I'd like to have some grandchildren before I'm too old to enjoy them!"

All of the Weasley children groaned, and said with one voice, "MUM!" causing much laughter in the group.

Arthur had joined the boys on the floor and was enthusiastically cheering for the Gryffindor team.

"Mum, you need to try our bathroom," Ginny said. "There are new taps on the tub with so many kinds of bubble bath, bath salts, all kinds of things. It's brilliant!"

"Yes, I loved it," Hermione said with a happy sigh. "I feel ever so much better since my bath. My feet don't hurt anymore."

"I just may do that," Molly said, shaking her head at her husband, who was acting exactly like his sons and Harry, totally engrossed in the game and now directing one of the players with his wand. She sighed and turned to go. "Good night, girls. Try to get them to turn in at some sort of reasonable hour."

"We'll try," Ginny promised.

Several games later (the Ravensclaws never had a chance, with all the Weasleys, including Ginny, and Harry directing the Gryffindor players), Arthur, Bill and Charlie stood up to leave. Hermione had fallen asleep on Ron's bed despite trying to watch the games. Arthur shook her shoulder gently.

"Hermione? You need to wake up so you can go to bed," Arthur said. "Hermione?"

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"Don't worry, Dad," Ron said. "I'll take care of her." With that, he swept her up in his arms and carried her across the hall, depositing her gently in her bed. She awakened a little as he laid her down. "Goodnight, sweetie," he said, leaning down to kiss her.

"Mmmm, 'night," she murmured sleepily, then turned on her side and went back to sleep as Ron removed her slippers and pulled the covers up over her.

"Good night," Harry said, holding Ginny's hands and leaning down to kiss her. He was careful not to pull her against him with her dad standing right there, and both he and Ginny in pyjamas and dressing gowns.

Ginny smiled up at him, knowing exactly what he was thinking and why he was keeping her at arm's length. "Night. Happy Christmas," she said.

"Oh, it is after midnight, isn't it? Happy Christmas to you," he said. He kissed her again, then reluctantly released her hands as they both backed toward their respective rooms. She waved at him as she closed her bedroom door.

A couple of hours later, Ginny stood outside her room, listening carefully. The house was completely quiet. She crept across the hall toward the boys' room but stopped, gasping, as she heard steps coming down the hall. She turned toward the bathroom, thinking that would be a safe excuse for being up.

"Ginny, dear, why are you up?" her mum said.

"Loo," Ginny said simply. "I wanted a drink of water."

"There's a pitcher and glasses on the table by your window," Molly said, confused. "I saw them in there."

"I don't *just* want a drink of water," Ginny said with a teasing smile.

"Ah. I see," Molly replied. She looked troubled.

"What's wrong, Mum? Why are you up?"

"I was going to the kitchen to make some warm milk," Molly said. "Can't sleep."

"Why not?"

Molly sighed. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. I just need some warm milk."

"Sit down, Mum," Ginny said, concerned. "Tell me what's wrong."

They sat on the top step. Molly rubbed her face with both hands, wiping her eyes and glancing furtively at her daughter.

"Come on, Mum, talk to me. You're scaring me. What's wrong?"

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Molly sighed again. "It's just that. . .you are all growing up so quickly. I looked at you and Ron up there this evening, both of you looking so elegant and fine, and I realized, you're grown! You're all grown up and I didn't notice it somehow. Ron's a man now, and you're nearly a grown woman. You're not that old in years, but somehow, I saw the woman in you as you stood there this evening." She took her daughter's hand in hers. "I don't want to hold on to you too tightly, but I don't want to let you go too soon, either."

"We're not going anywhere," Ginny assured her. "We're at Hogwarts, then Ron will be at Auror School, I'll be at Healer School, and both of those are in London. That's not so far from the Burrow."

In his room, Harry heard Ginny's and Molly's voices. He got up, put his glasses on and moved to the door.

"What's up, mate?" Ron asked quietly.

"Your mum's talking to Ginny in the hall," Harry whispered.

"Oh, no! She was going to switch rooms with me tonight," Ron moaned. "She got caught?"

"Dunno. There's no yelling going on, but there's some crying – your mum, I think," Harry said, getting nervous. "Do you have any Extendable Ears?"

"No, Ginny has them," Ron said. "She always carries them. I'm such an idiot! I should do that too," he grumbled, shaking his head.

Harry had moved back toward his bed.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked.

"She's not going to take the heat alone," Harry said determinedly as he put on his dressing gown and slippers. "I'm going out there."

"Be careful," Ron warned. "That might not be what it's about, you know? Mum cries for all kinds of reasons. Weddings make her cry. Having Charlie home makes her cry. Don't take the blame before you know what's up."

"Right," Harry agreed, grateful for the advice. He hoped Ron was right about the cause of Molly's crying. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door. "Oh! Hi. What's going on?" he asked when he saw the two women sitting on the top step.

"Mum thinks we're growing up too fast," Ginny said quickly, hoping Harry wouldn't say anything that would give away their secret.

"Uh. . .why?" he said uneasily.

"It's nothing, dear," Molly said dismissively. "You all just looked so grown up during the wedding. Weddings always make me cry. Don't worry about me. Did we wake you?"

"Erm, no," he lied. "I was going to the loo."

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"Too much punch, eh?" Ginny teased.

"Exactly!" he said with a grin.

"Oh, dear," Molly said suddenly. "You were on your way to the loo, Ginny. I'm sorry."

"No problem, Mum," she replied, hugging her mother. "Don't be upset. We're all fine."

Molly sighed again. "It was so nice having the whole family together tonight – well, everyone but Percy," she said sadly. "I miss Charlie so. I wish he didn't live so far away."

"He's here for a couple of days, so you'll have loads of time to visit," Ginny said encouragingly.

Harry saw the girls' bedroom door crack open, and Hermione peeping out. He caught her eye, and she backed off, closing the door quietly.

Molly looked at Ginny, then Harry. "Well, I was going to make myself some warm milk. Having trouble sleeping, you know," she said with a shrug. "I won't keep you from the loo."

"Go ahead, Gin," Harry urged her with a smile. "You were here first."

Ginny smiled at him, then looked at her mum. "OK. Good night." She got up and padded quietly down the hall, stifling a giggle when she saw Ron peeping out of the door.

Molly looked up at Harry, her eyes serious and sad. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course," he said, more confidently than he felt.

"What are your intentions toward my daughter?"

"Excuse me?"

"What are your intentions toward my daughter?" Molly repeated patiently. "I see how you two look at each other, and you have given her a promise ring. It's obvious to anyone that you care for each other a great deal."

"We love each other," Harry said simply.

"I thought so. So what are your intentions?" Molly pressed.

Harry stared at her uncertainly. He didn't really want to discuss this subject with his girlfriend's mother in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve in the chilly hallway of his home. He wasn't certain when or where he'd want to discuss this with Mrs. Weasley, but somehow, this didn't seem the time or place. Yet here it was, and he had to deal with it. He glanced up and noticed both bedroom doors cracked open, with Ron and Hermione both eavesdropping on the conversation.

"Harry? I asked you a question. Do you know what your intentions are?"

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"Yes, I do, actually, but I didn't think I'd have to talk to you about them so soon," he said, sitting on the step next to her, taking Ginny's place. He took a moment to collect his thoughts, then took a deep, calming breath and blew it out. "I love Ginny. She loves me. I mean to marry her as soon as you'll let me. But I haven't asked her and won't, not until I've spoken with you and Mr. Weasley. I want to do it properly, you see," he said quite seriously.

Molly sighed. She loved Harry deeply, yet Ginny was her daughter, her baby, and she was so young. "That's very sweet, Harry, but you and Ginny are too young. You don't know your own hearts yet. You'll probably go out with loads of other girls before you find your one true love and get married."

"I'm sorry to contradict you, Mrs. Weasley, but I do know my heart. Ginny is my one true love," Harry said, getting nervous as he watched Molly swiftly change from his understanding friend to a mother defending her child.

"Ginny is only sixteen years old," Molly said firmly. "That's too young for her to know her heart."

"My parents—" Harry began.

"Died far too soon," Molly interrupted. "You haven't had a role model for a good marriage, for a good family. Oh, Harry, when I first saw you – that dear little face, those sad, scared but hopeful eyes – my heart went out to you. I've grown to love the wonderful boy you are, just as if you're one of my own. And if you were one of my own, I'd tell you the same thing. You are too young, and Ginny's too young, to know your own hearts. This is a first love, not a 'forever' love."

"I do know my own heart, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said firmly. "Yes, I'm only seventeen, but I know Ginny's the one for me. She makes me so happy. And I make her happy too."

"And you break her heart every time you're hurt or sick," Molly interjected. "Have you thought about what it will do to her if . . ." She couldn't finish the sentence.

"You mean if Voldemort kills me?" he said with rising anger. "Yes, of course, I've thought about it. And I know it would hurt her terribly. I don't want to hurt her, nor do I want to put her in danger. That's why I won't marry her until I've killed Voldemort. If I had a wife, she would be in danger because he would know she'd be something he could use against me. I won't put her in that kind of danger."

"Yes, let's talk about You-Know-Who," Molly said, her own temper rising.

"Say *the name*," Harry snapped. The pictures on the wall above his head rattled a bit as his temper flared.

"You-Know-Who," Molly insisted, "is trying to kill you. Has been for years. You've changed since the last time I saw you, Harry. There's something dark in you now, that wasn't there before. I think it's connected with You-Know-Who somehow. What's going on with you?"

"Dark?" Harry gasped, astonished. "I'm no Dark wizard!"

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"I didn't mean it that way," Molly said placatingly. "But there's something dark behind your eyes now that wasn't there before. Something hard, bitter, that wasn't there before. What's changed?"

"I've spent my life trying to escape from Voldemort," he replied tensely. "I wasn't capable of killing him before, although I did try. But I was a kid, I didn't have the necessary skills, I didn't have the necessary mind-set. Yes, he was trying to kill me, but the idea of killing someone was a horror that took me a long time to get past. Then I wound up killing people in those battles. I was forced to do it at first, then something in me snapped and I found it to be much easier to kill them than I would ever have thought. I didn't enjoy it, I was upset by it, but I needed to survive, to save Ron, to save Ginny and Remus and Tonks. I think I grew up that day in France. I became someone else in a way. I don't feel like a seventeen year old kid, Mrs. Weasley. I feel like an old man sometimes. I can't explain it, but every so often I see kids my age doing things I used to consider great fun, but I can't find make myself do them, I can't act like a kid, not unless Ginny, Ron or Hermione drag me into it. Then I enjoy it, whatever silly thing it is, but I wouldn't have got involved on my own."

"What do you mean?"

"Snowball fights. Playing games. Lying around doing nothing. I used to enjoy those things a lot," he said, quite seriously, "and still do many times. But now I'm constantly doing research on spells, practicing them, improving them, all with one goal in mind: killing Voldemort. My friends don't have that . . . that life-and-death kind of thing hanging over them, not the way I do. And it's changed me. I'm tired of running. I'm tired of feeling incompetent when I face Voldemort. So I've worked hard to learn and create spells that should be not just good defences, but good *offences* against him. I am planning to kill a man, and doing everything in my power to reach that goal. Not just to kill him, but to utterly destroy him, so he has no chance of regenerating himself again. That way of thinking – planning to deliberately kill someone – messes up your mind. So if you see something 'dark' in my eyes, that's probably it." He was fighting to control his temper again by the time he finished speaking.

"Then it would be best for you to not see Ginny anymore until you have your task done," Molly said sadly. "If you're going to the dark places inside you, you won't be good for her. And she's too young to be seriously considering marriage anyway. So, Harry, I want you to stay away from my daughter."

"*WHAT?*" he gasped, leaping to his feet. "You. . .you. . .you can't mean it!"

"I do," Molly said, also rising to her feet. "Ginny's too young to be so serious about anyone, and you have too much on your plate to deal with such feelings yourself. You've spent a lifetime not being loved, Harry. I understand your wanting to hold onto the first loving family you've found, but honestly, it's best for both of you if you stop seeing each other." She sighed, sad for the boy, but doing what she felt she had to do as a mother. No matter how much she cared for Harry, her own children's needs had to come first. "As long as she's under my roof, she cannot see you again."

"I believe she's under *my* roof right now," Harry growled through clenched teeth as he struggled to control his temper and work out some way to salvage his romance.

"Don't you cheek me, young man!" Molly snapped. "You will not see her again."

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"MUM!" Ginny cried, having heard the last bits of the conversation. "You can't do this!"

Molly turned a stern face on her daughter. "I can and just did. You and Harry will not see each other romantically anymore. Give him back his ring."

"I will NOT give him back his ring, and I will not stop seeing him!" Ginny snarled. "You can't tell me what to do anymore."

"Oh, yes, I can, my girl! This is for your own good. You'll understand when you're older," Molly insisted. By this time, Hermione, Ron, Arthur, Charlie and Bill were all standing in the hall, mouths agape in shock, drawn to the sound of raised, angry voices.

"I love him! I would have married him *tonight* if he had agreed!" Ginny declared hotly.

"And I would have agreed," Harry said with a sad smile, "but I knew your parents wouldn't. We can't start a life together with your parents angry with us."

"It should have been a double ceremony!" Ginny cried.

"Triple," Ron said firmly, shocking his mother.

"Ron! Not you and—" Molly gasped.

"Yes, and her name is Hermione," Ron said, truly angry with his mother. "We should have planned a triple ceremony. That would've been great. We can do a double with you and Ginny, Harry. How about it?"

Harry looked at his best mate with a heartbroken smile. "That would be fantastic. But we can't. Not just now."

"Why not?" Ron said boldly. "We can get Dumbledore back and. . ."

"You haven't even asked Hermione," Harry pointed out. "And I won't go against your parents' wishes until Ginny's an adult. If they still won't agree then, well, she'll be an adult and we can do what we want. But I'd rather they were happy for us, you know? And you should feel the same."

"They'll get over it," Ron said, his eyes snapping defiant blue fire at his mother.

"RON! No!" Molly cried in anguish.

Ron turned to Hermione. "Well? You want to?"

Hermione's face was white. "Uh. . .Ron. . .it's a bit sudden," she mumbled.

"Do you want to marry me or not?" he demanded.

Hermione moved into his arms. "Someday. Not today. I want to finish school first. Can you wait?" She looked up at him hopefully. "Let's not make this decision in haste. It should be a

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happy time, you know? And this just isn't." She brushed his cheek lightly with her fingers. "But thanks for asking," she said with a smile.

He sighed and rested his cheek on top of her head, holding her close. "I'd do it, you know."

"I know," she replied.

"Don't rush into things on my account, mate," Harry said quietly. He was heartbroken, but he wouldn't allow the Weasley family to fight over him. "Ginny," he said softly. "You're only sixteen. Your mum does have the right." His face was carved in tense lines as he held himself in rigid control. "I will wait for you, sweetheart. When you finish Hogwarts—"

Ginny could see Harry trying to do the honourable thing and it appalled her. "NO! Harry, no! She doesn't. . .she can't. . ."

"She already has," he said sadly.

"Harry! No, *please!*"

"Keep your ring, sweet girl. I'll give you a much better one when you finish school," he promised, his voice breaking, tears sparkling in his lashes. He started to speak again, but instead pulled her into his arms and kissed her, murmured, "I love you, baby," then turned into a phoenix and disappeared in a flash of light.

"*HARRY!*" Ginny screamed, then fell to the floor crying. Hermione bent to comfort her. Ginny looked up at her mother. "I will *never* forgive you for this! *Never! EVER!*"

"Ginny, you'll understand when you're older. Sometimes parents have to do things their children don't understand in order to protect them," Molly said sadly.

"Molly, I can't believe you did this," Arthur said sternly.

"What?" she said in surprise.

"Harry's a phoenix Animagus? I thought he was a cat," Bill said quietly to Charlie. "Did you know?" His brother shook his head, and they both turned back to watch the continuing drama unfolding before them.

Hermione tried to help the weeping Ginny into their room, but Ginny would not budge.

"Harry's out there somewhere all alone, and it's *YOUR FAULT!* He's out there in his *pyjamas and slippers*, for Merlin's sake!" she cried, then looked up at Ron. "Is Merlin in your room?"

"Yeah."

"Merlin! Harry needs you!" Ginny cried, leaping to her feet and running into the boys' room. The magnificent bird tilted his head at her. "Please, Merlin," she said desperately, "I know I'm not Harry, and you don't have to listen to me, but I know you can understand me. Harry's turned into a phoenix and flashed away somewhere. I don't know where he is, but he's upset,

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and has probably gone somewhere to be alone. It's so cold out and he's not dressed for it. He shouldn't be alone. Please find him and bring him back, OK?"

The phoenix crooned one silvery, liquid note, then disappeared in a flash.

Comforted at least a little by the phoenix's song, Ginny collapsed on Harry's bed, holding his pillow in her arms, breathing in the scent of him, far too heartsick to cry. Hermione sat beside her, not knowing what to do.

Out in the hall, Arthur was showing rare temper. "How could you do that to them, Molly? I told you months ago that they were serious, and you did nothing then. Why try to break them up *now*, when they've had time to really fall in love? Haven't you seen how they are together? They love each other! How could you not see that?"

"I DID see that, and that's exactly why I did what I did!" Molly snapped defiantly. "And did you hear Ron just now? What's going on at that school that they're letting children get so involved with each other?"

"They aren't children, nor have they been for quite some time," Arthur said seriously. "And as for them being too young – Harry's parents fell in love at the age of sixteen. Remus told me that when he and I were talking about how strongly Ginny and Harry seem to feel for each other, and this was *months* ago. And *you*, Molly. How old were you when you fell in love with me? Huh?" He stared angrily at her, daring her to lie.

"That was different," she said uneasily.

"No, it wasn't," Arthur retorted.

"So how old were you, Mum?" Ron asked, still furious with her.

"That's none of your business," Molly snapped.

"She was sixteen, just barely sixteen, mind you," Arthur said. "And we got in all kinds of trouble for staying out too late, but we were so in love, we lost all track of time when we were together. I was a bit older, nearly seventeen, when we realized we were in love. Harry and Ginny are actually older than we were when we fell in love, Molly. We knew that we were right for each other from early on. I tried to break up with your mother for a time so she could date other boys and be really certain I was the one she wanted, but she nearly hexed me into oblivion for it." He turned back to his wife, frustrated and angry. "Molly, you just wanted a career teaching and wouldn't marry me right after Hogwarts, or we would have married younger. So how could you say those things to these children?"

"You just finished saying they weren't children," Molly said evasively.

"Don't split hairs with me, Molly," Arthur replied tensely. "Be honest. What's going on in that head of yours? Why would you want to break them up?"

"They're too young!" she insisted.

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"No, they're not," Arthur countered. "And now Harry's who-knows-where without warm clothes, and in this weather." He sighed. "We should send a message to Dumbledore. Harry needs to be found, so we can be certain he's safe and warm."

"He can warm himself with a Warming Charm," Molly snarled. "He is *not* going out with Ginny anymore!"

"You aren't making that decision," Arthur told her, glaring at her in fury. "Ron? Does Harry have his wand with him?"

"Let me look in our room," Ron said.

Before he took two steps, Ginny wailed, "His wand's in here! He's wandless!" She grabbed his wand and strode furiously out into the hall, pointing the wand at her mother.

"Ginny, don't!" Arthur said, seeing his daughter fully intent on hexing her mother.

"Don't worry, Dad," Ron said. "That wand is spelled so it only works for Harry."

"Really? Why?" Arthur asked, intrigued in spite of all the other things that were going on.

"Ask Dumbledore sometime – or Harry," Ron said, backing away from his still-furious sister who was now pointing the wand at him.

"Are you so sure it's spelled only for Harry?" Ginny growled, but then relented. "Yeah, you're right. I knew that," she said as her hand dropped to her side. "We need to find him."

"Right. Bill, you send a message to Albus, would you? I need to talk with your mother," Arthur said, taking the still-fuming Molly firmly by the shoulders and guiding her back to their room. "You boys look after your sister, all right?" he called over his shoulder. "Don't let her go off trying to find Harry. Dumbledore will bring him back safely, and very soon."

"Come on, Gin, how about some tea?" Ron said hopefully. He put his arm around his sister's shoulders and started walking her down the stairs, Charlie and Hermione following. Bill trailed behind them after sending an Adfero to Dumbledore.

"Would you really have married Hermione tonight?" Ginny asked.

"Well. . .it would have been too soon, I think," Ron said honestly. "I don't believe she and I are as far along in our relationship as you and Harry are."

He heard a relieved sigh behind him. "I'm so glad you said that," Hermione said with a smile as she came up next to them in the hall. "You had me scared for a while there!"

"Scared of what?" he asked curiously, sliding his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close as they walked down the hall to the kitchen.

"Scared that you were serious about what you were saying," Hermione confessed. "I'm just not ready for that yet, but I do love you."

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"I love you too, and I'm not ready yet, either," Ron said. "It just fell out of my mouth and there it was, so I suppose at some point it will fall out of my mouth at a more appropriate time. Consider yourself warned," he said with a smile, kissing her on top of her curly hair.

"I'll remember that," Hermione promised. She looked across his broad chest at Ginny, whose face was red and blotchy from crying and temper. "Are you all right?"

"I won't be all right until Harry's back here with us. Imagine her pulling this at Christmas, making him leave his own house! And we're GUESTS here! He was so happy this evening! The house looks great, the house elves outdid themselves on the preparations, Remus and Tonks had such a lovely wedding and such fun at the reception – and now this had to happen to spoil the evening." Ginny had gone from rage to crabbiness finally, which was at least some form of an improvement.

"I never thought I'd see the day when you pulled a wand in temper on Mum," Ron said admiringly. "What hex were you going to use?"

"I honestly forgot his wand was spelled to not work for other people," Ginny confessed. "I was going to put the Everlasting Boils spell on her, and a Bat-Bogey Hex. And probably a Never-Ending Silencing Charm, if I knew such a charm existed!" She growled deep in her throat. "I would never have imagined Mum would treat Harry that way. She says she loves him!"

"If you stop to think about it, she was treating him just like family, so I suppose she does love him," Ron said philosophically. "Doesn't make it any easier for Harry to take."

"He won't trust her again after this," Hermione said, "not for a long time, if ever. She's going to miss that."

"So is he," Ginny said sadly. "He loves Mum. She just broke his heart in a lot more ways than one." She sighed heavily, fat tears rolling down her cheeks again. "Oh, Harry, where are you?" she said miserably.

Chapter 18 – Decisions

A very miserable Harry Potter shivered in the Shrieking Shack. He was sitting on the bed, the covers pulled up around his shoulders as the wind howled through the broken windows. Snow was piling up in small drifts around the room.

Harry had removed his glasses and sat with his arms around his legs, his face pressed against his knobbly knees, sobbing as if he'd lost his last friend – which, to his mind, he had. If Molly didn't want him seeing Ginny, it wasn't much of a leap to think she'd also tell him to stop being friends with Ron because of the danger posed by Voldemort knowing that Ron was Harry's friend. And if he lost both Ginny and Ron, Hermione probably wouldn't be spending much time with him either. Harry rocked himself, locked in grief, his brain unable to think beyond the excruciating pain he was going through.

A flash of light made him raise his head. His heart lifted a tiny bit when he saw his faithful phoenix had come to keep him company.

"Hi, Merlin," he murmured, his voice breaking with emotion. "Thanks for coming. I needed a friend."

Merlin crooned to him and nestled against his side. Harry petted the phoenix for several minutes, the soft musical sounds and the feel of the bird's feathers on his hand both comforting Harry a bit.

"Damn, it's cold," Harry said with a sudden shudder. He glanced at the phoenix, which had made a different sound at him. "Yeah, I'm an idiot," Harry agreed, then changed into the black wolf, which curled itself around the phoenix so they could share body heat.

"Where might he have gone?" Dumbledore asked Ginny, Ron and Hermione anxiously. "There's a blizzard out there now. He's not at Hogwarts. Did you search the house?"

"Yeah, Bill and Charlie searched from top to bottom," Ron told him. "They're doing it again now just to be sure he isn't hiding somewhere. The house-elves are helping them. I've never seen Dobby so upset. But the way Harry flashed out of here, he was going somewhere else, not staying here in the house."

"Is Hedwig here?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, he left her at Hogwarts. He had Merlin here, but Ginny sent him after Harry," Hermione answered.

"I should have gone with him," Ginny sobbed.

"Then we'd have two of you out in the cold to worry about," Dumbledore said kindly. "I, for one, am glad you stayed here. And Harry wouldn't want you endangered, you know that. Wherever he is, he isn't safe."

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"I know," she said, tears streaming down her face. "I still should have gone. I wanted Merlin to bring him back. I should have. . . ." Her voice broke, angry, frustrated, heartbroken tears streaming down her face. Hermione put her arm around her comfortingly.

"I've got Barney here if you need an owl," Ron offered, remembering Dumbledore asking about an owl.

"Yes, I would like to borrow him," Dumbledore agreed. "I'll post a letter to Harry and follow Barney to wherever he is."

"In this weather?" Hermione said, concerned for her headmaster. "How will you travel?"

"I have my ways, Miss Granger, never fear," he assured her.

They all stilled as the sounds of angry shouts and something heavy falling filtered down two stories to the kitchen.

"Oh dear," Dumbledore said. "It's a bad one, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I've never heard them fight like that," Charlie said as he, Bill and the elves came into the kitchen. "Sounds like Mum's throwing things now. She doesn't usually do that."

Dobby and Winky stood wringing their hands and looking miserable. "Is our master safe?" Winky asked Dumbledore.

"Dobby and Winky will go take care of him wherever he is," Dobby said seriously. "Where do Dobby and Winky need to go?"

"I believe he's safe for now, but I don't know his location at present," the old wizard told the elves. "When I find him, if he needs you, I'll send for you. Don't worry. Harry can take care of himself rather well. He'll be back as soon as things calm down." He patted both elves kindly on the shoulders. "This is delicious tea. Thank you."

"Winky will make fresh scones," she said, turning to the stove.

"It's the middle of the night, Winky," Hermione said, sad to see the elves so unhappy. "You don't need to do that."

"Busy hands is happy hands," the elf said quietly, glancing over her shoulder.

"She has a point," Charlie said grimly. "I wish there was something we could do."

"Should I speak to your parents?" Dumbledore asked looking at the Weasley children each in turn.

"I don't know," Ron said uneasily.

"Perhaps you should," Bill replied, his face grim.

"I hope Dad throttles her!" Ginny snarled.

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"Maybe we should go with you," Charlie said, looking over at Bill, who nodded.

"All right, then. Merlin can look after Harry for a few moments. With luck, he'll bring Harry back here soon. I will speak to your parents, and then, Ron, if Harry has not returned, I'd like to borrow Barney if you don't mind," Dumbledore said, rising to his feet and starting to leave the kitchen.

"What about Harry?" Ginny demanded. "He should come first!"

"He's in no physical danger at present," Dumbledore assured her. "I checked the instruments I have tracking him, and, while they didn't tell me where he is, they did indicate that, physically, he's fine. But your parents sound as if they could do with a referee. Let me just have a word with them, and then I'm off." He left the kitchen and headed up toward the master suite.

"Bloody hell," Ron said as his parents got even noisier. "I don't envy Dumbledore."

"Maybe we should go too, in case he needs help?" Hermione said worriedly.

"We'll do it," Bill said as he followed Charlie out of the kitchen. "You two try to calm Ginny down, OK?"

"OK," Ron said, sitting back down. "I'm not entirely unhappy to be staying away from that situation anyway."

Upstairs, Dumbledore, flanked by Bill and Charlie, knocked on the door to the master suite. "Arthur? Molly? It's Albus. Is everything all right in there?" No answer, but the screaming in the room did lessen a bit. "I'm coming in. Bill and Charlie are with me," he called, then turned to the other men. "Wands out, stun only," he warned. "Domestic situations can be dangerous." They nodded, their faces worried, then followed him into the room.

Molly had been doing her best to destroy the room, from all appearances. Tables and chairs were overturned, pictures hung askew, the lambs in one painting of a country scene had all bolted and wound up nibbling nervously on the flowers in a painting across the room. At the moment, Molly was busy beating Arthur with a pillow while screaming at him.

"Have we interrupted something important?" Dumbledore said calmly.

Molly straightened up and pushed her hair out of her face, blowing feathers from the burst pillow away from her. "No, nothing. How are you, Albus?"

"Not a bit happy at the moment," Dumbledore replied testily. "I understand one of my students has gone missing after a confrontation with you, Molly. And you seem to be intent on destroying his home."

"Hasn't he come back yet?" Arthur said, his eyes worried.

"No, and no one knows where he went. The house has been searched several times." He turned stern eyes on Molly. "His house-elves are distraught, as are Miss Weasley and Miss

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Granger. And your children are frightened, hearing such a fight from you two. Can't you settle your differences more quietly?"

"We can't seem to settle this one at all," Arthur said sadly. "She won't listen to reason."

"Reason? *REASON?*" Molly snarled, instantly enraged and ready to go after Arthur again.

"*Silencio!*" Dumbledore said, pointing his wand at Molly. "Molly, you must be quiet and listen to me. Sit down." He Levitated the chairs back onto their feet and sat in the chair next to hers, then conjured a tea tray and set it on the table which Charlie had just righted. "Drink this," he said, pouring a cup of tea and handing it to her.

Molly sat with her arms crossed, glowering at all the men surrounding her.

"When you've had your tea and have calmed down a bit, I'd like to speak to you, Molly, but you must drink your tea first." Seeing her suspicious look, he added, "It's only tea, no potion of any kind in it. You have my word on that. But you need to calm down. There's nothing like a good cup of tea to help quieten the nerves," he said, pouring tea for Arthur, who sat in the chair across from Molly. Charlie and Bill accepted cups of tea as well, and moved across the room to sit on the edge of the bed.

Arthur's hands were shaking so, he spilled his tea several times before he managed a good sip. "Is someone out looking for Harry?" he asked worriedly.

"I will go and find him as soon as peace is restored here," Dumbledore replied. "I can't take very long to deal with this. The boy is out there in the cold in his pyjamas and wandless, with only Merlin to help him if he gets in trouble."

Molly tried desperately to speak, but the Silencing Charm was still holding.

Dumbledore gave her a quelling look. "I will remove the charm if you can stay calm. No more yelling. No more anger. Is that clear?"

She took a deep breath and then nodded.

"All right then." He removed the charm and said, "What did you want to say?"

"He can take care of himself just fine even without a wand. I know he's good at wandless magic," she said, anger still edging her voice.

"Molly, there's a blizzard outside. We are sitting in *Harry's home*. He's not here. He hasn't gone to Hogwarts. I checked before I came here. His godfather got married this evening and is now on his honeymoon. Harry wouldn't go to him tonight even if he could reach him – he's too considerate. He also wouldn't go to The Burrow after what happened here tonight. He won't go back to Privet Drive, there's no question of that. So if he's been run out of his very own home, where would he go? *He has nowhere else to go*. So where can he be? Wherever it is, he's in danger, because he has no safe place to go," Dumbledore said as reasonably as he could manage.

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Molly blanched. She had been so wrapped up in her temper, she hadn't considered what Harry might be facing out in the world this evening. "What shall we do?"

"You and Arthur *must* stop fighting. You're upsetting your children. I promise you, you cannot dictate to your children who they are allowed to fall in love with, and who they are not. Ginny and Harry are very good for each other. I believe they can go on to make an excellent life together when they're old enough. They're as well suited as James and Lily Potter were – or as you and Arthur were, and still are. You've done a wonderful job with your children to this point, Molly. Trust that the values you've instilled in them actually took hold. All of your children have turned out well."

"Not Percy," Charlie commented dryly.

"Prat," Bill agreed.

"He has some growing up to do, I believe, and then he'll be fine as well," Dumbledore said calmly. "He'll be all right with a few more years of maturity on him."

"Git," Charlie said under his breath.

"That's not helping," Arthur said, glancing over his shoulder at his sons.

"Sorry, Dad," Charlie said, not looking terribly repentant.

"So you think I should just leave Ginny and Harry alone?" Molly said, her heart breaking, every broken piece shining in her eyes.

"It's nothing to be sad about, Molly," Dumbledore assured her. "Many people go through life without finding their true love at all. Ginny is very lucky, as is Harry. They will be a blessing to each other all their lives, I'm sure of it."

"How can you be so sure that they're right for each other? That theirs is a forever love, not just puppy love?" Molly asked sadly.

"I've seen them together nearly every day for the last year, remember? Ever since Harry finally noticed Ginny as a girlfriend, he has just blossomed – and so has she. They are two halves of a whole, Molly. Even if they aren't, you can't force them to stop loving each other. They have to make their own decisions about how they'll live their lives. You've trained your children well. Trust them."

"What if they make a horrible mistake?" she cried, her voice quavering.

"Then you'll help them pick up the pieces of their lives and move on," he assured her. He looked from Molly to Arthur and then back to Molly again. "Are you feeling a bit better?"

She wiped her tears and then nodded.

"Good." He stood up and walked toward the door. "I must go and find Harry and make sure he's safe. Try to mend the fences you've damaged here tonight, will you? I'll be back as soon as I can."

A phoenix followed the barn owl for hours, flying at the owl's much slower pace as it battled its way north through the heavy snow and wind. Finally, the owl tapped on the boarded-up window of the Shrieking Shack, then went to the roof and zoomed down the chimney, landing next to a black wolf that lay trembling on the bed next to a phoenix. The wolf had a layer of heavy snow on his thick, coarse fur and was whining piteously. It looked up and growled when the phoenix following the owl changed into Dumbledore.

"Oh, Harry," the old wizard said sadly. "I'm so sorry for what you've been through. *Lumos*," he said, lighting his wand and looking around the dark, dreary room. "You're cold, despite your fur, aren't you?" he said smoothing a hand over the wolf's shaggy coat and brushing off the snow, some of which was melting into its fur. "Or are you trembling because you're grieving?" The wolf raised heartbroken eyes to his for a moment, then laid its head back on its paws, still trembling and whining. "Ah. That's what I thought. I'm so sorry, lad."

He handed Barney some owl treats and said, "You rest a while, Barney, and then go back to Hogwarts, it's closer. Ron will understand." The owl hooted dolefully, then flew up to perch on the footboard of the bed.

"Change back into yourself, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly. "I want to talk to you."

The wolf merely growled, not lifting its head from its paws.

"I just had a long talk with Arthur and Molly. She's coming round to a more reasonable stance. I think she'll understand before long. I believe her realizing that you two were so very serious just hit her hard when she was already feeling quite emotional. Come now, Harry, change back for me, please?" He sat down next to the huge wolf, shivering a bit. "I'd build a fire in the fireplace, but this chimney never did draw well, and with the wind outside, this room would soon be full of smoke. That wouldn't be comfortable at all, would it?" he murmured as he did a Warming Charm on the room. "There, that's a bit better, but it won't last long, this room is so draughty. I need to get that window replaced, don't I?" he mused. "Won't you change back for me, lad? I'd rather not force you, but we do need to talk."

A moment later, a shivering Harry appeared where the wolf had been. He pulled the thin blanket close around him. The Warming Charm wasn't doing a lot of good, and his dressing gown and pyjamas were just not enough clothing for the frigid temperatures inside the Shack.

"Let me help you," Dumbledore said kindly as he transfigured Harry's clothes into warm wool trousers, a warm sweater and a heavy woollen cloak, as well as sturdy boots with thick socks.

Harry snorted derisively. "Why didn't I think of that?" he said as he looked at his new attire.

"I believe your mind was elsewhere, as is your wand," Dumbledore said compassionately. "Now then. Arthur is firmly on your side, as am I. Both of us see that you and Ginny have enough sense to wait until you're older to marry, despite your strong feelings for each other. Molly just had a very emotional day and responded very badly, I'm afraid. I know she hurt your feelings, as well as Miss Weasley's, a great deal. She said a lot of things she didn't honestly mean."

"I don't believe that. I think she said what's in her heart," Harry said, his face hard and cold.

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"It's part of what's in her heart, yes, you're right," Dumbledore said with a sigh. "But Ginny is her only daughter, and it's natural she'd be over-protective of her. You need to return to your home and talk to Molly again. I believe your discussion will have a different outcome this time."

"I don't want to," Harry said stubbornly. "I can't trust her anymore."

"Do you know what she was doing, Harry?" Dumbledore mused. "She was treating you exactly as she'd treat one of her own children. She wasn't treating you with the kindness and respect she shows to people outside the family. Her losing her temper with you to that extent is a sign that she truly feels you are family."

Harry snorted with disgust. "Yeah, right. If that's how she treats her family, I want no part of it."

"That's not true. You do want part of it. You want Ginny in your life. You want Ron as your best friend, even as a brother. You want the rest of the Weasleys as your extended family. I know this to be true. I see it in your eyes when you're with them. They're the family you would choose if you were allowed to be with any family in the world."

"You're wrong!" Harry snapped, getting up and pacing the room restlessly. "I would choose my own parents over them. I would choose Sirius. I would choose Remus. I wouldn't choose the Weasleys!" The windows rattled ominously in response to his strong emotion.

"Well, you do have several good points there," Dumbledore agreed. "But the fact is, you care about all of the Weasleys a great deal, with the possible exception of Percy, of course," he added with a small smile, "and they do love you. Even Molly. Perhaps, especially Molly. She wants the best for you *and* for Ginny. Her judgement isn't always the best, I grant you, but her heart is good."

"If it's so good, then why was she so *horrible* to me?" Harry asked, his voice breaking with emotion as he sat on the edge of the bed next to his headmaster. "She as much as threw me out of my own house!" Soot fell down the chimney as the entire Shack shuddered. Harry's emotions were rattling the old building to its very foundations.

"She didn't mean to, Harry. And she's sorry for what she did. Please come back with me. Everyone's so worried. We've kept it from Remus for now, but if you don't return soon, someone may tell him. That's not something he should hear on his honeymoon, is it? I won't force you, but I think it would benefit everyone if you went back and talked to Molly while she's calm and settled things properly."

"What do you mean, 'settle things properly'? Do you mean I should ask for Ginny's hand now? Or do you mean I should break up with her?" Harry asked, frantic to find a way to make things go back the way they were before the blow-up.

"I think getting permission to see Miss Weasley again is enough to ask for just now," Dumbledore said sagely. "I'm cold and tired. It was a long flight up here. Let's go." He held out his hand and helped Harry up from the bed, then grasped Merlin's tail and the three of them flashed back to the Grimmauld Place house.

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The Weasleys and Hermione were all seated around the kitchen table, doing their best to mend broken relationships. Ginny was still in a temper and quite upset about Harry's extended absence. Suddenly, she sat up straighter, her face brightening.

"Someone's in the hall!" she said, leaping to her feet and running up the stairs. "Harry? Harry!" she called, praying it was him.

Dumbledore transfigured Harry's clothes back into pyjamas, a dressing gown and slippers just before Ginny came hurtling up the hallway and leaped into the young man's arms, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Ginny's face was swollen, red and blotchy from hours of crying. Harry didn't care. He held her close, murmured to her soothingly, then kissed her. Their kiss became frantic as the emotional upheaval of the last several hours overwhelmed them.

The Weasleys, Hermione and the house-elves had all followed Ginny up the stairs and down the hall. "Ginny," Molly began, then quietened when Arthur put his hand on her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked Harry worriedly.

"Bit cold," Harry replied as he lowered Ginny to her feet.

"You're freezing!" Ginny cried as she ran her hands over his face. "We need to get you warmed up!"

"Dobby has some tea and some pumpkin soup ready for you, Harry Potter, sir," the house-elf offered.

"Thanks, Dobby, that sounds perfect," Harry said, smiling wearily at him. "I'll be down in a little while. It's very late. Just leave it on the stove to stay warm and I'll help myself later. You should be in bed."

"Harry Potter's guests are up, so Dobby and Winky must be up to serve them," Dobby said simply.

Harry looked at the people crowding the hall. His temper flared but he did his best to tamp it down. "You're keeping the elves up," he said, "and that's not fair to them. They worked hard all day to prepare for the wedding, and then to clean up. They need their rest." Harry bit back more angry words when he realized none of the people in the house except Dumbledore had any experience at dealing with house-elves. He shouldn't be too angry with them for not knowing the elves were required, by their custom, to stay up as long as the guests in the house were up – he hadn't known that fact until just now himself. "Dobby, let's have brunch tomorrow instead of breakfast. How about planning it for, say, eleven? Then we can all sleep in."

"Whatever you wish, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said, gazing at his master with tremendous devotion.

"What I wish is for everyone, including you and Winky, to have a good night's sleep," Harry said kindly. "Now you and Winky go to bed. If my guests need anything else, I'll take care of

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them." When Dobby still didn't move, Harry added, "Consider that an order, Dobby. Go to bed. Thanks for everything you've done today."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir. If you're sure. . .?"

"I'm sure. Good night."

"Good night, then, sir," Dobby said as he walked back wearily toward the kitchen, taking Winky's hand as he passed her.

When the elves had disappeared down the stairs, Harry glanced around at his friends, then down at Ginny. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said, gently pushing her away from him.

"Harry?" she said, confused.

"I'm not allowed to see you anymore," he said sadly, reaching out with one gentle finger to smooth her hair out of her face. "That means I can't hold you, either. But it won't be forever." He looked deeply into her eyes, which were miserable and tearing up again. "When you've finished at Hogwarts, we'll get married whether they give us permission or not. And that's not a proposal – I told you, when I do it, I'll do it right. I'll try to get permission first, but if they don't agree, that's just too bad. But for now. . . ." He swallowed hard, forcing himself to drop his hand and step back from her.

"Harry! NO!" Ginny cried.

"Harry," Arthur said kindly, "Molly has something to say to you."

Harry had been avoiding looking at Molly. He finally turned his eyes to her, steeling himself for something unpleasant. "What is it?"

"Harry, I'm . . . I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me," Molly said earnestly.

"You said what was in your heart. I could see that," Harry said, his face adamant.

"You saw my Boggart, remember?" she said urgently. "You do remember that?"

"How could I forget seeing myself dead on the floor?" he snarled. "Of course I remember."

"Then you know how afraid I am for my family – and for you – in these awful times. I . . . I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am. You and Ginny . . . of course you can see each other. I won't stop you. I'm sorry for the way I behaved." Molly was fighting back tears but went bravely on. "I forced you out of your own house. I can't believe I did that. I'm so ashamed. I'll go back to the Burrow now. You lot have a happy Christmas." She sniffled, then prepared to Apparate but Harry stopped her.

"No," he said firmly.

"No what?" she replied, surprised.

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"Your whole family is here – well, except for Percy. The twins will be here again in the morning. You don't need to go to the Burrow," Harry said. "Families should be together for Christmas. Please stay."

"Oh, Harry," Molly said, tears streaming down her face. "Thank you! Can you forgive me?"

"I don't know. You seriously damaged a friendship here tonight," he said carefully. "It will take me a while to learn to trust you again. Are you certain you're willing to allow me to see Ginny?"

Molly swallowed hard. "Yes. You are good for each other. Albus said you're two halves of a whole, and I know in my heart that he's right. I just didn't want to believe it, with both of you being so young. I'm sorry for the way I behaved, all those horrible things I said. I hope you can forgive me at some point."

"I do, too." He gazed at her a moment longer, then sighed, his body relaxing a bit at last. He looked at Ginny and held out his arms. She rushed into his arms and held him tightly. Harry bent his head down and rested his cheek on her hair. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," she said, laughing and sobbing at the same time.

Harry looked up at the others and did his best to be cordial. "If you'll excuse us, I need to make up with my girlfriend. You lot should go to bed. Father Christmas can't come if you aren't asleep when he gets here."

Charlie and Bill chuckled and moved up the stairs. "Good night, all," Bill called, hoping the rest of his family would get the idea and leave Harry and Ginny alone.

"Come on," Harry said, taking Ginny's hand and leading her to the library, where he closed the door, then put a Colloportus and a Silencing Charm on it, as well as a charm that would tell people, in a very stern voice, to get away from the door or suffer serious consequences.

"What a horrible night!" Ginny said, holding on to him tightly.

"Yeah. I really need to get my 'saving people thing' under control," Harry mused wryly. "If I hadn't thought your mum had caught you trying to get into my room. . . ."

"I was afraid that was why you came out," she said sadly. "Thanks for trying to save me."

"If I hadn't come out, none of this would have happened," he replied, "but I couldn't leave you to get in trouble alone."

"Yeah," she chuckled, her eyes twinkling, "it's far more fun to get in trouble together."

"Yeah, that's what I had in mind," he said, leaning down to kiss her soundly. Seconds later, they were pushing at each other's clothes, frantic to get down to skin. Ginny shoved Harry toward a chair and jumped into his lap facing him, straddling his legs.

"I want to see why Mum fussed at me for this," she said, her eyes dancing. A moment later, she sighed. "Ah. That's why." Her soft chuckle was quickly covered by Harry's kisses.

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A very short time later, they rested, wrapped in each other's arms, Ginny's head on Harry's shoulder, his cheek on her hair, spent but happy to be together. They lifted their heads and looked at each other, then burst into laughter.

"That has to be some kind of world speed record," Ginny said, kissing the dimple in his chin.

"Yeah. But still. . . ." he murmured with a tender smile, then nibbled a line down her jaw, making her moan with pleasure. He sat back and studied her face. "I love you."

"I love you too," she replied. "I can't believe we had such a horrible night!"

"Me either. But, in order to avoid more trouble," he said, lifting her to her feet, "we should get out of here. And besides, young lady, as I said earlier, Father Christmas won't bring your presents if you aren't asleep!"

"Spoilsport," she said good-naturedly. "Yeah, we've been in here long enough. If anyone's paying attention—"

"There will be hell to pay," he said seriously. "Get dressed. We need to think of something silly to do to give us an excuse for looking the way we do."

"And what way is that, good sir?" she teased as she buttoned her pyjamas and pulled on her dressing gown, knowing perfectly well what he meant.

"Besotted with each other," he grinned.

"Besotted?"

"Seems like the right word at present," he said, leaning down to kiss her bum as she bent over to pull her slipper from under the chair, making her giggle. "I've got it!" he said suddenly, then squatted in front of her, with his back to her. "Get on."

"What?"

"You can play jockey. If we're doing something silly like this, we'll have an excuse for looking so goofy."

"Goofy, is it?" she said as she jumped lightly onto his back. "I thought it was 'besotted.'"

"That too," he said with a chuckle as he straightened up and slid his arms under her knees, carrying her piggy-back. "Get the spells off the door, will you?"

"Done!" she said with a wave of her wand.

Harry remembered his "warning" spell and waved his hand to remove that one as well, then opened the door and "galloped" down the hall, with Ginny giggling madly as she held on. They passed no one in the hall and continued their play all the way to the kitchen, where Ron and Hermione were sitting at the table with Arthur while Molly puttered at the stove.

"Feeling better?" Hermione asked teasingly.

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"Loads," Harry replied with a grin. "Ouch!"

"We haven't finished our race, Dobbin!" Ginny said, digging her heels into his sides. "Trot on!"

"Slave driver," Harry said, then trotted around the kitchen and back up the stairs, making another circuit of the hallway before returning to the kitchen. "Enough, wench!" he said, letting go of her legs and bending down for her to dismount. "You're wearing me out!"

"You needed the exercise, lazybones," she teased, her eyes raking him up and down. Harry was beautifully built, broad-shouldered, well-muscled, quite obviously not a lazybones.

He grinned at her dig. "Lazybones, am I? Next time, you can carry me!" he retorted, then ducked as she reached out to poke him. "This woman's abusing me again!" he cried in mock horror, determinedly ignoring the senior Weasleys.

"Yeah, we can see how abused you are," Hermione giggled. "It's good to see you two laughing again."

"Feels good too," Harry agreed. "Where's that soup Dobby left out for me? And why are you lot still up?"

"We were hungry," Ron said, "and Mum was worried about the soup and tea being left on the stove."

Harry stifled a sigh. "It's not a problem, Mrs. Weasley," he assured her warily, wishing she wasn't such a fusspot. "Dobby told me he uses a spell so it won't burn or dry up or anything."

"I just wanted to be certain," she said carefully. She was treading softly, hoping not to offend him again. "Would you like me to dish the soup up for you?"

Harry hesitated a moment, then said, "OK, thanks," trying his best to act normally with her, but only managing in sounding distantly polite.

It was enough. Everyone else breathed a sigh of relief. They'd been worried about how Harry and Molly were going to get along after their blow-up.

A short time later, Harry's soup was gone, the conversation had slowed again and everyone was yawning. "Off to bed now," Harry said, stretching so hard his back cracked. "Good night." He, Ginny, Ron and Hermione all headed up the stairs.

Molly had insisted on washing up the few dishes involved in their snacks. "Come on, Molly," Arthur said, stretching his hand out toward his wife when she finished. "Let's go upstairs too." He draped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze, kissing her on top of her head.

"Oh, Arthur, what have I done?" she said sadly. "And still – I felt it had to be said."

"So it's been said. Forget about it now," he said kindly. She nodded and walked slowly up the stairs with her husband.

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"Harry, wake up! Presents!" Ron called cheerily a few hours later.

Harry groaned. "What time is it?"

"About 9:30, I think," Ron replied. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, happily opening the presents piled at the foot of his bed.

"What woke you up so early?" Harry said, rubbing his eyes and yawning hugely. "And why did you wake *me*?"

"It's Christmas! Presents, Harry! Wake up!"

Harry rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sat up, grabbed his glasses and put them on, then smiled at the pile of presents by his bed. "Wow! I've never had so many before."

"Yeah, cool, huh? I knew you'd want to see."

"They would still have been there in half an hour, you know," he teased his friend. Harry was soon sitting cross-legged on his own bed, gleefully opening presents from all his friends.

Someone tapped quietly on the door.

"Come in," Harry called.

"Are you up yet?" Hermione said, poking her head around the door.

"Yeah, sure! Come in! Happy Christmas!" Ron called cheerfully.

"Good morning," Harry said. "Happy Christmas!"

"We thought it would be fun to open our presents together," Ginny said, coming in with her arms full of gaily wrapped packages and sitting on Harry's bed. Hermione and her pile of presents wound up beside Ron on his bed.

"Yeah, that's brilliant," Harry said, leaning over to give Ginny a kiss. "You look so cute with your hair all frowsy."

"Frowsy, is it?" she said with a crooked smile, running her hands over her sleep-rumpled hair. "Yeah, I guess it is. Hermione woke up ready to open presents and I didn't even think to brush my hair. Back in a sec," she said, ready to bounce off the bed and go tidy herself up a bit.

"I said it was cute," Harry grinned. "Don't worry about it. We match, right?"

She laughed and ruffled his already messy hair. "Yeah, we do, actually. What have you opened so far?"

The couples opened their presents and showed each other what they'd received, with much laughter and delight. The girls were particularly excited about their presents from Harry.

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"What a beautiful picture frame, Harry!" Hermione said as she opened it. "Did you make this?" He nodded. His mosaic efforts over the summer had gone into these picture frames as Christmas presents. "And it has a picture of Ron and me in it! Wow, thanks!"

Ginny had opened hers at the same time. "Oh, I've got one too!" she said happily, smiling at the handsome photo of her being swung around playfully in Harry's arms. "Thanks, sweetie!" She leaned over and gave him a kiss.

"They're enchanted," Harry said, taking Ginny's from her. "Let me show you how they work." He set it on the bedside table and pointed his wand at it. "*Slide show*," he said, and the photo was replaced by another one, then another, and another, each one staying on view for several seconds.

"Whoa, that's wicked!" Ron said. "How'd you do that?"

"That's not all it does," Harry said with a smile. "*Change dissolves*," he said, pointing his wand at it again. The slide show went from changing the pictures as a whole to changing with various patterns, the new picture taking the place of the old one bit by bit.

"There are several patterns you can use for the dissolves. All the commands are marked on the back, and they're in plain English so they're easy to remember," Harry said. "It will stop on whichever picture you want, as well." He pointed his wand at the frame again and said, "*Hold*." The picture currently on display remained in place.

"I've never seen anything like these," Hermione said, examining her frame closely. "Well, Muggles can do this kind of thing with a computer, and I've seen Muggle picture frames that change the picture, but never anything in the wizarding world like this."

"I made them," Harry said off-handedly. "I've seen such things on computers and those Muggle frames you mentioned, but they won't work in the wizarding world, so I made up spells to make the frames do what I wanted."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "You . . . made up these spells?"

Harry smiled and shrugged. "Yeah."

"How did you learn how to make up spells?" she demanded.

"Dunno. I just thought it out and when I tried it, it worked. So I put the spell on several frames to be gifts. Ginny's mum and Tonks are each getting one, as well," he replied, looking perfectly innocent.

"How can you sit there looking so innocent when you've learned something so . . .so . . ."

Hermione, rarely if ever at a loss for words, couldn't come up with the appropriate thing here. She growled in frustration. "When were you going to tell us you'd learned this? And when are you going to teach us how?"

Harry laughed, delighted with her reaction. "I was going to tell you when you opened your presents this morning – and I've just done so. And I'll show you how – well, I'll try, anyway –

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whenever you want. I don't know how to explain the process, but I'll have a go at it later on today if you'd like."

"Yes, of course I'd like!" Hermione said excitedly. "You're making up spells! That's amazing! Is it hard to do?"

"Not really. Well, I don't think it is, anyway," he said with a smile. "The biggest thing is to work out the steps logically, I think. Sort of the way computer programs are organized, step-by-step. One thing has to happen before the next one can. That kind of thing. At least, that's what I did for these frames."

"Have you made up other spells?" she asked, her presents completely forgotten for the moment.

"Yeah, I made one up that we used last night, actually," he said, grinning down at Ginny. "You lot didn't get to hear it, but I put a spell on the library door that would very sternly and loudly tell anyone who came within three feet of the door to leave or suffer the consequences."

"And does it work?" Ron asked. "What are the consequences?"

"It works. It stings you if you touch what I've protected with the charm," Harry said. "Not enough to hurt you, but enough to warn you off."

"Wicked!" Ron said with a grin. "Where did you get that idea?"

Harry shrugged. "I was annoyed with the fan girls one day and thought it would be great to have a 'proximity alarm' like some Muggle cars have. If you get within a few feet of the car, without even touching it, a big nasty voice says, 'Move away from the car!'" He laughed. "I wanted that kind of protection for myself! I haven't tried it on myself yet – probably won't – but that was where I got the idea. I saw a car with that kind of alarm on a television program and thought it was an interesting idea."

"Why would someone put that kind of thing on a car?" Ron asked, confused.

"No idea," Harry said. "Maybe there's an expensive sound system in it or something, I don't know. Or maybe just because they can."

They all went back to opening presents, chatting happily as they worked their way through their piles.

"Ginny, this is brilliant!" Harry said sincerely as he opened a box full of all his favourite sweets. "Thank you!"

"I thought you'd like that," she said with a smile, glad he was so easy to please, and sad that she couldn't afford what she'd wanted to buy him. But she was saving her money as much as she could. She'd have enough in a month or so. She just hadn't managed it in time for Christmas.

"Chocolate is always perfect!" he said happily.

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"Wow, 'Mione, this is great!" Ron said, happily pulling a screamingly orange Chudley Cannons sweater over his head.

"Oh, and it fits, too! I was worried. Your shoulders are so broad now, I wondered if it would be big enough," she said, smoothing the fabric over his heavily muscled shoulders and doing her best not to cringe at the clash of the garish colour with his ginger hair.

"I love it! Thanks!" he said, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her in for a kiss.

"Oooo, Ron!" Hermione said as she opened her present from him. "How lovely! Thank you!" He'd given her a desk set with a handsome ink bottle, quill and quill holder, as well as a blotter, and a beautiful book filled with blank pages. "Is there a spell on the text? It looks blank," she wondered as she flipped through it.

"No, it's a blank book. You can write whatever you want in it," he replied, smiling at her. "Notes, thoughts, stories. I read somewhere that writers often keep journals or diaries, and they make sure they write something every day. I don't know if you want to be a writer, but those articles you wrote were brilliant. I thought maybe. . . ."

"Thank you! I really did enjoy doing those articles. I've been thinking it would be fun to do some more writing. Thanks for thinking of this, Ron! It's wonderful!" She ran her hand over the luxurious leather binding of the book, knowing it and the desk set had been a serious expense for Ron, and loving him all the more for his encouragement of her writing.

"What's this?" Harry mused, opening a roughly wrapped package and pulling out a rather hairy bag with something large and oddly shaped obviously inside it. "Oh, it's from Hagrid. What d'you suppose this is?" He held the bag up for his friends to see.

"It's not growling or anything, is it?" Hermione said warily.

"No, but it is a bit lumpy and heavy," Harry said, running his hands carefully over the bag. He pushed his fingers through the thick fur and found a drawstring. "Here's the opening," he said, slowly and carefully opening the bag. He breathed a sigh of relief when nothing monstrous burst from the bag, then opened it wider and looked inside. "Wow!" he said, putting his hand inside and lifting something out. "It's something he's made. There's a note inside here, as well." He pulled the concoction of neatly carved wooden pieces out and then opened the parchment. "He says this is a perch for Merlin. Oh, there's a dish in the bag, too." He pulled out the large brass dish and set it on the bed. "No wonder it was so heavy! There's a diagram here. . . ." Intrigued with the project of putting the perch together, Harry studied the plan and started assembling the pieces, his tongue between his teeth in concentration. Before long, a very handsome large perch stood on a tall base. There were various branches protruding in different directions, each of which had a unique texture. Merlin would be able to scratch his toes on the bar wrapped in rough cord, sharpen his claws on another section, clean his beak elsewhere. There were small metal rings holding a water dish and a food tray, with the large brass dish beneath them to catch any spills or droppings. The setup contained every comfort a bird could want.

"Merlin, what do you think?" Harry asked, delighted with the present. The phoenix flew down from his customary position on the curtain rail of Harry's bed and made himself at home, seeming quite content.

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"He made catnip balls for Crookshanks," Hermione said with a smile as she opened her present from Hagrid.

"And owl treats for Barney," Ron said.

"And for Pigwidgeon as well," Ginny said with a smile. "He's making sure we're taking good care of our pets."

"Yeah, there are owl treats in here for Hedwig, too," Harry said, digging them out of the bottom of the bag.

"Happy Christmas, you lot!" Arthur said as he and Molly passed the open doorway. "Having fun with your presents?"

"Loads!" Ron said, chucking a chocolate frog, part of his gift from Ginny, to his dad.

"Harry, dear, thank you so much for the picture frame! It's lovely!" Molly enthused.

"Wait until you see what it does!" Hermione said, hoping to encourage friendly relations between Molly and Harry.

"I'll show you at breakfast," Harry added in a cool voice.

"We'll see you downstairs then," Molly said with a timid smile, hoping Harry was feeling more kindly toward her this morning. He was being distantly friendly, not his usual warm self, but she couldn't really blame him after all that had happened. She and Arthur went down to the kitchen, leaving the young people to finish opening their presents.

"All done?" Harry asked as Ginny shoved wrappings around on his bed making certain she'd not missed anything.

"Looks like it. This was a nice Christmas!" she said happily.

"It's not over, you know," he said seriously, gazing into her eyes.

"Huh?"

"I think there's something hidden right. . .under. . .here," Harry said, reaching behind her and pulling something out from under his pillow. "Happy Christmas."

"But you already gave me the picture frame!" she protested, but took the small package happily. She unwrapped it slowly, careful not to tear the pretty paper. "What have you done this time, Potter?" she said tartly as she recognized the jeweller's box. Harry just shrugged and smiled at her. She opened the box and gasped. Nestled inside was a pair of earrings with heart-shaped rubies surrounded by lacy gold filigree. "They're beautiful! But I already have earrings."

"I've noticed other girls who wear earrings usually have more than one pair," he said reasonably. "So now you do, too. These have all the same protections as the lion ones."

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"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she said, leaping into his arms with such fervour that she nearly knocked him over.

Harry laughed. "I'm glad you like them." He held out his hand like the well-trained boyfriend he was. Ginny was already taking the lion earrings off and putting the hearts in her ears. She put the lion earrings in his hand until she'd finished changing earrings, then carefully put the lions in the box that had held the heart-shaped ruby earrings.

"Where's your mirror?" she said, running to the wardrobe and opening it to look in the mirror inside. "Oh, they're lovely!" she moaned.

"Let's see then!" Hermione said, standing and admiring Ginny's new earrings. "Gorgeous!"

"Yeah," Ginny said with a smile, then looked at Harry, love shining on her face. "Gorgeous."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Molly said as Harry showed her and Arthur how the frame worked as they ate the delicious brunch Dobby and Winky had prepared.

"Harry, that's brilliant!" Arthur said. "Using Muggle ideas to create something new – pure genius!"

Harry blushed. "Not really. I just copied someone's idea and made it work for wizards," he replied.

"But you made it work! And it's a wonderful idea," Arthur enthused. "You should patent this, Harry. It could make you some money. I'm sure there's a market for such things."

"Yes, I agree," Hermione said, looking at Molly's frame. Each frame Harry had made was different, ranging from simple elegance for Molly's to cute and funky for Ginny's to refined for Hermione's. "Have you made any more? I'm sure you could sell them for a good price."

"I charmed one for Tonks," Harry said. "Hers is one I got in a Muggle store, with fluffy purple stuff and bright, sparkly stones on it. I hope she likes it. It looked rather silly to me, but it also looked so 'Tonks,'" he said with a fond smile.

"Fluffy purple with sparkles?" Ginny said, her eyes dancing. "She'll love it!"

"Harry, I have a contact in the Ministry's Patent Office," Arthur said seriously. "I do think you should patent this before someone steals your idea and makes a fortune off of it!"

"A fortune?" Harry said with a snort of laughter. "They're just for fun. I don't know that they'd make a fortune."

"Harry, people have sold rocks as 'pets' in the Muggle world and made a fortune while the fad lasted," Hermione said tartly. "There's no reason you shouldn't benefit from your own invention!"

"OK, OK," he said, grinning and raising his hands in surrender. "I'd be happy to meet your friend, Mr. Weasley. Thanks."

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"Knut for your thoughts, Harry," Hermione said quietly. They were sitting in the house's cosy library doing homework, but Harry had been staring off into space with a very serious expression on his face for quite a while.

"Huh? Oh, I'm not thinking of anything, really," he lied.

"That's not true. I could see the wheels turning in your head," she insisted. "And you're far too serious. What's wrong?" she said in concern.

"Nothing," he said dismissively. He didn't want his friends to know he'd been thinking about his future, Ginny's future, Ron's and Hermione's, as well, and wondering if he would be there to see it. He was determined to destroy Voldemort, and was coming to several conclusions about his life as a result of that decision. The decisions he was reaching now had been under consideration for months. He knew now what he wanted to do and how. He just had to do it.

Hermione was still studying him intently, as were Ginny and Ron. "What? Nothing's wrong," Harry insisted. "I was just daydreaming."

"I don't believe you," Hermione said.

"Well, that's all the answer I have for you right now," he said with a shrug, then buried his nose in his book again.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny all looked at each other, their faces worried. Something was going on with him, but what?

A few days later, an owl arrived during breakfast with a letter for Harry.

"Who's it from?" Ginny asked as she buttered her scone.

"Remus," Harry said with an excited grin. He scanned down the letter, his grin getting bigger the longer he read.

"What's up, mate?" Ron asked, noticing Harry's expression.

Harry looked up at his friends, a dazed and delighted expression on his face. "It's real. It works! He's trying it!" he said with a laugh.

"What works? Who's trying what?" Hermione said in confusion.

"The lycanthropy cure! Remus says they've tested it on two werewolves and they haven't changed during the full moon for three months! He's going to take it too," Harry said, excitement in his voice.

"Oh, but it's dangerous to be a guinea pig for new potions!" Hermione said in dismay. "He could be hurt!"

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"He says the science behind it is sound," Harry said, glancing down the letter again. "Tonks told him his lycanthropy didn't matter to her, but he's determined to try it." He laid the letter on the table and looked off in the distance. "If it works. . .wow," he said in an awed whisper. He grinned again and looked at his friends. "He's always been afraid to have children. If this works, I'll bet he and Tonks have a huge family!"

"That's great, Harry! Brothers and sisters for you!" Ginny said with delight.

"Godbrothers and Godsisters," Ron corrected with a chuckle.

"Are there such things?" Harry asked, laughing.

Ron shrugged. "Dunno. But if you say that's what they are, that's what they'll be," he said with assurance.

"Why wouldn't he want children if he's a werewolf?" Hermione asked. "You can't pass on lycanthropy genetically."

"He's afraid he'd attack them if he missed his potion," Harry replied quietly.

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice. "That would be awful."

"Yeah. He almost didn't marry Tonks because of the same worry, but she talked him out of it," Harry replied.

"How did she manage that?" Ginny asked.

"No idea," Harry said with a shrug. "I hope this treatment works."

Later that morning, Harry said, "I have a meeting at the Patent Office with your dad's friend, and some errands to do in Diagon Alley. I'll be back in a while."

"Do you want company?" Ginny said hopefully.

"If you want to come, you can, but I have dull business stuff to do at the Patent Office and Gringotts. You can shop elsewhere while I do it if you want."

"What kind of 'dull business stuff' do you need to do at Gringotts?" she asked, surprised. Harry hadn't mentioned anything about any kind of "business stuff."

"Just some things I need to take care of," he said dismissively. "It will take me a couple of hours, I suppose. You don't have to go unless you want to."

"Sure, I'll go," Ginny said.

"OK. You can go with me to the Patent Office if you want, but I need to go to the bank alone," Harry warned. "I have no head for business and I need to pay close attention to what's going on."

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"Can I help?" Hermione offered.

"Thanks, Hermione. I know you're good at this stuff, but I need to take care of this myself," Harry said evasively.

Hermione looked at him oddly. He was up to something, but she couldn't sort out what it might be. "We'll go with you and keep Ginny company while you're busy, then," she said finally. "All right with you, Ron?"

"Yeah, sure!" he said. "I haven't been into the Quidditch shop for a while, and we can visit Fred and George and see how our assembly line is working."

"That will be fun!" Hermione said sincerely. "Let's go!"

"Arthur Weasley tells me you've invented something rather interesting, Mr. Potter," Michael LeBrun, of the Ministry's Patent Office, said. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were seated nearby, paying close attention to everything that was going on.

"They're picture frames that change the pictures various ways," Harry explained, pulling Ginny's out of his bag and showing it to the man. He demonstrated what it did and looked at LeBrun expectantly. "Is it worth patenting?"

"I think that's a delightful thing," Mr. LeBrun said sincerely. "And you created the spells to make it work yourself? With no help?"

"No help at all. I made the picture frames as mosaics, and then enchanted them," Harry explained. "In one case, I used a frame I bought in a Muggle shop and enchanted it. The spell worked perfectly for each frame, once I got it sorted out."

LeBrun pulled out several parchments, shuffling through them quickly. "Ah, here we go. You fill out this form, make a diagram of your invention, explain in writing how it works, and provide us with a sample one to keep on file, and you're done. The sample can be a miniature if you want. There's a small fee involved, as well."

"That's all there is to it?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Pretty much," LeBrun said with a smile. "You can owl everything to me when you have it completed. Even if you never manufacture it yourself, this way you're protected if anyone tries to steal your idea and make money out of it."

"I understand," Harry replied. "Thanks."

"Wicked, Harry!" Ron enthused on the way out. "You're in business!"

When they left the Patent Office, Harry went off to Gringotts alone while the others went off to browse various shops.

Harry went up to the teller's window and said, "I'd like to know if someone here can help me make a will?"

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"Certainly, Mr. Potter," the teller said. "Go to the manager's office, over there. He can help you."

"Thanks."

Harry knocked on the manager's office door and was soon seated before the goblin's desk.

"How can I help you today, Mr. Potter?" the goblin said.

"I need to make a will," Harry replied. "I don't know any lawyers. Can you tell me who to see?"

"We can handle that for you, Mr. Potter. We did the same for your parents," the goblin replied. He pulled out a piece of parchment, a quill and ink. "I'll make notes on what you want in your will, and then will have it written out in proper legal language and sent to you for your signature, how's that?"

"That's fine," Harry said, nervous now. He'd been thinking about this for quite a while, and had finally settled on what he wanted to do. "I want to leave some money to Remus Lupin, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger," he said, watching as the goblin began writing. "The bulk of my estate will go to Ginny Weasley, although her name may be Potter by the time she gets it," he said with a blush.

The goblin looked up at him and smiled a horrible goblin smile. "Getting married soon, are you?"

"Getting engaged, anyway," Harry replied. "But the way my life has been, I suddenly realized I needed to take care of some things, such as making a will, to make certain Ginny's cared for properly." The goblin nodded. "I'd like to give Remus twenty thousand galleons, and Ron and Hermione ten thousand galleons each. I want Ron to have my Firebolt, and Remus to have a set of books I have. Ginny gets my dad's Invisibility Cloak – I'd like that to go to any children we might have. . .if we have children." He stopped and took a deep breath, the implications of what he'd just said having hit him hard. Children. Would he live long enough to have any? He clenched his jaw and disciplined his thoughts, getting back on track. "If any of the people I've named has, um, died before they can receive the money, then it should go to their spouses or children. If Remus has died, the books should go to Hermione. If Ginny and I don't have children, then Ron's children should inherit my Cloak. Ron should be executor, I think."

"I understand," the goblin said as he made more notes.

"But if something has happened to my money and those amounts will cut into Ginny's inheritance too much, then they should be lowered. How do we do that?"

The goblin began explaining to Harry various ways of dividing an estate, and they agreed to terms that pleased Harry.

"Right, then," Harry said with relief when they were done. "Thank you."

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"Not a problem, Mr. Potter. This is a simple document. I can have it ready for your signature in about an hour, or I can owl the completed document to you. You'll need to sign both copies and return one to the bank for safekeeping."

"I can come back in an hour or so, sure," Harry said, surprised this task had turned out to be such an easy one.

"Excellent. We'll need two witnesses to your signature. Bank staff can do that for you, if you'd like. Once it's signed and witnessed, I'll keep one copy in the vault for safekeeping, and you keep the other with your important papers."

"All right. Thanks again."

"See you in an hour, then," the goblin said as he held the door for Harry to leave the office.

When he got outside of the bank, Harry glanced around, looking for his friends and Ginny. They were nowhere in sight, which was exactly what he'd hoped for. He stepped into an alley and Disapparated, arriving seconds later in Hogsmeade in front of Mr. Joyero's jewellery shop.

"Hi, Mr. Joyero!" Harry called as he entered the shop.

"Mr. Potter!" the jeweller said with delight. "How lovely to see you again! What can I do for you today?"

"I want to order an engagement ring," Harry said with a smile. "It has to be very special."

"I understand. Do you have any idea what you want?"

"Something sparkly. A diamond, I think. But it needs to be unique too," Harry said, his eyes hopeful. He knew Mr. Joyero was good at coming up with unusual and beautiful jewellery that pleased both Harry and Ginny.

"I'll show you some things that are already made up, and you can tell me if any of those suit your needs," the man said, opening a display cabinet and pulling out a tray of stunning rings. "But if you don't see what you want here, you can tell me if you like one part of a design on a ring, another part of a design on another. Or you can create the design yourself, and I'll make whatever you wish."

"Her hands are small, so the diamond shouldn't be too huge," Harry said cautiously as he admired the rings in the tray. "Maybe about this size," he said, pointing to a ring. "But I don't like that stone. It's not sparkly enough."

"Let me show you some loose stones. You can pick whichever one you want, and I can set it for you," Mr. Joyero said as he pulled out a tray full of diamonds of various sizes and shapes.

Harry studied the stones for a long time in silence, then poked one with his finger, turning it this way and that to catch the light. "They're all beautiful, but I like this one."

"You have a remarkable eye," the jeweller said sincerely. "That's the finest one carat diamond I have. Oval shape, beautifully cut, perfect clarity and the highest quality colour. Let me show

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it to you," he said, picking the diamond up and snapping it into a holder with small metal prongs, then handing it to Harry along with his jeweller's loupe.

Harry looked at him questioningly, then put the loupe to his eye and peered into the depths of the diamond. "Wow! It's like looking inside a rainbow!" he said with delight.

"This is a wonderful stone, Mr. Potter," the jeweller said. "Does it suit you?"

"You don't think it will be too big for her hand? You've seen her. She has small, dainty hands."

"In the proper setting, this diamond will be perfect on her hand."

"OK, let's talk about the setting," Harry said, his heart lifting as he imagined Ginny's response to the ring.

A short time later, Harry and Mr. Joyero were shaking hands, having agreed to the details involved.

"How much will this cost?" Harry said, suddenly realizing he hadn't asked the price of anything they'd talked about.

Joyero wrote a figure on the order form, then showed it to Harry.

"That's all? I thought it would be a lot more!" Harry said in surprise.

"You have sent me a great deal of business, Mr. Potter, and you, as well as your friends, are regular customers," Mr. Joyero said with a smile, "and truly, I am honoured that you are ordering such a special gift from me. It will be a pleasure for me to know your young lady is wearing this ring."

"Wow, thanks," Harry said sincerely.

"When do you want the ring completed?"

"As soon as possible," Harry replied. "I'm not going to ask her right away, but when I do, I want to have it with me."

"I'll owl it to you when it's ready."

"Please send it to the Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, and send it at night, so it doesn't arrive with the morning mail, all right?" Harry asked as he handed the down payment to the jeweller. "Oh, I suppose I could pick out her Valentine's Day gift now, as well," he mused. He walked around the shop looking at the various things on display.

"What about a pendant to match the earrings you bought her for Christmas?"

"She never takes the lion pendant off," Harry said.

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"It could be that she never takes it off because you gave it to her," Mr. Joyero said wisely.

"Another pendant would give her a choice of things to wear, or you could get something that would look nice with the lion and she could wear them both at the same time. Many ladies do that."

"Really?" Harry replied in surprise. "Huh. OK, you know the lion pendant. What would go well with it?"

"I have this heart-shaped ruby pendant that matches those earrings you bought her," the jeweller said, "and I can put in two chains, one the same length as the lion in case she wants to wear it alone, and a longer one, in case she wants to wear them together."

"You're sure this is the style? To wear them together?" Harry said uncertainly. He didn't pay that much attention to women's jewellery unless it was on Ginny.

"Dear? Would you come here, please?" the jeweller called over his shoulder.

"What do you need?" his wife said as she came into the shop from the workroom behind it. "Ah, hello, Mr. Potter!"

"Hi. Nice to see you," Harry said politely.

"Show Mr. Potter what you're wearing today," Mr. Joyero said.

Mrs. Joyero stepped up to the counter and Harry saw that she had on two necklaces, one a bit longer than the other. One was a beautiful swan whose body was a handsome marquis-cut diamond, the other was a cluster of what looked like flowers made of gemstones with diamonds at the centre. One flower had rubies for the petals, the next one had sapphires, the third emeralds. They were gorgeous necklaces.

"Wow! Those are beautiful!" Harry said sincerely.

"You can see that two pendants that relate to each other in some way – here by having some matching stones – can look wonderful together," Mr. Joyero said simply.

"OK. I'll take that pendant with both chains, then," Harry said, glad to have that decision out of the way, "and with every protection you can put on it."

As the jeweller boxed up the pendant and chains, Harry noticed he had picture frames for sale on a side table. He went over and looked at them. "What do these do?" he asked.

"Nothing. They're just frames," Mr. Joyero replied. "Why?"

"Well. . . I made some frames as presents for my friends, and they were quite happy with them. The pictures change in various ways," he explained. "My girlfriend's dad arranged a meeting for me at the Patent Office this morning to get them patented. I just wondered what kind of market there might be for them. I have a friend who's a photographer who wants to have his own shop when he finishes Hogwarts, and I thought I could market them there."

"So you want to go into manufacturing?" Mr. Joyero asked with interest.

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"Not really, but these seem to be a nice present, and I like to make things. It's a sort of hobby of mine, when I have time, to make things with my hands," Harry said modestly.

"If you want, you can make up some frames and I'll offer them here in the shop, see how they do," Mr. Joyero said with a smile. "Could you show me a sample sometime?"

"I have one in my bag, actually. I just showed it to the man in the Patent Office." Harry pulled out Ginny's frame and showed the jeweller what it would do.

"That's wonderful, Mr. Potter! Yes, I think there would be a market for such frames. Work out how much you want for them, bring me some samples to sell, and we'll see what happens, how's that?"

"Really?" Harry said, grinning. "That would be fun. I may not be able to make any until the school term is over, since I'm so busy at school. I'll send you some as soon as I get them made."

"Excellent! I'll see you again soon, then?"

"Absolutely!" Harry replied. "Thanks a lot!" He took his package and waved as he left the store, shoving the small parcel into his pocket.

His business complete, Harry Apparated back to Diagon Alley and strolled through the shops he knew his friends would visit, finally finding them in Quality Quidditch Supplies.

"Business all finished?" Ginny asked brightly.

"Yes. Everything's taken care of," he replied, glad he'd had the idea to deal with these things so soon. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and happily followed Ron and Hermione around the shop. He glanced up at the shop's clock every so often. When it was time for him to return to the bank, he said, "I have to go back to Gringotts to sign some paperwork. Won't take a minute."

"We're all done here," Ron said. "We'll go with you, if you want."

"OK," Harry replied, not worried about them seeing him signing the will. They wouldn't know what it was, after all.

When they got to Gringotts, Harry left his friends standing in the lobby while he went into the goblin's office to read over and sign his will.

"All done, Mr. Potter," the goblin said with satisfaction as two other goblins signed on the "witness" lines.

"Thanks," Harry said, rising to leave.

"One thing, Mr. Potter," the goblin said as he handed Harry a copy to keep.

"Yes?"

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"You need to tell your friends where to find your will so that, if something should happen to you, they'll know what your wishes were. A man as young as you, most people wouldn't expect him to have a will already. So make sure you tell them where to find it, all right?"

Harry was stunned. He hadn't planned to tell anyone about the will. He'd assumed that somehow, it would be taken care of after he was gone. But what the goblin said made good sense. He sighed as he folded the document and put it in his pocket. "All right. I'll tell them. Thank you."

"Ready to go home?" Harry said as he approached his friends.

"Yeah, but let's get something to eat at the pub first," Ron said. They would be using the Floo Network from the Leaky Cauldron to return to Grimmauld Place.

As they ate sandwiches and drank their butterbeer, Hermione looked at Harry seriously. "What was that all about in the bank, Harry?"

"What do you mean?" he said evasively.

"You signed two copies of something, and then two goblins signed it as well. They were witnessing your signature. They gave you a copy to keep. What were you signing?"

"Nosy little witch, aren't you?" he said flippantly, hoping to get her off the subject.

"You've been very serious the last several days, and far too quiet. What's going on in that head of yours?"

Harry sighed. *No time like the present*, he thought. *May as well get it over with*. He looked around to see if anyone was close enough to overhear him. "All right, if you must know. I wrote a will today."

"What!" Ron exclaimed before Hermione shushed him. "Why?" he said in a softer voice. Ginny merely gasped, then swallowed hard, doing her best not to cry.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders comfortingly. She grabbed his hand with both of hers and held on, nervously fingering his ring. "I didn't want to upset you. That's why I haven't talked about it." She nodded mutely, still clutching his hand tightly and running her fingers over the lion on the ruby in his ring repeatedly.

He looked up at Ron and Hermione and said, "I have this 'destiny' thing hanging over my head," Harry explained, wishing he knew a better way to tell them. "Something could happen to me. If it does, I don't want the Ministry to get my things. I want to have a say in where they go. I have property to deal with, and so on," he said lamely, not wanting to get into the two fortunes, Potter and Black, for which he felt so responsible.

He looked at his two dearest friends and his girlfriend, then sighed. "I may as well tell you everything. The bank has one copy, I have the other. It will be in my trunk, the front left corner, as long as I'm at Hogwarts. Once I'm out of Hogwarts, I'll find another safe place for it, and I'll let you know where that will be. Or maybe I'll just keep it in my trunk. I simply haven't thought that far ahead yet.

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"I'm taking Voldemort very seriously. He won't ambush me again if I can help it. The battle will be on my terms. I will destroy him, but if I'm really honest with myself, I have to admit that I don't know if I'll survive the battle." He winced as the girls both stifled sobs. "Don't worry, I plan to survive," he insisted, "but I feel a responsibility to my parents and to Sirius to make sure that what they left me doesn't wind up in the wrong hands. So I made a will. Ron, you're the executor. That means you have to make sure everything is done the way I wanted it in the will. I know I can trust you to do that for me." Ron nodded solemnly.

"You get my Firebolt. I know you already have one, but it wouldn't hurt to have a spare," Harry said with a shrug. "Remus gets that set of books, or if he's already gone, then you get it, Hermione. I don't have any other stuff that's worth worrying about. Ron, you and Hermione and Remus each get some money as well." He glanced up at them, upset to see their white faces as they realized how thoroughly he'd thought this through. "And Ginny, you're my next of kin." He hugged her as she stifled a sob. "Don't worry, baby, I'm just making sure you'll be taken care of. But I plan to be the one to take care of you for as long as you can stand me."

"Forever, then," she said, sniffing.

"Forever and a day," he agreed, then doggedly went back to finishing his task. "You get everything else: the house, the property in Godric's Hollow, my dad's Invisibility Cloak, the bulk of the estate. I had them put your name in the will as 'Weasley' with a notation that it might be 'Potter' by the time the will is read." He looked at her tenderly, and brushed the tears out of her eyes. "Please don't cry. I don't intend to die anytime soon. But I wanted everything to be in place. You do understand, don't you?" He looked around at his friends a bit desperately.

After a long moment, Ron cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, mate, we understand. It's the right thing to do, actually. It's just a bit of a shock. I mean, you're only seventeen!"

"Yeah, that's why the goblin at Gringotts told me to tell my friends about the will, because most people wouldn't expect someone my age to have one."

"Too right," Ron replied edgily.

"Another thing I've been thinking about," Harry said decisively, "is Auror School. I'm going to ask them – if I get in, that is – if I can delay attending for a year or two, however long it takes to get Voldemort. I don't want to face more school with that threat hanging over my head."

"No Auror School?" Ron said, stunned.

"Not for a while. You're still welcome to live with me, Ron. I'll stay at the house when I'm not off chasing Voldemort," Harry said with a sad smile. "I'd enjoy your company."

"Are you going after him *alone*?" Hermione said in horror.

"I'll work with the Order," Harry replied quietly. "Once he's gone, I'll be free to go to Auror School and get on with my life." He turned to Ginny. "That means you have to wait until he's gone, too, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I won't put you in danger by marrying you while that monster is alive."

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"What if you get scouted by a Quidditch team?" Ron asked, remembering their dreams of playing professional Quidditch as well as going to Auror School together.

"That will be a hard choice to make," Harry sighed, "but can you see a Quidditch team wanting me, with Voldemort still after me? He could Portkey me out of a game again! No, I don't think any of them will want me until he's gone." His face was sad but resolute. "I don't see any other way to go on after Hogwarts. This is the best plan I could come up with."

"And you're not the best planner in the world," Hermione reminded him tartly.

"Hermione!" Ginny snapped, ready to do battle to defend Harry's honour.

"Maybe not, but I had to make these choices for myself," he replied quietly.

The group was quiet for several long minutes. Finally, Hermione sighed and said, "I'm sorry for what I said about you not being a good planner, Harry. Given the circumstances, this really is the best plan, I suppose."

"It's the best I could come up with," he agreed. "If you can think of something better, do let me know."

"I will," she promised. "I'm sorry I pushed you into telling," Hermione said, wiping tears from her eyes, "but I think you did the right thing."

"Yeah, me too," he replied. He sighed, sat back in his chair and downed the rest of his butterbeer. "Well, this was fun. Let's go home," he said tiredly.

Chapter 19 – Questions

A cautious peace reigned over Grimmauld Place for the duration of the holidays. The Weasley children stayed angry at Molly for days and avoided her company as much as possible during that time, only relenting in the last days of the holiday. Harry and Molly treated each other with careful courtesy whenever their paths crossed, Molly wary and anxious, Harry keeping his distance. The twins popped in from time to time, their inevitable good cheer brightening the atmosphere whenever they were present. That cheer became a bit forced when they learned from Bill and Charlie why everyone in the house was so tense, but they agreed to follow Harry's lead in how to behave, in order to keep the peace in his home.

Now it was time to return to school. The trunks were packed, the house searched again and again to ensure nothing was left behind. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione stood by the front door with Merlin waiting patiently on the banister to flash all of them back to school.

As Arthur, Molly, Bill and Charlie said goodbye to Ron, Ginny and Hermione, Harry stood to one side talking with Dobby and Winky. Harry shook hands with the Weasley men when they came to thank him and the house-elves for their hospitality.

When Molly got to Ginny, she hesitated. "Can you ever forgive me? I'm so sorry I spoiled your holiday and made such an awful scene."

Ginny sighed. She was well past her rage now, but she was still wary of her mother's volatile moods. "Just don't do anything like that ever again, Mum," she cautioned.

"I'll do my best, dear," her mother replied. "I love you so much. Please take care of yourself – and take care of Harry, too."

"I will," Ginny said, opening her arms and hugging her mother. "I love you too."

Molly sniffled and hugged Ginny tighter. They held on to each other for a long time, then parted, both of them tearful. Molly turned nervously to Harry. "I don't know what to say, Harry. I'm so sorry."

"I know," he replied, then followed Ginny's example and opened his arms to Molly. Harry sighed as she clung to him tearfully. He wished things were the way they had been before she blew up at him. Molly was the closest thing to a mother he'd had since his own mother had died. When he and Ginny married, Molly would be his mother-in-law and they'd be related to each other for the rest of their lives. He wanted desperately to restore the comfortable relationship they'd once had together, but he worried that they'd never have that easy, friendly feeling between them again. He glanced up at Ginny's tearful, hopeful face and decided it was time to make more of an effort to restore their relationship. He tightened his arms around Molly, his careful embrace finally becoming warm and genuine.

Molly sobbed harder when she felt the change. "You dear, dear boy. You are so precious to me," she said, sniffing as she pulled back to look at him. "I never meant to hurt you."

"I know." He studied her face intently. "Let's put it behind us now, all right?"

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Molly gave him a watery smile. "I do believe you're more mature than I am, Harry." He smiled a bit in response. Molly's eyes brightened as she had an idea. "Do you get much post?"

"No. Sirius is the only one who ever wrote to me at school."

"May I write to you, then?" she said.

A slow smile crossed his face. "Yeah, I'd like that. Thanks."

Molly returned his smile. "Have a good term."

"Thanks. Take care," he said, giving her another hug before stepping back and standing with his friends. "Merlin, we're ready." With a flash, they were gone.

Soon after they returned to school, Remus stopped Harry in the corridor. "How was Christmas?" he asked carefully.

Harry hesitated a moment, then said, "Fine." He didn't want to be dishonest with his godfather, but he also didn't want to dredge up all the awful memories of Christmas Eve,

when Molly had driven him from his own home.

"I heard something disturbing from Professor Dumbledore," Remus said, looking concerned. "Are you and Molly all right now?"

"Yeah, we're fine," Harry replied, lifting his shoulders in a casual shrug. "No problems."

"I'm so sorry that happened, and that I wasn't there for you when you needed me," Remus said, his voice low and sad. "I wish—"

"Don't worry about it," Harry interrupted. "It's over. She said what she wanted to and we all know her feelings. And she knows mine, as well. We'll be fine."

"If you ever want to talk about it," Remus said, squeezing his godson's shoulder comfortingly, "my door is always open to you. You do know that?"

Harry gave him a warm smile. "Yes, I know. Thanks. I'm fine. Don't worry."

"I have to worry about you. It's in the Godfather's Handbook," Remus teased.

"You're just practicing your parenting techniques on me," Harry teased in return.

"At least I'll have a head start with my own child. You've given me plenty of practice!"

Their conversation turned to the much more pleasant topic of Remus and Tonks' honeymoon trip and the move to their new house as the two continued down the corridor.

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The second week back at school after the holiday, Remus stopped by the Gryffindor table at breakfast.

"Good morning!" he said cheerily.

"Hi, Remus!" Harry said, smiling at his godfather. "How's Tonks doing?"

"She's wonderful," Remus beamed. No one had ever seen him happier. He simply glowed with the combined joy of being in love, being newly married, and the prospect of starting on the lycanthropy cure.

"And how are you doing?" Harry asked carefully.

"I start the potion next week," Remus said quietly, his face filled with hope. "They owled me with updates on their research. All the test subjects are doing well."

"Excellent!" Harry said. Ron, Hermione and Ginny all added their good wishes.

"That's not why I stopped by, though. Boys, there are officials from the Auror School coming to meet with you tomorrow."

Harry and Ron glanced at each other, then Ron asked the question that was on both of their minds. "Why are they meeting with us?"

"They're doing your pre-testing and interviews tomorrow," Remus explained.

"Tests?" Ron said, looking thunderstruck.

"Yes, Ron, tests," Remus said with a laugh. "They're not like school exams. They're aptitude tests, and they also want to see the quality of your spell work and so on. They don't take just anyone who applies to Auror School. The Aurors are an elite group, and take only the best-qualified candidates."

Ron looked at Harry and gulped. "Yeah, we knew that," he said uneasily.

Remus smiled at him. "Don't worry. Your spell work is far above average, both of you, and you have the qualities they look for in Aurors. If you do your best, you'll be fine." Both boys nodded and relaxed a bit. "They'll be here at two o'clock. I'll get you a pass from your classes, because this will probably take all afternoon. They'll see you both together for a while, then they'll meet with you one at a time. They'll explain everything to you when they first meet with you."

"Will you be there?" Harry asked.

"Yes, at first. I do have a class to teach in the afternoon."

"OK. Thanks, Remus," Harry said, grinning now. As Remus moved on to the staff table, Harry and Ron looked at each other with wide, excited eyes. "Wow," Harry breathed. He'd had the conversation with Tonks that his godfather had suggested and was once more quite excited at the idea of being an Auror.

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"Yeah! Officials from the Auror School! *Testing* us!" Ron said, more than a bit anxious.

"That's wonderful!" Hermione enthused. "I wish we could watch the process. I'll bet it's fascinating."

Ron turned to her in confusion. "Huh?"

"I mean, these are *Aurors*! They'll want to test your skills and all," she explained. "I'd love to see how they do it, what they ask you and all that." She looked up into his suddenly worried eyes and smiled reassuringly. "You'll do fine, Ron! What I'd really like to see is how amazed they are by how much you two already know!"

"I hope they're amazed by my skills and not by what a fool I make of myself," Ron said darkly, making his friends laugh.

"Ron, seriously," Harry said, grinning. "You're an Animagus. You've got top marks in most of your subjects now, if we just completely ignore History of Magic. Your defensive spells are excellent. You'll be fine."

"I'm not as good at the spell work as you are," he said uneasily. "I'm going to look like an amateur next to you."

"We're not competing, Ron," Harry said patiently. "They're comparing us to a standard, not each other."

Ron's tension eased a bit. "Oh. Yeah! You're right! What was I thinking?"

"Git," Harry teased.

"Yeah, sometimes," Ron agreed easily.

Two o'clock the next day came all too swiftly for Ron, not fast enough for Harry. Both were keyed up as well as on edge about the meeting. Now they stood outside the door an unused classroom, staring at the door nervously. They each took a deep breath and blew it out, trying to calm themselves, then looked at each other and nodded. Harry knocked politely on the door, then opened it when he heard someone call, "Come in." When they walked in, they saw three men seated at desks at the front of the room, talking casually to Remus.

"Ah, here they are!" Remus said with a warm smile. "Harry, Ron, I'd like you to meet Albert O'Connell, Malcolm Kelly and Sean McTavish. Mr. O'Connell is the head of the Auror School, and Mr. Kelly and Mr. McTavish are instructors. They're here to do your pre-testing and interviews." He turned to the three men. "This is Harry Potter and Ron Weasley," he said, indicating each boy in turn.

"Good afternoon," the boys said courteously.

"It's a pleasure to meet you boys," O'Connell said. "We've heard a great many good things about you."

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"Thank you, sir," Harry said with a smile, doing his best to stay calm.

"Thanks," Ron agreed nervously.

"Sit down," O'Connell invited. Each young man sat in a desk facing the three Aurors. "We have a few things to go over with both of you, then we'll meet with you one at a time. We may call both of you back in when we're finished to talk about some other things, as well." The boys nodded their understanding.

"First off, we want you to be completely honest with us today. If you have questions about any aspect of the Auror training, or of a career as an Auror, please tell us so we can get your questions answered and not leave you confused in any way. If we ask you a question and you're not clear on what we're looking for, ask for clarification and we'll explain it to you. This isn't a test such as you've had here at Hogwarts – you're allowed to ask questions, discuss things about what we're doing that interest you, all that. Part of what we're doing here is learning about how your minds work, what your attitudes are like, how you approach problem-solving, that type of thing. We want to know your aptitudes as much as your skill-level in various areas. Clear?" The boys nodded again. "Any questions so far?"

"Um, yes," Harry said uneasily. He looked at Remus. "May I ask you something in private, Professor Lupin?"

"Of course," Remus said, moving to the side of the room, Harry following close behind after he excused himself.

"They said for us to be completely honest," Harry whispered with concern. "Do you know if we can trust them? I mean, do I tell them *everything*? All my Animagus forms, all the spells I know – the Dark spells as well?"

"Yes, Harry, everything," Remus said with a warm smile. "Professor Dumbledore knows these men well, and I've known O'Connell for many years. He's a good man. You can trust him. All of them are in the Order now, as well. And your Animagus forms and those spells will be useful to you as an Auror. Go ahead and be honest with them."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Harry took a steadying breath. "OK, then. Thanks," he said, then returned to his seat. "Sorry about that," he told the Aurors.

"Is there a problem?" O'Connell asked.

Harry exchanged a look with Remus, who replied, "Harry wanted to know if he should trust you with some things he's been keeping secret. I told him you're in the Order, which means Professor Dumbledore trusts you, so he should, as well. I also told him that the skills involved, the things he's kept secret, will be very useful to him as an Auror, so he should be completely honest with you."

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"Oh, well done, Mr. Potter!" McTavish said happily. "A cautious nature will be a wonderful help to you in this work."

Harry smiled. McTavish seemed to have a cheerful, encouraging personality like Professor Flitwick's. O'Connell seemed open and friendly, Kelly quiet and thoughtful. At least none of them were intimidating. Perhaps this meeting would be easier than he and Ron had thought it might be.

"Any more questions, boys?" O'Connell said. "No? All right, then, Mr. Weasley, if you'd wait outside while we interview Mr. Potter?" As Ron rose to go, McTavish said, "We'll be talking with Mr. Potter at least an hour. If you want to wait elsewhere, that's fine. Just be back in about an hour, all right?"

"All right," Ron agreed. He touched Harry's shoulder. "Good luck, mate. Not that you'll need it," he said with a grin.

"Thanks," Harry said, smiling up at his friend. When Ron closed the door behind him, Harry folded his hands on the desk and forced himself to relax and to be at his most attentive at the same time.

"Mr. Potter, we'd like to ask you a few questions before we get into the testing portion of our meeting," O'Connell began. Harry nodded. "Why do you want to be an Auror?"

"To catch Dark wizards," Harry said immediately. "And it seems to be the best use of my skills."

"Your skills?"

"I'm good at defensive spells," Harry clarified.

"Yes, we've seen your marks," O'Connell said with a smile, "and we know about the D.A. and your work with them. We also know about your battles with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Voldemort," Harry corrected automatically.

O'Connell looked at him quizzically.

"Fear of the name increases fear of the thing itself," Harry explained. "He's just a man like any other, a very powerful wizard, yes, but still, using some other term than his name to talk about him gives him even more power than he already has. And he doesn't need any extra power." His face had grown grim as he spoke.

O'Connell studied the face of the suddenly very serious young man before him. With those few words, the boy had disappeared and a resolute warrior had taken his place. "You're right, Mr. Potter. I stand corrected. 'Voldemort,'" he said clearly.

Harry shifted nervously in his seat, the boy suddenly replacing the warrior again. "I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

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"No, you made an excellent point, which I will remember. Thank you for that." He glanced at his fellow Aurors. All of them had been impressed by Harry's response. "What do you see yourself doing in one year, five years, ten years, fifteen years?"

Harry thought a moment, then blushed. "In one year, I may be married, as well as going to Auror School, possibly at night if I get signed by a professional Quidditch team – that is, if Voldemort is gone by then. If he isn't, I'll be after him. When he's dead, I can get on with my life. In five years, my wife will be through with Healer School and we might have a child, maybe." He blushed again and smiled at the thought. "I'll be an Auror, maybe still playing Quidditch, I don't know. In ten years, I'll probably be a full-time Auror and have a house full of kids. In fifteen years? I don't know. Professor Dumbledore talked to me about teaching at Hogwarts at some point, but that will be after Remus – I mean Professor Lupin – retires, and I'm not going to rush him." He blushed again, wondering how they were taking his responses. He glanced at Remus and got a wink and a teasing grin in return.

"We know Remus is your godfather, Mr. Potter, so your calling him by his first name doesn't bother us," McTavish said kindly. Harry smiled gratefully.

"So the most important thing to you right now is getting married?" O'Connell said. "You've mentioned a wife and children several times."

"My girlfriend and I are very serious," Harry explained. "I've never had a family, and I want one of my own."

"That makes sense," O'Connell said with a smile.

"But the most important thing to me right now is killing Voldemort," Harry continued. "I can't get on with my life until he's gone. So one of my questions to you is, can I put off going to Auror School until I've killed him? When I finish Hogwarts, I'm going after him full-time. I can't do anything I really want to do until he's gone."

"Why do you think you have to be the one to kill him?" Kelly asked seriously.

Harry looked at Remus, who nodded. "There was a prophecy about us, about Voldemort and me, made before I was born. Apparently I'm the only one who *can* kill him," he said heavily. "It's not what I would choose. It's what's been forced on me. But I can deal with it, and intend to do so before I move on with my life. I do want to go to Auror School, but if I'm required to be completely honest with you, I need to let you know I can't go to school until Voldemort's gone."

"Well said, Mr. Potter," O'Connell said seriously. "Thank you for your honesty. I can tell you that your need for that time will not affect your acceptance to Auror School. If you're accepted, we'll take you whenever you're able to attend."

"Thanks," Harry said with relief. He'd been worried that he'd blown the entire interview right there.

"You said you want to play professional Quidditch," McTavish said.

The Time of Destiny

Harry nodded. "I'm hoping to be able to take night classes for Auror School so I can play Quidditch if I get scouted. But I don't know if I'll be scouted or not," he said with a shrug. "I just want to keep my options as open as possible."

"I understand," McTavish said with a smile. "I, myself, played professional Quidditch while going to Auror School. It can be worked out."

Harry's face brightened. "Really? Who'd you play for?"

"The Edinburgh Eagles," McTavish said proudly. "They've never been the best team in the league, but it was fantastic to play at the professional level. I'm glad I had the opportunity. I played Keeper."

"Ron's Keeper on our team," Harry said, glad to hear the man's experience. "I play Seeker."

McTavish smiled warmly. "I hear you're a brilliant Seeker and a fine captain. I've also heard good things about Mr. Weasley's Quidditch skills."

"Thanks!" Harry said with a happy grin.

"We could talk Quidditch all day," Kelly grumbled, "but unfortunately, we need to get back on task."

"Right you are," O'Connell said, smiling warmly at Harry, "but a little Quidditch talk never hurt anyone."

Harry smiled, finally beginning to relax and enjoy the interview.

"I see from your records that you're an Animagus," O'Connell said.

"Yes."

"Professor Dumbledore told us you're a multiple Animagus. Is this true?"

Harry gulped and glanced at Remus, who nodded. "Yes."

"Why did you check with Remus before answering that question?" Kelly said.

"Um. . .the number and specific Animagus forms I do are one of the things we've been keeping secret, and one of the things I asked Remus if I should be completely honest about," Harry explained. "I was just making certain that it was safe to trust you with the information."

"Right, then, Mr. Potter," O'Connell said. "I admire your caution. So tell us about your Animagus forms. Doing even one is a rare skill. I commend you on your accomplishment."

"Thank you. Um, well, I can do a lot of them now," he replied. "I haven't actually counted in a while."

"Name them off," O'Connell suggested, wondering how many the boy could do that he didn't remember how many there were.

The Time of Destiny

"A cat, a phoenix, a thestral, a wolf, um, a stag, a Labrador. . .a damselfly, um, a flying squirrel. . .what have I left out?" he said, looking at his godfather.

"A flying squirrel? When did you do that one?" Remus asked, amused. "And you left out the raven."

"Oh yeah, the raven," Harry said with a smile. "The squirrel is recent. I just got it a couple of days ago."

"Why a flying squirrel?" Remus asked, intrigued.

"Hermione turned me into one as homework for our Human-to-Animal Transfiguration study, and I enjoyed it, so I started working on it," Harry said with a shrug.

"Harry loves to fly," Remus told the interviewers, "as you might imagine, since you know about his Quidditch skills. He seems to enjoy being a flying animal as well. All that flight as an Animagus is why his upper body is so well-developed," he said, looking at his godson fondly. Harry blushed.

The interviewers were still trying to get their minds around the fact that this young man before them could turn into any of the animals he'd named, much less all of them.

"Oh, and a frog," Harry added suddenly. "I think that's all."

"That's ten," O'Connell said in a stunned voice. "Ten forms?"

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"Could you show us?" McTavish said eagerly.

"Sure," Harry said, and swiftly became a black cat, a raven, a Labrador, a black wolf. . .and froze, his hackles on edge, a growl in his throat as he bounded toward the door and swiftly changed back into himself. Harry stood there, wand out, ready to do battle. "Is this part of the test?" he whispered, "because someone's out there who shouldn't be."

Remus had followed him to the door, arriving just after Harry changed back into himself. "No, it isn't," he said, pulling his own wand, and then throwing open the door. "Mr. Zabini," he said in a harsh voice. "Exactly what do you think you're doing?"

"Uh. . .nothing, Professor," the Slytherin said lamely, casting furtive glances around the room, noticing the three strangers, all of whom stood with wands at the ready. "I, uh, just needed to, uh, tie my shoe."

Remus looked down at the boy's shoes, both of which were well-tied. "I don't think so," he said.

"He's been there a while," Harry said. "I thought I sensed something, but then —" he stopped himself before he said "when I was a wolf" — "I was sure someone was out there listening."

Remus still held his wand on the boy. "Turn out your pockets, Mr. Zabini," he demanded.

The Time of Destiny

Zabini looked at Remus defiantly. "No."

"Turn out your pockets."

"I haven't done anything wrong!"

"So far, you've earned a week's detention for defying a teacher, and you're losing more points for your house the longer you delay," Remus said sternly.

Harry pointed his wand at the other boy's pockets. "*Accio*," he said, and caught an Extendable Ear as it flew toward him along with the boy's wand and some sweets.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Remus said, smiling at Harry.

"I learned that from Mrs. Weasley," Harry said with a shrug as he handed Zabini's wand, the Extendable Ear and the sweets to Remus.

"Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I need to deal with Mr. Zabini, here," Remus said to the Aurors.

"Remus?" Harry said quietly. "Check his arm."

"I will," Remus said, knowing Harry was asking him to look for a Dark Mark on Zabini's arm, to see if he was already a Death Eater. He pushed the reluctant Zabini out of the door and closed it quietly behind him.

"Well, that was impressive," Kelly said approvingly.

"Sorry?" Harry said, confused.

"How did you know someone was there?" Kelly asked.

Harry hesitated. His "sixth sense" for danger might sound odd to these men. But then again, Remus had said to be completely honest with them. "Erm. . .the hair on the back of my head stands up a bit when there's danger nearby," he said uneasily. "As soon as that happened – well, as a wolf, my hackles raised – the wolf scented him, so I knew where he was."

"And who is that young man?" O'Connell said.

"Blaise Zabini. He's a Slytherin."

"I meant, who is he to you. You seemed to know he wasn't to be trusted."

"He's always trying to get me in trouble. I think he may already be a Death Eater. That's why I asked Remus to check his arm, to look for the Dark Mark," Harry explained.

"You have excellent instincts, Mr. Potter," McTavish said with a smile. "Well done. Now, if we could get back to your Animagus transformations?"

The Time of Destiny

Harry performed all of his transformations for them, earning impressed sounds from them when they saw the phoenix and thestral, and laughter when the flying squirrel zoomed around the room.

"Sorry about that," Harry said with a sheepish grin when he changed back into himself after being the squirrel. "Sometimes I just can't help myself. The squirrel is a lot of fun to do."

"It certainly looked it," McTavish said, still laughing.

"Tonks Lupin – oh, is she your godmother now?" O'Connell said.

"She married my godfather. I don't know if that makes her my godmother or not, but I'm glad she's in the family," Harry said with a warm smile.

"Ah, I see. She seems to be quite happy being married to Remus. He's a good man," O'Connell said.

"Yes, he is," Harry agreed.

"As I started to say, Tonks told us you have some Metamorphmagus tendencies."

"I don't know that I'm a Metamorphmagus, but I can control the length of my hair," Harry said off-handedly.

"What do you mean?"

"I can grow it out or make it shorter at will. I can do the same thing with my beard."

"Show us."

Harry stood there and grew his hair out until it hung down to the middle of his back, then made it shorter than he'd worn it in several years, then back to his current length. Then he grew a full beard that hung nearly to his waist, then shortened it to his pirate's beard that Ginny so enjoyed, then became clean-shaven again.

"That's a wonderful skill, Mr. Potter!" McTavish cried in delight. "However did you learn it?"

Harry shrugged. "The first time I remember doing it was when I was little and my aunt cut all my hair off but my fringe. I didn't want to go to school looking like that. By the next morning, my hair had all grown back. I didn't learn to control it consciously until a few years ago, and I never did anything with my beard until last year."

"Is that how you were disguised at the concert where that man who looked like you was murdered?" Kelly asked.

"Yes, I had my hair longer and used a Glamour Charm to turn my hair, beard and eyebrows blue. And I wore a cap that covered my scar," Harry explained.

The Time of Destiny

"Can you show us?" Kelly continued. Harry changed the length of his hair, added the beard and then made his hair, beard and eyebrows blue. The Aurors laughed and nodded, and Kelly told him to change back to normal.

"Excellent, Mr. Potter, really," O'Connell said approvingly. "All right, we'd like to test your spell-work now." He stood up and waved his wand, clearing a large section of the room of furniture. "I'd like us to duel – do try not to hurt me too badly, all right?" he said with a smile. "And I'll do the same." He held his wand up in salute as he stood facing Harry, then turned his back and walked to a proper fighting distance, as Harry did the same. When they faced each other again, Harry watched the other man warily, wondering what he was going to do. O'Connell cast a Stunning Spell, which Harry blocked easily. Harry sent a Stinging Hex at O'Connell, and O'Connell threw up a shield just in time to avoid being stung. Soon each man had the measure of the other and they were duelling full-out, casting spells as quickly as they could, dodging, ducking and rolling, moving quickly around the area, the air filled with the colours of the rapidly flying spells. The other two men had all they could do to stay out of the way of the spells. Harry and O'Connell seemed to be fairly evenly matched, but then Harry became more aggressive and started getting spells past O'Connell's shields. Finally, the older man put his wand up and said, "You win!"

"I do?" Harry said with surprise.

"Absolutely! I'm worn out, and you're still going strong," O'Connell said. "Very well done, young man!"

"Thanks! That was fun!" Harry said, grinning.

"For me, too," O'Connell said with a smile as he sat down and tried to catch his breath.

"While Albert recovers," McTavish said, "Why don't we go over the list of spells Professor Dumbledore gave us. He says you know every spell on this list. I'd like you to read the name of the spell and tell us how its cast."

After Harry had gone through the list as directed, the Aurors all smiled approvingly at him.

"Well done, Mr. Potter," O'Connell said. "Would you please send Mr. Weasley in? And we'd like to talk to you again in an hour."

"OK," Harry said, heading for the door. Ron was waiting outside.

"How was it?" Ron asked nervously.

"It was fun!" Harry replied with a grin. "Have you seen Remus?"

"No, why?"

"I wondered what happened to Zabini," Harry replied, looking a bit grim.

"Zabini? What are you on about?" Ron said, looking quite puzzled.

The Time of Destiny

"He was listening at the door when I was telling them about my Animagus transformations," Harry said quietly, glancing around to be certain they weren't being overheard. "Remus took him away. Where were you, anyway?"

"Library. Thought I'd brush up on my spells a bit before the interview," Ron said, blushing.

"You don't need to worry – you'll be fine," Harry assured him. "They're ready for you now. Good luck, mate!"

"Thanks!" Ron entered the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Harry decided it would be wise to guard the door, so he did a Cushioning Charm on the wall and floor and sat down, digging some homework out of his bag to keep him occupied.

"Harry! There you are!" Hermione called as she and Ginny came down the corridor. "Ron said you should be finished soon. How was it?"

"It was actually quite fun," Harry said, grinning. "I was surprised at that."

"Why are you sitting here, if you're finished?" Ginny asked him.

"Blaise Zabini spied on my interview – Remus and I caught him. I decided it would be a good idea to guard the door while Ron's being interviewed. They want to see me again in an hour anyway," he said with a shrug.

"So what did they have you do?" Hermione said as she and Ginny sat down beside him.

Harry told the girls all about the interview and the duel he'd participated in.

"And they'll do the same with Ron?" Hermione asked.

"I suppose so," he replied.

They settled down to doing homework together as they waited for Ron's interview to end. When nearly an hour had gone by, the door opened.

"They want a few minutes to confer, then they want to talk to us together," Ron said, smiling at the girls when he saw them.

"OK," Harry replied, starting to pack up his books.

"How was it?" Hermione asked Ron.

"It was brilliant! Harry told me it was fun, and I just didn't believe him, but it was! I duelled with Mr. O'Conner, showed them the collie, demonstrated spells to them, answered a bunch of questions, but it was easy! It was fun! I would never have believed it," he said, a huge grin on his face. "I was expecting something really hard."

"Yeah, me too," Harry agreed.

The Time of Destiny

Just then, O'Connell opened the door. "We're ready for you lads now," he said with a smile. "Oh, I'll bet these young ladies are your girlfriends, right?"

"This is Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley," Harry said, indicating each girl in turn.

"It's very nice to meet you, ladies," O'Connell said with a courtly inclination of his head. "The lads had quite a few nice things to say about you."

"You talked about us in your interviews?" Hermione said, looking up at Ron in amazement.

"Well. . .uh. . .," Ron said, blushing madly.

"We ask a great many questions as a means of getting to know the people we're interviewing, Miss Granger," O'Connell said reassuringly. "Gentlemen, if you're ready? Ladies, it's a pleasure to meet you. We won't keep them much longer." He escorted the boys back into the room and smiled one last time at the blushing girls just before closing the door.

"Sit down, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter," O'Connell said genially. "We only have a few things to go over with you, and then you'll be free to go. First, we're delighted to tell you that both of you have passed all our tests with flying colours. We'll be very happy to have you in the Auror School."

Harry and Ron exchanged excited grins. "Thanks!" Harry said brightly.

"Yeah, thank you," Ron said earnestly.

"We understand both of you want to play Quidditch if you get scouted, and we don't have a problem with your attending night classes as they fit into your schedule," O'Connell continued. "We take the long view in the Auror Division of the Ministry of Magic. We want our Aurors to be as well-trained as possible, and to be motivated to do excellent work at all times. We want our Aurors to be happy in their work and to receive proper rewards for work well done. It's a dangerous job at times, so we do our best to take good care of our people." He turned his eyes to Harry. "Mr. Potter, we do understand that you have a mission to accomplish before you'll feel free to move on with your life, but we'd like to encourage you to go ahead and take the Auror training as soon as possible. The skills you'll learn with us will help you in your mission. It's your decision, of course, but we would like you to consider going straight into Auror training when you leave Hogwarts. You can think it over and let us know what you decide." He turned to look at the other two men and saw nods of agreement from both of them. "We have discussed our findings from the interviews and tests we've done here today, and have come to some interesting conclusions."

The boys waited nervously as O'Connell shuffled through some parchments before him.

"Yes, here we go. Mr. Potter, you have tested out of the first two years of Defensive Spells, the first year of Transfiguration, the first two years of Charms, and you may also skip the Disguises class if you wish, although I think it would be a help to you despite your ability to change your appearance at will. Mr. Weasley, you have tested out of the first year of Defensive Spells, the first semester of Transfiguration, and the first semester of Charms." He looked up at them and smiled. "Your work with the D.A. has trained you well."

The Time of Destiny

"We've. . . 'tested out'?" Harry said cautiously. "Exactly what do you mean?"

"I mean your skill levels are far above N.E.W.T. standard, and in some areas higher than we expect from second year students in Auror School. There are only a very few defensive spells that we teach that you don't know – and you know quite a few that we don't teach," he said with a rueful smile. "You're both Animagi, so you have a tremendous advantage in Disguises and in Transfiguration. So in other words, you don't have to take very many classes the first two years of school. Or, you can take a full load and have a lighter class load later in your training – it's your choice."

"Wicked!" Ron breathed happily.

"Wow!" Harry said, looking a bit dazed.

"We'll be owling you entry information – dates, supplies needed and so on. We have dormitories, but normally those not taking a full class load don't stay there. Do you have someplace to live while you're in school? We have a list of recommended, reasonably-priced lodging if you need it."

"I have a house in London," Harry began.

"Oh, I'm an idiot," O'Conner said with a laugh. "Of course! Order headquarters is your home, isn't it? You've done a wonderful job of refurbishing it."

Harry blushed. "Thanks. Yes, Ron and I can live there while we're at school."

"Excellent! I believe we're finished here then, lads. It has been a tremendous pleasure to meet you. We're looking forward to working with you," O'Connell said with a warm smile.

The boys exchanged pleasantries with the three men, then started for the door.

"Oh, Mr. Potter?" O'Connell said suddenly. "A word, if I might?"

"Yes?"

"I'll wait for you outside," Ron said as he walked out of the door.

"OK," Harry said.

"We won't be long, Mr. Weasley," O'Connell said. Ron nodded and closed the door behind him.

"I've debated whether to say anything," O'Connell continued, "but I think it's the right thing to do."

"Sorry?" Harry was completely confused. He glanced at the other two men, who were talking in the corner as they packed up their parchments.

"I wasn't certain if it was right to tell you before you started at our school or not, but after getting to know you, I believe it is."

The Time of Destiny

"I don't understand."

"I'm sorry, I'm thinking out loud," the man said, shaking his head with a rueful smile. "I wanted to tell you that I knew your parents. James and Lily were in my class in Auror School."

Harry's face lit with happiness. "They were?"

"Oh, yes, lad. I'd started working at Gringotts right after finishing Hogwarts, but then I decided what I really wanted was to be an Auror, so I started Auror School several years late. It happened to be the same year your parents started. We were great friends. I even knew you when you were a baby. One time when I was visiting, your mum gave you to me to hold while she made dinner. You had a bit of an, erm, emergency, and I thought I'd have to change your nappies, but your dear mum saved me the trouble," he chuckled.

Harry blushed but still laughed in delight. "That was good of her, I expect."

"Yes, she was like that. Kind, sensitive, sweet – and stubborn, hot-tempered, absolutely courageous. Much like your young lady from what I could tell meeting her and hearing about her from you and Mr. Weasley."

"Ginny's like my mum?" Harry said, his heart lifting to hear about his parents from a new source.

"Yes, very much so. Your mother was a good bit taller, and her hair was a darker red – and she had your eyes, of course. Or you have hers, rather," O'Connell said with a grin.

"Yeah, I've heard," Harry smiled.

"They would be so proud of you, Harry. May I call you 'Harry'?" Harry nodded. "Your dad – he was brilliant, and funny, charming, quite the rascal at times. You take after him in more than just looks. You do know you look just like him, right?"

"Yeah, I've been told. And friends have given me pictures of them, as well."

"Oh, I might have some pictures I could give you! I'll have to look."

"That would be brilliant! Thank you!" Harry said with delight. "Did you know Remus and Sirius as well?"

"Oh yes, I knew them, not as well as I knew your parents, but one or the other of them was often at your parents' house when I'd stop by," O'Connell said with a smile. "I'm sorry about Sirius. I know he was your godfather." Harry nodded, a sad shadow crossing his eyes. "What happened to him was so unfair. I never thought he was capable of betraying your parents. He doted on you and he really loved both James and Lily. He was a brother to them. So was Remus, although I didn't know him as well as I did Sirius. I understand Remus is your godfather now? How did that happen?"

"I asked him if he'd be my godfather when he offered to be my wizard guardian after Sirius died," Harry explained.

The Time of Destiny

"Oh, that's wonderful. Everyone needs family. Remus is a good man," O'Connell said with a smile. "I'm glad I'm going to get to know you better. I've been following the stories about you. I could tell from things I read and what I heard from those who knew you that you'd make a wonderful Auror. I hoped you'd choose this career path. It will be a real pleasure to teach you!"

"I'm looking forward to it!" Harry said sincerely.

"You know, I've just had a thought. I'd like you to let me know whenever you have contact with Voldemort, or when you wind up facing him again. There are a great many of us at the Auror School and in the Auror Department who want a crack at the old bastard. You seem to have far better luck – oh, wait, maybe 'luck' isn't the proper word?" he teased, making Harry smile, "at finding him than we do. I'd like to set up a communication system between us so you and I can stay in touch. That way, you can let me know where to find him. We'd be able to respond much more quickly than if you let the Ministry know you needed us and then they had to inform us. This kind of direct link between us would be beneficial in many ways. Would that be all right with you?"

"You'll come and fight with us?" Harry said, excited at the thought of having fully-trained Aurors helping in the battles.

"Absolutely! The Ministry is behind you, Harry. We want to help out. I'm sure Dumbledore will agree to this, but feel free to contact him if you're concerned in any way."

"Tell me more about it first. How will we communicate? Adferos?"

"No, those can be seen. I can make something that's specific to the two of us and quite undetectable. Do you have any of your Famous Wizard Cards?"

Harry was startled into a snort of laughter. "Me? No, I don't collect my own card."

"We need two of them. I have one that I've kept in my photo album with the pictures of your parents. I can owl that one to you if I have to, but we really need two."

"My girlfriend usually has some with her," Harry offered. "Let me ask her." He opened the door and looked out at Ron, Hermione and Ginny, who were still waiting patiently for him to finish. "Ginny, do you have any of my Famous Wizard Cards with you?"

"Yes," she said, already opening her bag.

"We need two of them," Harry said.

"Why don't the three of you come inside and then you'll see what we're doing. It's always good to learn a new spell, right?" O'Connell said with a smile.

"What kind of spell?" Hermione said excitedly.

"It's a communications charm. James and Sirius had mirrors with a similar charm on them," O'Connell began.

The Time of Destiny

"Remus and I do, too," Harry said, understanding now what O'Connell had in mind.

"Here are the cards," Ginny said, passing over two of Harry's Famous Wizard Cards.

"All right. I'll give you a short Charms lesson, shall I?" O'Connell said, smiling at the students around him. "Here we have two cards with the same wizard portrait on them. It's important that they have the same portrait on them, because they're going to communicate with each other."

"The way paintings do if there are portraits of the same wizard in two different places?" Hermione said, cottoning on.

"Exactly! So now that we have two wizard portraits of the same wizard – Harry – all we have to do is charm them properly. The incantation is *Defero*. You tap the item you'll be using for communication twice as you say the incantation, thusly." He tapped one card twice while saying, "*Defero*." The card shimmered with light for a moment, then settled back in his hand. "Here, Harry, you do the other one," he said, handing the card to the young man beside him.

"*Defero*," Harry said as he tapped the card twice. It shimmered exactly as the other one had when O'Connell spelled it.

"Good work! Now they will communicate with each other. Go over to the other side of the room and give your image a message."

"Do I need to say it's for you?"

"Not as long as there are only two cards set up as Communicators," O'Connell said, "but since others might use the same idea, it would probably be a good idea to use my name, yes."

Harry nodded and crossed the room, turning his back to the others. He looked at his Famous Wizard Card. It always seemed odd to him to see himself smiling and waving, captured Snitch in hand, from the face of one of these cards. "Hey. Take Mr. O'Connell a message, OK?" Harry said uncertainly. His image nodded. "Tell him I think this Communication Charm is cool."

"Got it!" his image said, then zoomed out of the edge of the card.

Harry's eyes were wide with surprise. His cards had never spoken to him before. His voice from the card sounded funny, but he'd always heard people didn't recognize their own voices when they heard them recorded. He'd have to ask his friends if his card's voice really sounded like him. As he finished this thought, his image came back into the card.

"Mr. O'Connell says yes, it's a cool charm, and he's glad it works!" the little photographic Harry said enthusiastically, apparently waiting for some praise for delivering the message well.

"Erm. . .thanks," Harry said to the card, feeling rather silly.

"No problem! Now go back over there, he has another charm to put on the cards," his photographic image told him impertinently.

The Time of Destiny

"Right," Harry said, thinking it quite funny that even his photograph was cheeky.

"I see it works," O'Connell said with a smile.

"Yeah, it's brilliant," Harry said, grinning, "although this little guy is rather cheeky!"

"He takes after you, Harry," Ron said with a laugh. "He was cheeky on this end, as well."

"All right, let's do the spell that will let you know you're receiving a message," O'Connell said. "Once this is in place, you'll feel the card vibrate in your pocket when I'm sending you a message." With a bit of instruction, the cards were soon set up to let each of them know when they had a new message.

"Can Harry add people to the list this card will talk to?" Hermione asked curiously. "I mean, could he have the same card talk to Ron or me or Ginny, if we had similarly spelled cards in our pockets?"

"Certainly, it can be set up that way," O'Connell replied. "Excellent question, Miss Granger."

"She's the smartest witch in our year," Ron said proudly.

"Top of our class," Harry added with a grin.

"I have more cards," Ginny said. "Can we spell them too?"

"Of course," O'Connell said. "I'll show you how, then you can do the others."

"Wait a minute," Harry said suddenly. "If all of us have these cards, will they know when you're sending a message to me?"

"No, only when the message is for them. And you could send a message to all three of them at the same time if you wanted to, Harry." O'Connell supervised as Ron, Hermione and Ginny each put the spells on their cards. "Now, if any of you feel a need to talk to me, you just have to say my name and the message to Harry's image, and I'll get the message. If you want to send a message to several people, just say all of their names before saying your message. Simple, really, but quite a useful thing. Just be sure nobody else gets these cards. Don't lose them or trade them by mistake. Mark them somehow so you'll know which one to keep." He gave Harry a considering look, then went on, "I think it might be best if Harry autographed the cards. I imagine you lot don't have his cards with autographs on them, do you?" They all laughed and shook their heads.

"That's a horrible idea!" Harry said, blushing madly. "Everyone will think I'm a great prat, signing cards for my friends like that."

"Or that we're prats for having the autographs," Ron said, grinning, "but honestly, why not? It's not as if we'll be showing them to people. They'll be in our pockets, right?"

"Yes, and about that – you want this in my pocket all the time?" Harry said, turning back to O'Connell, who nodded. "So even in the pocket of my pyjamas. . .?"

The Time of Destiny

"Yes, Harry. The only time you won't have the card on you is when you're in the bath," O'Connell replied.

Harry nodded. "OK. So how is my card supposed to be marked?"

"You won't be trading it, so just keep it in your pocket," O'Connell said. "I just don't want any of you to get them mixed up with the un-spelled cards. I doubt Harry will, because he doesn't collect his own cards, but Ginny, at least, seems to collect them, so the autograph is a way to mark the spelled cards."

"OK," Harry said, then sat down and pulled out his quill and ink bottle to sign his friends' cards.

"Make it 'to my best friend Hermione'," Hermione prompted with a giggle.

"Make mine 'to the best mate ever,'" Ron teased.

"Make mine personal," Ginny said, a teasing purr in her voice that made Harry blush.

Harry spent a few minutes thinking, then signed them, "To Hermione, my best friend and the smartest witch I know, Best, Harry Potter"; "To Ron, the best mate a guy could ever have, Harry"; and "To my warrior princess, I love you! Your speed demon".

"Aw, how sweet!" Hermione said with a grin as she saw what he wrote.

"Wicked!" Ron chuckled.

"Thanks, baby," Ginny said, running her hand over his hair as he finished signing hers.

"I've taken up enough of your time, Harry. It's been a real pleasure to meet you. I look forward to us working together," O'Connell said sincerely. "If you get any clues about Voldemort or just want to talk, you know how to get in touch with me. Don't go off and face him alone, Harry. A lot of us want to back you up."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Connell. That's great to know. I'll stay in touch," Harry promised.

"What happened with Zabini?" Harry asked Remus when he saw him in the corridor just before dinner.

"You were right, he was listening. We Memory Charmed him so he's forgotten what he heard," Remus replied, his face sad. "This war is making us do things to children I never thought I'd see."

"It's hurting loads of people. A little Memory Charm isn't going to be too big a burden for Zabini to bear. You didn't throw in an attitude adjustment while you were at it, did you?" Harry teased.

"You wish!" Remus said, grinning. "Oh, and he doesn't have the Dark Mark. We did check."

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"I'm surprised. The way he's been behaving, I was sure he must have already joined them."

"Not yet."

"Then he's just acting like the prat he is," Harry concluded.

"I suppose you're right," Remus agreed.

"Harry," Dumbledore said as he passed Harry in the hall a few days later, "may I have a word?"

"Sure. How are you, Professor?"

"Spiffing!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Lemon drop?"

"Thanks," Harry said, accepting the sweet as the two of them ducked behind a tapestry which was a shortcut to another hallway. Dumbledore led Harry down the shortcut to an unused classroom in the other hallway. "What's up?" Harry said as the headmaster closed the door.

"I wanted to talk with you about your meeting with the Aurors," Dumbledore said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to attend the session, nor to chat with you after. I've heard wonderful things about how well you and Mr. Weasley did."

"Yeah, they said we tested out of some classes!" Harry enthused.

"That's wonderful, and I must say, I'm not at all surprised. Mr. O'Connell told me he set up a communications system with you and Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes," Harry said, pulling out his Famous Wizard Card and showing it to his headmaster.

"Excellent! I'll spell a card like that so it will be easy for you to contact me, as well. Mr. O'Connell is a very valuable resource in many ways, and will be a great help to us in the coming confrontation with Voldemort," Dumbledore said. "He has recruited a large number of Aurors to the Order."

"That's great!" Harry said sincerely. "He told me the Ministry is behind us and wants to help."

"Yes, that's true. They can get there fastest if you notify Mr. O'Connell with this card when you face Voldemort again. Don't forget about it in the heat of battle, Harry. Get someplace quiet for a moment and notify him as well as me where you are, if you should become separated from the rest of us."

"I don't intend to let Voldemort ambush me again," Harry said fiercely. "I want to take the battle to him on my own terms."

"And you very well might," Dumbledore assured him, "but it's best to be prepared for all contingencies." Harry nodded. "I do have something else to discuss with you."

"Yes?"

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"The All-Stars Quidditch Game isn't going to happen, Harry, at least not this year. It's an excellent concept, and I hope to implement it in the future, but the current members of Slytherin house want nothing to do with it. We could force them, of course, but then the atmosphere of inter-House cooperation you were hoping to create wouldn't be there. I'm sorry."

"That's OK. I didn't really think they'd want to participate, but it was worth a try," Harry replied with a shrug. He was disappointed, but not surprised.

"Yes, it was worth a try, and we will keep working on the concept," Dumbledore assured him. "As for the D.A. Tournament, everything is in place. We have judges and a prize lined up, and we've gone over the skills you and Remus listed and created a number of challenging tasks for the competitors to complete. It should be a great deal of fun. We'll do it in April, shall we? That way, it won't interfere with the Quidditch Cup game."

"Yes, that would be great, sir," Harry said sincerely. "Thanks! So I can tell them about it now?"

"Absolutely. And I'll announce it to the school, as well. I'll send you the details we've worked out in the next day or two so you can share them with the D.A."

"Brilliant!" Harry said with a grin.

When Harry announced the D.A. Tournament in the next D.A. meeting, it created an excited buzz that raced around the room.

Harry looked over the sea of upraised hands, each of which represented a question he'd need to answer, and sighed. This was going to be a long meeting, with not much time for practical work.

"All right, ask your question when I point to you, and the rest of you stay quiet so everyone can hear the answer. It's possible a lot of you are trying to ask the same thing. Pay attention so I don't have to answer anything twice, all right? We do need some time to practice our spell work this evening as well as talking about the Tournament." His eyes roved over the room, finally settling on someone. "Right. What's your question?" he said, pointing at a Fifth Year Ravenclaw boy.

"Can anyone enter, or just the D.A. members?"

"The Tournament is limited to D.A. members. It's a test of your skills." He looked around and chose another student. "Yes?"

"What's the prize?"

"They haven't told me yet, sorry. I'll let you know when I find out." He picked another person. "Yes?"

"What sort of things will we be doing in the Tournament?" Alex McCullough asked. He was the Ravenclaw who'd asked Harry near the end of the previous term if Harry had killed Alex's

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dad in battle. Harry had invited him to join D.A. and Alex had become an enthusiastic member, working so hard that he'd moved up the ranks quite rapidly.

"Tasks that test the skills you've been learning," Harry answered with a patient smile. He didn't want to dim anyone's enthusiasm, but he thought they should have had a clue about that question, at least.

"Can we invite our parents?" a young girl asked.

"I believe that will be allowed, but I'm not certain. I'll ask Professor Dumbledore about it." Harry turned to Hermione and said, "Would you make a list of questions I don't know the answers to, so I ask Dumbledore about them?" She nodded and got out parchment, a quill and an ink bottle, then began making notes.

"Yes?"

"Who are the judges?"

"Professor Dumbledore, Professor Lupin, Auror Tonks Lupin, retired Auror Alastor Moody, and me."

"Why you?" someone called out.

"I didn't want to," he said with a shrug. "I was planning to help run it and keep things going smoothly, but Dumbledore insisted I be a judge."

"He's a Tri-Wizard Champion, you git!" Colin Creevey added. "Of course he'd be a judge!" Everyone laughed.

"Will there be levels of competition? I mean, some of us are First Year D.A., some Second, some Third," a Hufflepuff girl asked. "It wouldn't be fair for everyone to compete together."

"Harry was a Fourth Year when he had to compete with three Seventh Years in the Tri-Wizard Tournament!" Dennis Creevey said stoutly. "It should be a level playing field like that, with everyone trying the same challenges!"

There were groans as well as calls of "hear, hear!" in response to Dennis's comment.

"All right, you lot, settle down!" Harry said, grinning at them. "I know exactly how you feel! But Dennis is right. It will be a level playing field. You just have to do your best. There will be reasonable solutions to every problem." He was thoughtful for a moment, then said, "I suppose I could run the course myself before the Tournament to make sure everything's set up as fairly as possible. How's that?"

"If you can do it, that doesn't mean we can!" someone from the back called with a laugh.

Harry chuckled. "Right, then, I don't need to run the course! Works for me!" he said amiably.

"It wouldn't be fair for them to see you run it anyway, mate," Ron said quietly as the group laughed. "Then they'd have clues on how to do the tasks."

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"Yes, you're right," Harry said, glad Ron had thought of that aspect of the situation.

Numerous questions later, the group was finally satisfied and they were able to begin practicing their spell work. Harry and Ron conferred as the practice began.

"That went well," Ron said with satisfaction. "I think the Tournament will be brilliant!"

"I hope so," Harry said. "It should be fun, not life-threatening," he added, thinking of the many times during the Tri-Wizard Tournament he had been certain he was going to die, long before he wound up face-to-face with Voldemort.

Double Potions was its usual stressful time. Harry was working hard on a poison antidote, one of several Snape had been teaching them lately. Snape had told Harry privately that he'd used these potions on Harry at various times the previous year, and it was time Harry learned to make them himself. With only a few minutes left in the class period, Harry was quite pleased to see his potion was the clear amber it was supposed to be, and it wasn't smoking or sending off sparks as some other people's potions were. His looked just like Hermione's. He looked up at her and smiled as he caught her eye.

"Good work, Harry!" Hermione said with delight. "Perfect on the first try!"

"Yeah," Harry said happily. "Wish I could do this all the time!"

"Mr. Potter," Snape sneered as he passed their table. "Exactly what is that supposed to be?"

"Poison Antidote Number Three," Harry replied promptly, wondering why Snape was behaving this way. His eyes widened in disbelief as his professor leaned over the potion to inspect it more closely and dropped a few particles of something in it, which instantly turned it sky blue.

Hermione gasped at the colour change. She knew something had happened, but she wasn't certain what. Ron stared at Harry's cauldron in shock, then glared at their professor furiously.

"Poison Antidote Number Three? I think not," Snape snarled. "*Evanesco!*" he said, making Harry's potion disappear.

"But, Professor," Harry protested in frustration, his face white with shock.

"Not one word, Potter," Snape interrupted, "or I'll take points from Gryffindor. You know I expect the highest standard from my N.E.W. T. students. How you even qualified for this class is beyond my comprehension."

Harry mouthed wordlessly, then blurted, "It was fine!"

"Apparently not," Snape said silkily. "And now for your cheek, you have a detention. See me after class." The Slytherins in the class had gone from sniggering to laughing out loud as the scene progressed.

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"What the bloody hell was that all about?" Ron said in an urgent whisper, scowling at Snape's back as the man glided away.

"I don't know," Hermione murmured uneasily. "That was totally unfair. Harry, your potion was fine!"

"I know," Harry growled in disgust as he began packing his things away. "He hasn't been as much of a prat as usual lately. Maybe he noticed."

"Something must be up," Hermione said worriedly. "He wouldn't deliberately ruin your potion."

Harry turned on her, doing his best to control his fury. "He *did* deliberately ruin my potion! And don't you remember all the times I've turned in a perfectly acceptable potion, sometimes even a completely accurate one, and he's dropped the flagon and said 'oops' or done something else to ruin it?" he hissed as the worktable started vibrating in response to his temper. He caught his cauldron, which was beginning to dance across the table, and stifled his rage as well as he could. "Fairness isn't something he's acquainted with."

After class, Harry stormed up to Snape's desk while Ron and Hermione waited at the back of the room. "What's going on?" he snarled. He and Snape had actually been getting along fairly well so far this term.

"You and I are arranging a detention," Snape said smoothly. He glanced around the room and raised his eyebrows at some lingering Slytherins who were watching the scene avidly.

"Why?" Harry hissed furiously. "My potion was fine!"

"Potter, any more cheek and you'll have two nights' detention," Snape said, still glancing around his room. His gaze settled on the lingering Slytherins. "Why are you still here?"

"Just leaving now, Professor," they said reluctantly, and finally left the room.

Snape bent his head as he wrote something on a piece of parchment, his greasy hair falling forward and concealing his expression. Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot, doing his best to control his temper, but incensed at being treated so badly. He heard a tinkle of glass and knew his anger was making the jars on the shelves behind him vibrate against each other. He took a deep breath and blew it out hard, doing his best to keep his temper under control and not break any of the containers filled with disgusting things.

Snape lifted his head at the sound and gave Harry a reproachful glance. "Your work is shoddy, Potter," he said, turning the parchment toward Harry and tapping it lightly with his finger. "You leave out ingredients, you neglect the proper preparation time, you don't follow instructions. And your cheek is beyond belief." The lecture went on in this vein as he continued to tap his finger on the parchment, finally flicking his eyes down when Harry didn't seem to understand.

When Harry finally looked down, he saw Snape had written, "I need you to do the detention. I have information for you. I can't tell you about it now. Trust me." He looked up at his professor, startled. He had information for him? He wanted Harry to *trust* him? Harry

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swallowed, forcing down his rage and thinking hard as the continuing reprimand washed over him. Snape had saved his life several times with potions like the one they'd been working on today. Trust him? He supposed he must. He gave Snape the briefest possible nod and the professor brought his tirade to an end.

"Right. You will come to my office for detention this evening at five o'clock," Snape said, carefully pulling the parchment back toward himself and surreptitiously waving his wand over it, making the message disappear.

"Yes, Professor," Harry said quietly, wondering who was watching them right now, since Snape was so obviously worried about being overheard or his note being seen.

"And you will work hard to improve your potion-making skills, won't you?" Snape said snidely, but as he spoke, he pulled out his grade book and showed Harry that he'd given him full marks for the day's work. "You can see you need to improve your marks."

"Yes, Professor," Harry answered dutifully when Snape finished speaking. He looked at the professor curiously. What was going on? He couldn't make sense of it.

"You're dismissed," Snape said curtly, then turned deliberately away from Harry and busied himself with examining the potion samples the class had just turned in.

Harry picked up his bag and headed for the door, shaking his head at Ron and Hermione when they opened their mouths to ask questions. "Later," he whispered as he passed them. He didn't speak to them until they were in Gryffindor Tower, where he told them everything that had happened.

"What do you make of that?" he said when he'd finished his story.

"It sounds as if Snape thinks he's being spied on," Hermione said immediately.

"Yeah, and something about it involves you," Ron added, scratching his head as he tried to consider every angle.

"What should I do?" Harry said, still baffled by what had happened.

"Go serve your detention and see what happens, I guess," Hermione said with a shrug.

"You still have that mirror Remus gave you, don't you?" Ron said suddenly.

"Yeah," Harry replied.

"It's a fairly safe way to communicate, right? People can't see it like they can Adferos, and they can't capture the message some way, right?" Ron went on.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry said.

"So contact Remus with the mirror and ask him what he thinks. That way, nobody will see you going to see him, and whatever you two say will be private," Ron said with a smile, pleased at his deductive abilities.

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"That's really good, Ron," Hermione commended him. "Have you used the mirrors much, Harry?"

"Only a few times. It vibrates in my pocket when he sends a message," Harry replied, pulling out the mirror. "Ron, can I use your suite? I don't want to do this down here," he said, nodding at the crowded Common Room.

"Yeah, sure," Ron agreed.

Soon Harry was in the Head Boy Suite, mirror in hand. "Remus Lupin," he said, staring at the mirror. Moments later, Remus's face appeared.

"Hello, Harry! How are you?" he said cheerfully.

"I'm fine. I have a question for you," Harry said. He went on to tell his godfather what had happened in class.

"I have no idea what's going on," Remus said, his face furrowed in concern. "Severus must have got wind of something to feel a need to warn you like this. I'm sorry he created a scene in class."

"It was the same as every other time he's yelled at me in class," Harry said with a sigh, "but it hasn't been happening that much this year. And my potion was fine! He added something to it to mess it up. I couldn't believe he did that!"

"Whatever he has to tell you must be very important," Remus said. "I'll talk to Albus as soon as I can and see if he knows what's going on. Let me know what you find out tonight, all right? And I'll tell you whatever I learn, as well. Stay in touch."

At five o'clock, Harry knocked on the door of the Potions classroom and entered when he heard Snape say, "Come in."

"Good evening, Professor," Harry said, setting his bag down by his work table. "What would you like me to do?"

"I want you to grade these First Year papers for me," Snape said, handing Harry a stack of parchments. "The answer key is on top."

Harry sighed and sat down, pulling out his quill and ink bottle, then setting to work. The first two parchments were simple enough to grade, but the third one was a message from Snape.

"We're being watched and listened to. Don't look round. The Dark Lord suspects me now, so he's had some items set in place to keep track of what I do. Therefore, I must crack down on you more often in order to maintain appearances. Some of the students in my house have become Death Eaters. Make two marks here, as if you've found wrong answers." Harry complied, writing a large "X" on one line, and then the next, flicking his eyes back and forth to the answer key to add authenticity. He continued to read. "They have been given some instructions by Voldemort, to which I'm not privy. If I learn what the plans are, I will let you

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and the headmaster know. Meanwhile, watch your back, and respond 'normally' when I berate you in class.

"I must say, I've been pleasantly surprised at your progress this year. I didn't know you had N.E.W. T. standard work in you. Your father was a git, but he was very good at potions, and apparently you are taking after him that way. Please don't let down the quality of your work. As I did today, I will give you the proper marks in my book, but I will have to damage your potions sometimes when they're correct in order to maintain appearances. Please accept my apologies for what I am being forced to do. Mark something wrong here." Harry made another large "X" on the parchment. "Once you've read this message, make what's written here vanish. Keep this parchment in the stack, finish grading them and hand them to me when you're done. Mark another wrong answer here." Harry marked the parchment with a final large "X" and then murmured the spell that would remove all traces of what both Snape and he had marked on the parchment as he slid the now-blank parchment under the stack and went back to grading the other parchments. When he'd completed the task, which took only about twenty minutes, he carried them up to Snape's desk.

"All done. What else?" Harry said, doing his best to act angry yet respectful.

Snape turned another note on his desk toward Harry. "Act as if you have no spare parchment," it read.

"I want you to re-do your essay on galangal. It was pathetic. Clearly you have no understanding of the many uses of this ingredient. I expect twelve inches on it. Here's the waste of parchment you turned in. Try to do better this time!" Snape snarled, handing Harry a rolled up parchment.

"I don't have any spare parchment with me, sir," Harry said.

Snape sighed dramatically and reached behind him, pulling out a roll of blank parchment. "Use this, then," he sneered.

"I'll bring you some tomorrow to replace this," Harry said. "Thank you."

"Yes, do that," Snape said, giving Harry a filthy look and going back to work grading essays.

Harry sighed and went back to his seat, unrolling the parchment as he went. He saw the essay was marked with a spiky black "E" – *E*? he thought. *Exceeds Expectations, yet he expects me to re-do it? What the bloody hell is going on here?* He looked at the essay again, and stifled his look of surprise when he found a small parchment rolled up with it. "Potter," it said, "when you've finished reading this parchment, erase it as before and keep it in your essay. You don't have to re-do your essay, as you can see. But I need to keep you here long enough for it to appear that you've been thoroughly punished. Open the blank parchment and write whatever you want on it. Just stay busy for another thirty minutes or so. I've charmed the blank parchment so that once you roll it up again, whatever you've written will disappear and a copy of your galangal essay will appear."

Harry stopped reading and scratched his head, making a show of studying his first essay, then pulled his book out of his bag and opened it to the appropriate page. He sighed heavily again, then rose from his seat and went to the book case, pulling down two heavy volumes and

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carrying them back to his desk. He started rewriting his homework in earnest, trying for an "O." Writing as quickly as he could, he had the revised essay completed and handed it in forty minutes later.

"I think this is better now, sir. Thank you for giving me a chance to revise it," Harry said, making sure the parchment didn't roll up so it would erase itself. He hoped Snape would understand that he really wanted his professor to not erase it without reading it.

Snape scanned down the parchment, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. "I see improvement here, Potter," he said seriously. "Try to do this well on the first try in the future."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "What else?"

"That's enough. You're dismissed."

"Thank you, sir. Good night," Harry said, putting away the books, grabbing his bag and leaving. He glanced at the shelf beside the door as he reached for the door handle. At the bottom of a jar of newt eyes, one pair of eyes was aware, and following his movements avidly. He suppressed a shudder, glanced quickly away and pulled the door open, then hurried out, grateful he didn't have such things watching him all the time. *Wait until Ron and Hermione hear this*, he thought as the door swung shut behind him.

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Chapter 20 – Changes in the Wind

The Ravenclaw/Slytherin game, normally held in January, had been swapped with the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff game which was normally played after Valentine's Day, because too many Ravenclaw players were down with the flu in January. So, on a crisp January day, the Gryffindor team was getting ready for their game with Hufflepuff when Professor McGonagall knocked on the boys' locker room door. "Mr. Potter? A word, if I might?" she said when Harry answered the door.

"What's up, Professor?" he asked.

"I need to tell you something. You must use your best judgement when deciding if you tell your team mates, or at least Mr. Weasley, or not," she said hurriedly, knowing the team was due out on the pitch in a few minutes.

"OK," he said with a puzzled frown.

"There are scouts for professional Quidditch teams in the stands today," she said, watching his reaction carefully.

Harry's face lit up with joy. "Really? Brilliant! What teams are they from?"

"I don't know. Professor Dumbledore told me they are here to watch you and Mr. Weasley play. That's all he said. I thought you should know."

"Cool!" Harry said, a happy grin on his face. "Wait 'til I tell Ron! He'll have kittens!"

"About that, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said uneasily. "Do consider carefully before you tell him. If he knows, will it affect his performance in the game today?"

Harry looked at her seriously. She had a point. He thought for a long moment and then said, "Honestly? He's got it nailed now. He's really good at it. And if such news threw him, then he wouldn't do well on a professional team anyway. I think he has a right to know." She nodded, just as the door behind them opened.

"Who has a right to know what, mate?" Ron said, looking from one of them to the other with concern, having heard the tail end of the conversation. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Harry said. "Professor McGonagall was just. . .erm. . .wishing us luck."

"Thanks, Professor," Ron said easily, "but we've got this one in the bag. Our Chasers are working together quite well now."

"Good!" she said with a small smile. "I enjoy having the Quidditch Cup on my desk. See that it stays there!"

"We will," both boys said with a laugh.

"Mr. Potter? I think it's all right," she said, studying Ron's carefree face.

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"Me too," Harry agreed.

"What are you two talking about?" Ron said, knowing he was being left out of something.

"When I tell you, you have to stay calm, OK? We need to concentrate on winning this game today," Harry said carefully.

"Yeah, sure, of course! What?"

"There are scouts in the stands today," Harry said, trying not to grin too broadly.

"Scouts?" Ron gasped, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open. He couldn't believe his ears.

"Professional Quidditch scouts," Harry assured him.

"*Whoa!* Really?" Ron controlled himself with a great effort. "That's great, Harry," he said loyally. "What teams?"

"Dunno. Doesn't matter right now, does it? At least we're being looked at!" Harry said, letting a bit of his excitement show.

"W-w-we're being looked at? *Both* of us?" Ron said, stunned. "I mean, I expected you to be scouted, but they're here to look at *me*, *TOO*?" Harry nodded, laughing at the rapidly changing expressions crossing Ron's mobile face. "*WICKED!*" He gave Harry a high five, and offered one to McGonagall, who raised her hands and smacked both boys' upraised palms with glee.

"Good luck, boys!" she said, turning to go. "Win this game for all of us!"

"We will!" the young men chorused.

"What d'you reckon?" Ron said in an excited whisper as he turned to face Harry. "Real scouts?"

"Yeah!" Harry replied, equally excited.

"Wouldn't it be cool for us to be on the same *professional* team?" Ron sighed blissfully.

"Absolutely the best!" Harry agreed. "Let's go kick some Hufflepuff arse!"

"Yeah!"

The team flew out onto the pitch, unaware of why Harry and Ron were in such good spirits. Ginny cottoned on quickly when she saw several strange men sitting near Dumbledore who were watching both Harry and Ron closely and making notes as the play progressed.

"Scouts!" she told Colin as she passed him. "There are scouts in the stands watching Harry and Ron! We have to play our very best and *win this game!*"

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"Scouts? Cool!" Colin said, then zoomed over to his brother to share the news. Ginny told the other Chasers as they passed the Quaffle on their way to their first goal against Hufflepuff. Euan and Fiona were as excited as the others. Harry and Ron had been so good to them, spending a great deal of time helping them with their flying and their Quidditch skills, and even helping with homework on occasion. They'd do anything they could to help their captain and Keeper get on a professional Quidditch team!

Gryffindor played with absolute brilliance that day. The passing was crisp and accurate, the Bludger work was done with style and good humour, and Ron was having one of his best games ever as Keeper. Harry soared above the fray on the opposite side of the pitch from the other Seeker, both of them looking for a glint of gold. The Hufflepuffs fought hard, doing their very best to get goals past Ron, their Beaters making every attempt to keep the Gryffindor Chasers from scoring, but with little success.

"The Hufflepuff Chasers are passing well on their way to the goal. Watch out, Ron! *Whoa!* Ron Weasley makes an absolutely amazing save there, hanging off of his broom by one leg and hand and snagging the Quaffle with the tips of his fingers! And there's a chorus of 'Weasley is our King' as Weasley sends the Quaffle blazing back toward Euan Abercrombie." Ron sat on his broom, a huge grin on his face as he pretended to be conducting the Gryffindors' singing.

"And it's Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle," Dean Thomas announced excitedly. "Look at that girl fly! Watch it, there's a Bludger coming your way! Nice Bludger work by the Hufflepuff Beaters, and *very* nicely blocked by Colin Creevey of Gryffindor! And Weasley passes to Abercrombie, who SCORES! And it's Gryffindor 80, Hufflepuff nothing! Hufflepuff in possession. *Whoa*, nice interception by the Gryffindor Chasers! What teamwork! Fiona, well done! I keep asking her out, but she keeps ignoring me!"

"Mr. Thomas," McGonagall warned.

"Sorry, Professor, it's just the simple truth!" Dean said cheekily. "And it's Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle, racing toward the Hufflepuff goal – look out for that Bludger, Ginny! Well done, Dennis! An excellent block by Dennis Creevey – and she SCORES!"

Cheers erupted from the Gryffindor stands again. People were standing and waving their scarves and Gryffindor pennants. Luna Lovegood's lion hat let out a roar as a chorus of "Weasley is our Queen" rang through the stands.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession again. Euan Abercrombie is racing down the pitch! And look! Potter must have seen the Snitch! There he goes in one of his trademark dives! He's flying straight down! I've never seen such a dive! Can he pull out of it in time? *Careful, Harry!* Whew, Potter's pulled out of the dive now. . . oh, Abercrombie scores again! Look at Harry go! He's weaving between Chasers from both teams. That Snitch is an elusive one today! Hufflepuff Seeker Kevin Whitby is hot on his tail, but he's just not as sharp on the turns as Potter, nor is his Comet as fast as that Firebolt! Potter's going into another dive, back through the Chasers – watch out for that Bludger, Harry! OH! He dodges it neatly and it's batted back toward the Hufflepuff Seeker by Dennis Creevey. Way to go, Dennis! Ouch, that had to hurt. Whitby caught the Bludger right in the stomach. And Potter not only pulls out of that dive handily, but he also has the Snitch! Gryffindor wins, 250 to twenty!"

The Time of Destiny

When he first saw the Snitch, Harry did a spectacular dive, aiming his Firebolt straight toward the ground, following the tiny golden ball as it plummeted to earth. Just a few feet from the ground, he whipped his broom up to fly parallel to the ground, his toes skimming the surface of the grass, then raced off at a sharp angle, still following the elusive Snitch. He lay flat along his broom, urging it to greater speed as he dodged between players in pursuit of the small golden ball. The Snitch headed for the ground again, and once more, he had to fly between players. He ducked and felt a whoosh ruffling his hair as Dennis Creevey's bat swung much too close to him, protecting him from a Bludger. "Thanks, Dennis!" he called as he reached as far as he could, then caught the Snitch neatly. Harry sat up on his broom, looking at the struggling ball held tightly in his fingers, and laughed out loud. *Now, THAT was a game!* he thought as he rose slowly in the air, his Snitch-filled fist pumping triumphantly, a delighted grin on his face.

One by one, his team-mates thumped into him until they were a massive, swirling, red-and-gold hug. They spiralled slowly to the ground and dismounted from their brooms while being greeted by their wildly celebrating House mates. Soon the entire team was lifted on Gryffindor shoulders and carried off the field in triumph, as many voices sang "Weasley is our King" in praise of Ron, who had played brilliantly and knew it. His face glowed with joy.

Harry punched Ron playfully in the shoulder. "Well done, mate!"

"And you as well!" Ron said with a happy grin as he cuffed Harry in response.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Weasley!" McGonagall called as the team was being carried away to the party that would soon rock Gryffindor Tower.

"Hey, let us down, guys," Harry said to Neville, Dean and the others who were carrying him and Ron. "McGonagall needs to see us." Soon, he and Ron stood before their Head of House, their faces happy and expectant. "Yes, Professor?" Harry said with a radiant smile.

"Come over here," she said, beaming as she led them to a quiet spot behind the stands. "There are some people who want to meet you."

Three men stood by Professor Dumbledore. They all grinned at the boys.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, I'd like you to meet Mr. Terwilliger, Mr. Thornton, and Mr. Washburn," Dumbledore said. "They are scouts for professional Quidditch teams. They'd like to have a word with you."

A movement caught Harry's eye, and he saw Remus and Tonks standing not far from Dumbledore, both of them smiling proudly. Tonks waved. Her hair was a long red mane like Ginny's today. Remus winked at him. Ginny and Hermione ran up and joined Remus and Tonks, both of them waving and grinning broadly at the boys. Harry smiled back at them, then turned to the men before him.

"Very nice to meet you," Ron was saying politely.

"Yes, nice to meet you," Harry added quickly.

The Time of Destiny

"What a wonderful game!" Terwilliger enthused. "Your team is very well trained. Who's your coach?"

"Harry's captain," Ron said loyally.

"And Ron's the strategist," Harry added. "We work together to train the team."

"Excellent!" Terwilliger replied. "Congratulations on the victory, and on the brilliant job you've done training your team."

"Thank you," both boys said, inordinately pleased.

"Now to business. I know you have a victory party to get to!" The boys nodded, huge grins on their faces. "We represent several teams who may be looking for new players for next season. If they decide to recruit you and you sign a contract with them, you'll start practice in the summer. The game season begins, as you probably know, in the fall. Mr. Thornton, here, represents the Montrose Magpies, Puddlemere United and the Wimborne Wasps. Mr. Washburn represents the Appleby Arrows, the Falmouth Falcons and the Pride of Portree. I represent the Tutshill Tornados, the Chudley Cannons," at this, Ron moaned, "and a relatively new team, the London Lions. Not all of these teams will need new players this season, but players sometimes get traded between teams, so it's good for you to know up front who we represent."

The boys nodded excitedly, giving each other a glance that glittered with joy, then turned back to the men before them.

"We were quite impressed with your skills today, lads," Mr. Thornton said. "We'll explain the scouting process to you, and then we can answer any questions you might have, all right?" Both boys nodded again, too excited to speak. "We will come and watch your next game and give our reports to the teams we represent. After that, whichever teams are interested in you will send you offers to consider. I would suggest that you not sign the first contract presented to you as soon as you receive it. There may be a better offer from another team. If there's more than one offer, they normally arrive within a few days of each other, so you won't have to wait long to see how many offers you get. Each of us will let you know when we've sent you the final offers. You will have a week to make your decision. Once school is out, if you've signed with a team, you will report to their headquarters and get on the practice schedule. You'll need to find somewhere to live on your own. None of the teams provide that except when they're on the road. They practice three to five times a week, depending on the team, with a game usually twice a month, always on the weekends. On your days off, you're on your own. We expect you to be responsible enough to show up to practice on time, well-rested, ready to work and sober, without someone nagging you about any of it. You'll be treated as adults, and will be expected to act like adults. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said seriously, knowing he'd never have a problem with the "sober" bit, since he was never going to touch hard liquor again.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, but a bit uneasily. *If I have to fight Voldemort, I'm going to be late for practice, or hospitalized, or miss games. I can't do this.* This sudden realization made his heart sink down through the bottoms of his shoes.

The Time of Destiny

"What's the matter, Mr. Potter?" Mr. Terwilliger said, noticing the change in the young man's expression. "Something wrong?"

"Erm. . . I . . . uh. . . I may have a bit of a problem."

"So you're a drunk, eh?" Washburn teased.

Harry blushed. "No, sir, it's not that. It's just that. . . well. . . ." His voice trailed off. Here was his dream come true sitting right in front of his nose, and Voldemort's ugly face was in the way, as usual. "I have to fight Voldemort," he said dully. "I can't promise to meet your schedule. I never know when he'll attack, or"

Terwilliger put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "We know that about you, lad. The teams that are interested in you are fully aware of the burden you bear and will do their best to work around it somehow."

"You're kidding, right?" Harry said, not believing what he'd just heard.

"Harry – may I call you Harry?" Terwilliger said, smiling warmly. Harry nodded. "I, personally, have the greatest admiration for you. The teams I represent feel the same way. I spoke to the management of each of my teams before coming here. We'd heard about your Quidditch skills and wanted to see if you were as good as we've heard – and you are, I might add. Whichever team needs a Seeker and sends you a contract, of the teams I represent, anyway, will have a reserve player who can cover the Seeker position if you're not available. For your first year or two, both of you will probably be reserve players anyway. When you get the contracts, discuss your concerns with the team management at that time. I'm sure they can work something out if they want you badly enough."

"Do you think they'll want me that badly?" Harry said uncertainly.

"After what I saw today, and what I've read about you in the past? Yes," Terwilliger assured him.

"Really?" Harry said in disbelief. Suddenly, his face brightened. "Wow. Thank you!" he replied, his heart suddenly feeling much lighter.

The three men answered the boys' questions and discussed details with them a bit longer, then said their goodbyes. When the men were gone, Ron and Harry turned to each other, their faces shining with delight.

"We're being scouted!" Ron said, pulling Harry into a back-pounding hug.

"I can't believe it!" Harry said, laughing as he and Ron both jumped in the air, punching their fists skyward, whooping with joy.

"Well done, boys!" Remus said, clapping each of them on the back. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks!" Harry said, smiling at his godfather. "I'm glad you were here to see this!"

The Time of Destiny

"Whoa, I can't wait to tell Dad and Charlie and the twins and Bill and. . ." Ron was saying dazedly just before a small, bushy-haired body threw herself on him with a happy squeal. "Oh, and Hermione," he said fondly, swinging her around in his arms.

Ginny had jumped into Harry's arms. "Congratulations, Harry!" she cried, absolutely delighted for him. She peered over his shoulder as he held her and called, "Congratulations, Ron!"

"Thanks," Harry said, kissing her soundly. "I can't believe this. What a great day!"

A few weeks later, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were bundled against the cold as they walked down the main street of Hogsmeade, looking in shop windows and simply enjoying a day of freedom in the village. The boys allowed the girls to drag them into Madam Puddifoot's for some tea, Harry even more reluctantly than Ron, given the bad memories he had of this place. His face was stoic as he walked through the door and gazed at the too-frilly decorations and the cherubs circling over the tables.

"I've never been in here before," Ron said uneasily as he frowned at the cherub throwing heart-shaped confetti at him.

"I came in here once, just to see what it was like," Hermione said, smiling at Ron's discomfort. "The tea is good, it's warm and cosy, and it is sort of cute, isn't it?" she said encouragingly.

"If you say so," he replied, finally dragging his eyes away from the silly pink decorations and gazing into Hermione's smiling eyes. If it made her happy, he'd do his best to act as if he was enjoying himself.

Harry sighed. The one and only time he'd been in here was on his disastrous date with Cho. They'd sat at the next table. He remembered being quite uncomfortable watching the other students snogging sloppily across the tiny tables, while he didn't even have the nerve to hold Cho's hand.

"Knut for your thoughts," Ginny said softly, reaching across the table and taking his hand.

"I was just thinking I wanted to hold your hand," he said, smiling warmly at her and lacing his fingers through hers. What a difference it made, being here with Ginny, knowing how to talk to his girlfriend, being comfortable with her. He found the place a bit amusing now, rather than terrifyingly feminine.

He glanced up at the cherubs flitting above them. "Not in the tea!" he snapped, covering his and Ginny's cups with his hands as one of the cherubs prepared to toss a handful of confetti his way. The cherub shrugged and dumped his entire load in Harry's hair, making everyone laugh, even Harry.

"You're cute with pink confetti in your hair," Ginny giggled. "I'll have to remember what a good look that is for you."

"Oh, really?" he said, grabbing a handful of confetti out of his hair and sprinkling it on top of her head. "There! Now we match!" He and Ginny ended up in a laughing confetti war, finally tossing so much confetti at each other that their tea cups were soon filled with it.

The Time of Destiny

"Now we need more drinks!" Ginny teased.

"Let's get them in the Three Broomsticks, OK? Then we won't have to dodge these silly cherubs!" Harry said, laughing again as she sprinkled confetti up and down his arms. "Having fun?"

"Oh yes! I just love decorating, you know that," she said with a laugh.

"Are you two finished playing over there?" Hermione said, giggling at how silly Harry and Ginny were being. "I have some shopping to do – Ginny, do you want to come? I need to leave Ron behind for a bit."

"Yeah, I'll come," Ginny said as she pushed back her chair and stood up.

"When I wanted to leave, you wanted to stay. Hermione says, 'let's go shopping' and you're ready to go? I suppose that shows exactly where I stand in your list of priorities!" Harry pouted, giving Ginny a pained look.

"Silly, I need to get your Valentine's present! You boys behave yourselves, now!" Ginny said, pulling her cloak around her.

"We'll behave ourselves elsewhere, how's that?" Ron said, getting to his feet. "We'll meet you in the Three Broomsticks in, say, an hour?" he said, glancing at Harry, who nodded.

"That's fine! See you then," Hermione said as she and Ginny waved and went out of the door.

"What are you getting Ginny for Valentine's Day?" Ron asked as the boys went out into the cold.

"Already got it," Harry said with a smile, patting his pocket. "Bought it over Christmas break."

"Wow, you are organized!" Ron said, grinning. "What did you get her?"

"A pendant," Harry said, smiling in anticipation of Ginny's reaction to it.

"I don't know what to get Hermione," Ron said in frustration. "She's a bit hard to shop for. I can't think of anything she'd like but books."

"Why don't you buy her a sweater or scarf or something like that?" Harry suggested.

"You think? I hadn't thought of clothes," Ron said, mulling over Harry's idea.

"Something different to everyday stuff," Harry said. "I should have thought of that myself, actually."

"So get Ginny two presents," said Ron as he stopped in front of a shop that sold women's clothing. "She won't mind."

"That's a thought," Harry mused, "but the pendant's the right thing for Valentine's Day."

The Time of Destiny

"You're not going to make me go in there alone, are you?" Ron said uneasily, glancing at the store beside them.

Harry laughed. "No, I won't make you go in there alone," he agreed. "I'll even look around myself. Will that make you happy?"

"Yeah!"

The boys browsed through the store, rather appalled at the huge variety of clothing available to women, and wondering how they'd decide on what size to get. Finally, Ron found a pretty pink sweater knitted in a lacy pattern.

"She likes pink," he said doubtfully as he held it up to show Harry. "What d'you reckon? Does it look small enough for her?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I think she'll like it," Harry said approvingly. He held up a gold sweater with a dainty pattern of running horses woven into it in shades of russet and brown. "What do you think of this one for Ginny?"

"She'll love that. You know how she likes horses," Ron said with a smile. "And she likes that colour."

"Yeah," Harry said.

Their shopping completed, the boys went to the Three Broomsticks to wait for the girls. They waved at friends who came in, and chatted to those at nearby tables. Finally, the girls arrived, a gust of air lifting their hair prettily as they came through the door. Their cheeks were pink with cold, and both of them looked quite pleased with themselves.

"Good shopping, ladies?" Harry said as he pulled out Ginny's chair for her.

"Excellent!" Ginny replied, smiling up at him as she settled into her place beside him.

"I'm hungry," Ron said as he pushed Hermione's butterbeer toward her. Harry passed Ginny hers, as well.

"What a surprise!" Harry teased. "I'll get us some crisps, OK? Anything else?"

"Crisps would be great!" Hermione said. "I'm a bit hungry as well."

Their snacks eaten, the two couples parted for a while. Harry and Ginny walked toward the Shrieking Shack, turning off the path to the clearing they'd used as a snogging spot on other Hogsmeade weekends when they didn't have a lot of spare time. They knew if they went to the Shack, they would lose all track of time.

Harry conjured a squashy armchair and sat in it, pulling Ginny into his lap. She did a Warming Charm so they'd be more comfortable.

"This reminds me of last Valentine's Day," Ginny said. "Wasn't that the first time we sat in here? And we were even in a chair like this, weren't we?"

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah, I think that was Valentine's Day," Harry agreed. He nibbled on her ears. She was wearing the heart-shaped ruby earrings he'd given her for Christmas. "You're so pretty. You taste good, too," he chuckled, now moving his nibbles to her neck.

Ginny giggled. "That tickles! Oh! No, wait, don't stop!" she protested as he lifted his lips away from her neck.

"You said it tickled. I'm trying to keep you happy, you know," he grumbled, then nibbled her neck on the other side, "just for balance," he said with a laugh.

"I love you, Harry," Ginny breathed, lacing her fingers in his hair and pulling his face up to hers. "I don't understand it. I love you more every day. Every single day, I think I love you as much as anyone could ever love someone else, but then the next day, I love you even more. How is that possible?"

"I have no idea, but it's true for me too," he said huskily as he bent his head to kiss her seriously. He groaned as she opened her mouth and invited him in. Several passionate minutes later, they came up for air.

"We're going to melt the snow around here if we keep this up," Harry murmured, kissing her behind her ear, his hand cupping her head, his other hand trying patiently to find a way through her layers of warm clothes to her breast.

"Yeah," she breathed, arching her back as his hand finally found its way through some of her layers and moved languidly, tantalizingly on her breast. She moaned and sat up a bit straighter. "It's too cold to do this here. Let's go somewhere warmer later, OK?"

"Yeah," he said, distracted by the pleasures he was experiencing, "warmer."

"Harry? Warmer?" she said, trying to get his attention.

"Ummm," he said, nuzzling her neck again.

Ginny moaned with pleasure. His hand had at long last discovered skin. "Oh, yes! No, wait! Don't! It's too cold!" She shivered and sat up.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, straightening her clothes. "You drive me so crazy, I didn't even notice the cold."

"It wasn't your chest getting an icy blast up it, either," she said with a laugh. "Warming Charms don't work that well on gusts of wind!" She slid her fingers into his thick, glossy hair again and rocked his head from side to side. "One of these days, Potter," she said in a warning tone.

"What?" he said, baffled.

"One of these days, we're going to have a decent place to do this!" she declared.

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah!" he agreed. "Well, now that we've been so rudely interrupted, I can give you your present." He moved her a bit so he could get to his pocket. "I think there's something in here for you."

"Oh, you do, do you?" she said tartly. "And what might it be?" She'd noticed the shopping bag he'd carried and was surprised he wasn't reaching for that.

"A little something," he said, pulling the package out and setting it gently in her hands.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny breathed when she recognized the jewellery store wrapping. "You're spoiling me!"

"And that's a problem because. . .?" he said with a sly grin.

"It's not a problem, not a problem at all!" she laughed, carefully unwrapping the small box and gasping when she opened it to see the beautiful heart-shaped ruby pendant that matched her earrings. "It's gorgeous!"

"It has all the protections the lion one does. And there are two chains, so you can wear it by itself, or use the longer chain to wear it with the lion. Mr. Joyero says that's the fashion."

"It is. I've seen other girls do that. Oh, thank you, sweetheart!" she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. She sat back and opened her cloak a bit so she could put on the new pendant. The two necklaces complimented each other beautifully. "I wish I had a mirror!"

"I have one," Harry said, pulling out the small mirror he used to communicate with Remus and holding it so she could admire her jewellery.

"Wow. Thank you!" she said again, pulling him down into a warm kiss.

"I just love the way you thank me for things," he said when they broke the kiss, leaning his forehead on hers. "You do have a way with words."

Ginny giggled. "I have a present for you, as well," she said. "I ordered it ages ago. I hope you like it." She pulled a box out of her pocket and handed it to Harry.

Harry smiled tenderly at her, then hefted the box in his hand. "Hmm, not chocolate frogs, I'm guessing," he teased. "Not Pepper Imps. Not a quill. Not a broom. What could it be?"

"Just open it, silly!"

"OK, if you insist!" he said, then gleefully ripped off the paper and opened the box. "Oh, Gin," he breathed in amazement, "it's wonderful!"

"It's waterproof, too," she said. Harry had purchased a cheap watch to replace the one he'd ruined during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and had ruined that one when he rescued Ginny from the lake during the battle in France the previous year. His next watch had been blasted to pieces by Voldemort in their battle at the end of the previous school term. He'd never replaced it. Ginny's gift was a beautiful watch with numerous dials and hands.

The Time of Destiny

"What does it do? What are all these hands and things?" he asked, studying the watch in amazement. It reminded him of Dumbledore's watch with its twelve hands.

"This pair of hands tells the time, see?" she said, pointing to the two longest hands. "This one counts off seconds. This dial shows the date. That one is a timer. You use this button to set it to time things, or to set it as an alarm. This other small dial, if you look closely, is like the clock we have at home. It has me, Ron, Hermione, and Remus on it. You can add people if you want to. If you touch this button," she said, demonstrating, "it enlarges this dial so you can read it."

Harry studied the enlarged dial, noticing his friends' faces on the hands, just as they were on the Weasley clock. The dial said, "Home, School, Work, Travelling, Lost, Hospital, Prison, Mortal Peril." Ginny's, Ron's and Hermione's hands all said "Travelling" right now, and Remus's said "School."

"It's fantastic!" Harry said excitedly. "Thanks! And it's waterproof on top of everything else?"

"Yes, and it's also supposed to hold up to being hit with spells and so on."

"I didn't know they made such things," Harry said, truly impressed with her gift. "Thank you, sweetheart!"

"You really like it?" she said, thrilled by his reaction. She'd been making payments on this watch for months, using nearly every penny of her spending money to purchase it.

"I love it! It's brilliant!" he said, still studying the watch. He raised his eyes to hers. "*You're* brilliant! And I love you – even more than this watch!" He kissed her quite thoroughly. "Happy Valentine's Day, baby."

"And to you, as well," she said, smiling up at him.

A while later, as they stood up and Harry Vanished the chair, they started to walk away when Ginny said, "Wait, Harry, you left your bag."

"I forgot about that!" he said, going back and lifting the bag from the snow. He glanced inside it and looked off in the distance for a long moment.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, confused.

"I'm trying to decide."

"Decide what?"

"If you need this now or later," he said, suddenly handing her the bag. "Now works."

"What's this?" she said, taking it and gazing at him with dancing eyes. He always gave her wonderful presents, and he'd already given her that lovely necklace. Now what was he up to?

"Something I found today that I thought you'd like. Go ahead and open it," he urged her.

The Time of Destiny

She reached into the bag and pulled out a soft package wrapped in brown paper. "What. . .?"

"Open it."

When she got the package open and saw the sweater, her face lit up. "Oh, Harry, it's gorgeous! It has horses on it! And I love the colour!" She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him happily. As she stepped back from him she said, "But you didn't have to – the necklace was more than enough!"

"I know I didn't have to. Ron didn't want to go in the shop alone to look for something for Hermione, and I saw that and it seemed to be saying, 'Ginny needs me, Ginny needs me' – so I bought it for you," he said.

Harry's impish, crooked grin made Ginny's heart turn over. What had she ever done to deserve such a boyfriend? "You are so precious to me, did you know that?" she said sincerely. "I love you."

"And I love you!" he said, lifting her in his arms and swinging her around. "I hope that fits, by the way."

"It's my size, I looked at the label," she replied. "It's perfect! I can't wait to wear it!"

"And I can't wait to try to get it off you," he said with a teasing leer, wiggling his eyebrows and making her laugh as he set her back on the ground.

"Me, either," she said, tucking the sweater back into the bag and lacing her fingers through his as they started back toward town.

Some time later, the four friends were walking back to school. Hermione loved her sweater, and was amused by the fact that she'd bought Ron a sweater as well. Both of them were impressed with the watch Ginny had given Harry and with Ginny's new pendant and sweater.

Partway back, Harry's high spirits overwhelmed him. He grabbed a fistful of snow and tossed it at Ron. A snowball fight ensued, with much laughter. Ron grabbed Harry and shoved a handful of snow down his back inside his clothes. Harry pulled Ron down to the ground and scrubbed his face with snow. The girls giggled madly and managed to evade the snowballs for a while, then began pelting the boys with snowballs from the shelter of the trees. The boys soon tackled them and pulled them down into the soft, deep snow, rolling over and over together down a small hill, their laughter echoing around them. They finally grew tired of rough-housing and relaxed, making snow angels before getting up and doing Drying Charms on their clothes so they wouldn't freeze on the way home.

Harry was still feeling silly. He changed into his flying squirrel Animagus form and bounded up a tree, soaring to the next one and racing through its branches, showering his friends with snow when he could. His friends followed his progress as he led them toward school. As the squirrel soared between trees twenty feet above them, it squealed suddenly and collapsed into a ball, falling from the sky, hitting several large branches as it fell.

"*Aresto Momentum!*" Hermione cried, but her spell missed the rapidly falling animal, which landed on a rocky outcropping below the trees.

The Time of Destiny

"*HARRY!*" Ginny and Hermione screamed as they ran toward him.

"What the bloody hell happened?" Ron cried, kneeling beside the small animal, which was twitching and squeaking as if it was in great pain.

"Don't move him. Something may be broken," Ginny warned. She touched the squirrel with one gentle finger. "Harry? Can you change back?" The squirrel shuddered and squealed again, its eyes rolling frantically, its tiny ears flat against its skull.

"Here, I'll change him," Hermione said, then tapped him three times with her wand. Instantly, Harry lay there before them, groaning and twisting in pain, his left arm obviously broken. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, glad she'd conquered the Human-to-Animal Transfiguration so they wouldn't have to wait for Harry to change himself, as he'd had to do when injured as a thestral the previous year.

"Look, his scar's bleeding!" Ginny said as she began examining him. "He must hit his head."

"Or something's going on with You-Know-Who," Ron said darkly. The two girls looked at him in shock.

"That's probably what it is, scar pain," Hermione said. "But it must be awful. I don't remember it actually bleeding before."

Ginny did a quick Ferula Charm to support Harry's broken arm. Not finding any other injuries, Ginny took a handful of snow and held it to his scar, hoping it would comfort him. The snow quickly turned bloody. "We need to get him somewhere so he can be taken care of," she said anxiously. "I don't know if Merlin will come if we call him."

"I can make a Portkey for him," Hermione offered.

"Where'd you learn that?" Ron said in surprise. "The Ministry controls Portkeys. Won't you get in trouble?"

"I watched Dumbledore do it, then tried it myself once," she said. "I spoke to Professor Dumbledore about it after I succeeded with it. He told the Ministry that learning it was an extra credit project for me. That should cover this. Besides, it's an emergency!" She glanced at Ginny. "OK with you?" Seeing Ginny's nod, Hermione pulled off a mitten and laid it on Harry's chest, tapped it with her wand and said, "*Portus.*" She looked up at Ginny. "It will take him to the hospital wing. Why don't you go with him?" Ginny nodded.

"The hell with that," Ron growled. "We'll all go." He wrapped one arm tightly around Harry, then took Hermione's hand and held both of their hands on the mitten next to Ginny's just as the Portkey activated. They all felt the tug behind their navels as the Portkey transported them. They landed in a heap, with Ron doing his best to keep Harry from crashing to the floor. Harry screamed in pain when his broken arm was bumped by his friends trying to keep their footing. When Ron regained his balance, he lifted his friend in his arms and carefully laid him on a bed.

"What's going on?" Madam Pomfrey said, hearing the commotion in her quiet hospital wing.

The Time of Destiny

"Harry's hurt," Ginny said. She explained what had happened as the nurse examined her patient, who was writhing on the bed and clutching his scar while groaning wretchedly.

"All I can find is his broken arm," Madam Pomfrey said. "Nice job on the splint, Miss Weasley." She shook her head, looking disgusted. "He's lucky that's all that's wrong, with such a fall. Jumping tree to tree. What was he thinking?"

"He was in his flying squirrel form," Hermione said, wondering if the nurse had missed that part of Ginny's explanation.

"I know that," Pomfrey snapped. "But still. . .he does such dangerous things."

"He was just having fun," Ginny murmured.

The nurse gave her a look that said in no uncertain terms what her opinion of "just having fun" was. She finished her examination, healed the broken arm and said, "I believe the majority of his problem is scar pain, but I don't understand why it's continuing so long, nor why it's bleeding. That's quite unusual, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ginny replied anxiously.

"Get a flannel and cold water and hold the flannel on it for him, Miss Weasley," Madam Pomfrey directed. "I'll contact Professors Dumbledore and Lupin."

A short time later, Dumbledore strode into the room. "What's wrong with him?"

"He seems to be having scar pain that hasn't let up since it began," Madam Pomfrey said worriedly. "I don't remember it ever going on so long, nor do his friends."

Dumbledore moved to Harry's bedside, his face furrowed in concern. He'd never seen the boy have such a horrible reaction to scar pain. "Harry? Can you hear me? Wake up, dear boy. Come back to us. You can do it."

Harry writhed on the bed in agony, his groans heart-wrenching. His movements were so violent, it was all Ginny could do to keep the cloth on his scar. Ron and Hermione stood on either side of the bed, trying to keep him from falling out as he rolled around trying to find a way to shake off the pain in his head.

"What happened today? Any problems?" Dumbledore asked Harry's friends.

"No. We had a wonderful day," Ginny said, a tear escaping her control. "We were playing in the snow just before he decided to do his flying squirrel form and fly through the trees. He was so happy, so playful today. He was in a great mood, then he just. . .crashed," she ended, shaking her head in disbelief.

Dumbledore sat on the side of the bed and put a hand on either side of Harry's face, holding his head as still as he could. "Harry?" No response. "Harry, listen to me. I know you're in great pain. I want you to open your eyes. Show me what's wrong so I can help you." Harry's body shuddered and his head quivered in Dumbledore's hands, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, but the headmaster held him firmly. "I know you can do this. Open your eyes. Let me see

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what's wrong." Harry's eyes opened a bit and Dumbledore leaned forward, doing Legilimency on him as quickly as he could. Harry gasped and his eyes widened, his body shaking even harder, a cry of fear or pain escaping him. Dumbledore tightened his grip, wrinkling the boy's smooth face as the old wizard pressed his hands firmly against it to hold it still. Dumbledore became quite grave as he stared into the young man's eyes. He sat back suddenly, his hands rubbing Harry's cheeks soothingly before releasing his grip.

"What is it, Professor?" Hermione asked. "What's he seeing?"

"It's too horrible to contemplate," Dumbledore said, his aged face ashen. "And I couldn't pull him out of it. I tried, but he's locked into that vision right now."

Harry's body contracted in a spasm of pain, his hands flying to his scar again. He groaned horribly, thrashing about on the bed uncontrollably. A broken cry burst out of him. "*NO! No! Stop, please!*"

"Stop what?" Ginny asked in concern.

"What he's seeing. We can't stop it," Dumbledore said sadly.

"Would some Dreamless Sleep Potion help him?" Madam Pomfrey said, looking quite worried.

"It might do him more harm than good right now, Poppy," Dumbledore said. "He has to break free of this himself. All we can do is wait."

"Could we get some ice for his scar? A cool cloth usually helps, but it doesn't seem to be making any difference this time," Ginny said, doing her best not to cry.

"That's a good idea," Pomfrey said quickly. "I'll be back in a minute." She soon returned with a bowl full of ice. She wrapped some in a cloth and handed it to Ginny. "Try that."

Harry's scar was bleeding freely, blood running down his face and into his eyes. Hermione washed the blood off as Ginny tried to push his hands away to hold the ice on his scar. Ron grabbed Harry's hands and held them out of Ginny's way, gasping when his best friend suddenly gripped his hands tightly.

"Ouch! He's about to break my hands," Ron cried in surprise. "He's actually pulling me." Ron grunted in pain as Harry clutched his hands in a bone-crunching grip. "It's as if he's trying to pull himself out of a hole."

"In many ways, he is," Dumbledore said quietly. "Can you hang on? It may help him to feel that connection to someone outside the vision."

"Yeah. I've got him," Ron said determinedly, tightening his grip on Harry's hands as much as he could. His hands were growing numb from being squeezed so hard.

Remus ran into the room. He'd been on his way home when he was contacted about his godson's injuries. "What's going on?"

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"Lord Voldemort is in the middle of doing something absolutely abominable," Dumbledore said sadly. "Harry doesn't seem to be able to break free of this vision."

Ginny pressed the ice more firmly against Harry's scar. He gasped and opened his eyes, the shudders in his body finally diminishing. "Thanks," he whispered, his voice sounding crackly and old.

"Are you back now?" Dumbledore said with a smile.

"I . . . I hope so," Harry replied cautiously.

"Are you going to be sick, mate?" Ron said, noting Harry's pallor.

Harry nodded and sat up quickly, vomiting spectacularly over the side of the bed. His friends moved just in time. Madam Pomfrey waved her wand, making the sick vanish.

"Can you tell us about it?" Dumbledore said gently.

"Albus, for Merlin's sake, let the boy rest!" Madam Pomfrey said, incensed.

"Something important just happened. We need to know what it was," Dumbledore said, his eyes grave. "Harry?"

Harry's face crumpled. He looked as if he'd be ill again any moment.

"Take your time," Remus encouraged sitting on the edge of the bed by his godson. He patted the boy's shoulder comfortingly.

"It doesn't matter. It's too late," he moaned.

"Too late for what?" Remus said, his quiet voice filled with concern.

"Too late to save them. They're gone, they're all gone." Harry curled up on his side in a ball of misery, too horrified to cry, a dry sob escaping him now and then.

"Who, Harry? Who's gone?" Remus prompted gently.

"The kids. All of them. All gone," he said, his voice breaking with emotion.

"Poppy? A dose of the Draught of Peace might be helpful now," Dumbledore murmured. She nodded and ran off to get the potion for Harry.

"Are you feeling better?" Dumbledore said a few minutes after Madam Pomfrey gave Harry the potion.

"Yeah," he said, nodding wearily, his body finally beginning to relax. "A bit."

"Can you tell us about it?"

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Harry looked around at his friends, his godfather, his headmaster, the nurse, all of whom bore expressions of heartfelt concern. "I'm sorry I scared you," he murmured.

"It's all right, lad," Remus said, running a gentle hand over the boy's hair.

Harry looked at him gratefully, then sighed. He tried to sit up, and was instantly assisted by everyone at once, which made him smile a bit. "Thanks." He swallowed hard, then began.

"While I was flying, my scar just exploded with pain quite suddenly. I tried to reach the next branch, but couldn't. I got caught up in the vision and wasn't even aware of falling, although I did feel my arm snap." He wiggled the fingers on his left hand and stretched the arm out, twisting it this way and that, glad it was all in one piece again. "I'm just delaying telling you," he said uneasily. "I should get on with it."

"In your own time," Dumbledore said, his voice warm and comforting. "You've been through a lot this afternoon."

Harry nodded and swallowed. "Well. . .Voldemort was very happy, deliriously happy. That's why my scar hurt to start with. A plan had come together and was going forward. He'd had Death Eaters out scouting the country for certain people, and they'd found them and were bringing them to him. There were seventeen of them – because I'm seventeen years old. That's what he said. They all had green eyes, because I have green eyes." He grew more miserable the longer he spoke. His body appeared to be caving in on itself as he tried to shrink away from the horrible things he was about to say. "Seventeen green-eyed Muggle children."

"Children?" Hermione murmured in shock.

"Muggles?" Ron said, equally surprised.

"From about six years old to about fifteen, I think," Harry said. "He. . .he took their eyes." His voice broke and he began crying. "He took their eyes because they were green like MINE!" He sobbed brokenly, then fought on. "He used their eyes in the Eye-Restoring Potion he's been making with pureblood wizard eyes. He thought making it half-blood by using Muggle eyes rather than the eyes of half-blood wizards might make it stronger somehow. So that's what he did. Seventeen Muggle children lost their eyes. He made the potion and it worked. He can see now, better than I can without my glasses. And he got tired of the kids' crying, and found their appearance disgusting since he'd ripped out their eyes, so he killed them, all of them. *Seventeen green-eyed Muggle children.*" He shuddered, the horror of it nearly more than he could bear. "It's my fault they're dead."

"No, it isn't!" Ron, Hermione and Remus insisted. Ginny was in tears, sharing his misery.

"Yes, it is. I scratched out his eyes. It was my idea to take his eyes, not Fawkes'. My idea. My bloody brilliant *brainstorm*," he said, self-loathing in his voice. "When Fawkes turned up during the battle last year, it gave me an idea. I thought I could defeat him if I put out his eyes, just as it was easier for me to kill the basilisk when Fawkes pecked out its eyes. But I didn't count on him still shooting spells blindly and nearly killing Ginny. And once I saved her, I couldn't fight anymore. It wasn't such a brilliant plan after all. This potion he's making – it has something to do with his having some of my blood in him, but I didn't understand that part when he was talking about it. But it doesn't matter. It's all *my bloody FAULT!*" He buried his

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face in his hands and sat shuddering with horror and guilt. Remus pulled him into a tight embrace. Ginny wrapped her arms around his back and rested her cheek on his hair, trying not to sob. Ron and Hermione stared at the scene with horror, Hermione crying as quietly as she could, Ron's face white with shock, neither of them knowing what to do.

"I saw bits of that in your eyes, Harry," Dumbledore said sadly, "when I did Legilimency on you. I tried my best, but I couldn't pull you out of the vision. I'm so sorry I couldn't get through to you. You shouldn't have had to suffer so."

"I shouldn't have had to suffer? What about those children? They were at school or at home or at a friend's house, just living their lives, not bothering anyone, not doing anything wrong except for having *green eyes*!" He pulled away from Remus. "I'm going to be sick again," he said, then leaned over the bed and vomited. He sat up, his face grey and ill-looking, his eyes startlingly green against the pallor of his skin. "Sorry," he murmured as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. As Hermione cleared away the sick, Ginny cleaned his face with her flannel, then took his hand in hers and gently washed it as well. "Thanks," he said quietly.

Ginny put her arms around his neck and pulled his head to her chest, cradling it in her arms, her cheek on his hair, tears streaming silently down her face. She had no words of comfort for him. She couldn't imagine the horrors he'd just seen. When she tried to picture it, her mind balked and shut down. And for him to blame himself? How could she ever help him through that? She had to do something. She put her lips by his ear. "I love you, Harry. We'll get through this together," she murmured.

He shivered and folded his long arms around her, holding her close. How could she still love him when he'd caused so much harm? Harry felt as if his brain was locked in a cold, dark place, with images re-running over and over and over that he simply didn't want to see. He couldn't find a way to stop it.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said gently. "You need to rest. Once you've rested, you'll feel a bit better and we can deal with the situation. I truly hate to trouble you further, but can you tell me where this happened?"

He raised his head and looked at Dumbledore with eyes darkened by sadness, a simmering anger burning deep within them. "I didn't recognize it. It was a big open room, stone walls, torches in wall sconces, not much furniture. What furniture I saw was dark wood and leather, carvings of some kind on the wood, scary faces with tongues sticking out on the corners of the top rail. I noticed it because he stood in front of a chair like that for a while. He was telling one of the older children why they were there. It was a boy, brown hair, freckles, maybe fifteen. He made the boy sit in that chair and watch while he took the eyes of the others. He yelled at the boy for flinching when the children screamed in pain, then explained to him about the potion, and about how 'useful' they were being, especially since they were Muggles, by 'sharing' their eyes with him. Then he took that boy's eyes as well. Once he had all of the eyes in the potion, he simmered them for a while, still talking so calmly to this one boy – who was quiet after his initial screams – sometimes telling the others to shut up. When the potion was ready, he took it and then the first thing he saw was that boy he'd been talking to. That's when I saw the boy and the carvings on the chair. Voldemort leaned down and got face to face with him. He said he wondered if those eyes had looked as good in the boy's face as they did in his. Then he looked in a mirror and I saw. . . I saw. . . ." He stopped, his body shaking in revulsion.

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"What, Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

Harry lifted wretched eyes to his headmaster's. "His eyes look like mine now. They're not shaped like mine, but the colour is nearly the same. He seemed to be very happy about that for some reason. The last time my scar hurt, I had a vision of him with green eyes. Is there some reason he'd want eyes like mine? Because he has some of my blood or something? Do green eyes make him more powerful, or help him fight me better?" Harry sat back, startled. "That's it! He thinks those eyes will help him defeat me, even more than the red ones." He stared, aghast, at his headmaster. "He didn't gain any magical power by making eyes that look like mine, did he?"

"No, he didn't," Dumbledore assured him. "I suspect it's the shock value of seeing your own eyes in his face that he's counting on. But now you've already seen them, so that advantage is lost to him. Was he aware you were there with him?"

"No, I don't think so. He was obsessed with the children and the potion," Harry said in disgust.

"All right," Dumbledore said, patting Harry kindly on the shoulder. "You lie back and rest. I'll deal with this situation. You just get better, all right?"

"How can you deal with the situation?" Harry demanded. "Seventeen kids are DEAD! You can't bring them back!" The windows of the hospital wing rattled ominously in response to his fury. Harry noticed, and did his best to calm down before someone got hurt.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I know, Harry, believe me, I know. I wish there was something I could do about that. But we do have ways of tracking people. We need to find out where Voldemort is hiding now. We'll pick up the trail of those who kidnapped the children and see if it leads to his lair. You rest, and I'll take care of things as well as I can manage. And just between you and me, I can manage things fairly well," he said, a smile in his voice as he tried to reassure the grieving boy.

Harry spent the night in the hospital wing and was released early the next morning. Now he and Ginny were sitting across from Hermione and Ron at breakfast. Harry had no appetite and was barely picking at his food, not speaking much even when spoken to. His friends understood that he needed time to deal with the horrors he'd seen and tried not to bother him too much.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione took her copy of *The Daily Prophet* from the owl as quickly as she could, trying to hide the paper in case the story was on the front page, but she wasn't quick enough. Harry reached across the table and grabbed the paper out of her hands, opening it so fast that he ripped it. His eyes scanned the front page frantically. A small headline in a box near the bottom of the page said *Death Eaters Suspected in Kidnappings across the UK – Story on Page 32*. Harry opened the paper to page 32 and saw the story, headlined: *Seventeen Muggle Children Disappear in Incidents across the UK – Death Eaters Suspected*. The story went on to say these children had simply vanished without a trace from their school playgrounds or home gardens, and that, in each case, a man in a dark cloak had been seen just before the child disappeared. The descriptions of the man varied, and the abductions happened within such a limited time frame, there had to be more than one kidnapper involved. Some witnesses said they thought the man wore a hood, which led the *Prophet* to its speculation about Death Eaters. The article went on to propose many wild ideas

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about what "You-Know-Who" might be using these children for. No one had noted the fact that all the children had green eyes.

Harry threw the paper across the table in a fury, his rage making the milk and juice jugs dance. "Bloody hell," he growled, then stormed away from the table. He spoke no more the rest of the day, no matter how anyone tried to entice him.

"Why's the story inside the paper instead of on the front page?" Ron mused as he looked at the paper.

"Because they're Muggle children," Hermione said darkly. "If they were wizard children, it would have been a huge headline on page one."

Days later, Harry was very much like a ghost. He never smiled. His face was pale and drawn, with huge circles under his eyes. He simply dragged himself from class to class without paying attention to what he was doing or where he was going. The only time he showed any life at all was during Quidditch practice. There, he played with a fierce determination that was nearly frightening in its intensity. Ron had taken the team aside and explained that Harry wasn't feeling well, and asked them all to be patient with him. Dumbledore had done the same with the staff, while also telling them the reason why Harry didn't feel well. Even Ginny couldn't cheer him up, which showed how very depressed he was.

In Transfiguration class just over a week after Harry's vision, Professor McGonagall called on Harry to answer a question. He didn't respond.

"Mr. Potter?" she prompted. Still no answer.

Hermione trod on Harry's toes, which only got her a wearily filthy look from him.

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall said again, just as Ron reached behind Hermione and poked Harry in the ribs.

"Huh? Sorry, Professor," he said dully.

"Are you feeling quite well?"

"I'm fine," he said, his voice flat, his face gaunt and pale.

"See me after class, please, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said crisply, then turned to Dean to get the answer to her question.

After class, Harry trudged slowly up to McGonagall's desk. Ron and Hermione waited anxiously at the back of the room. Harry sighed heavily as he stood before her. "Yes, Professor?"

"Sit down," she began. He dropped into a chair with a thud. "I'm quite concerned about you, Mr. Potter. You're not participating in class, you're not doing your homework, you're coming to class unprepared," she said, tilting her head and studying his face up close for the first time in days. "You look ill. You've lost weight and you have huge circles under your eyes." She

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stopped uncertainly. She didn't want to put him through any more pain, but she had to find out if that vision was still causing Harry's problems, or if it was something else.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said listlessly.

McGonagall gazed at the boy sitting perfectly still before her, looking terribly sad and weary. His cheeks were emaciated and hollow. Even his hair, which usually seemed to have a life of its own, lay limp and nearly flat on his head. His eyes, normally so brilliant and full of life and humour, were flat and cloudy-looking. He usually looked better than this when he was quite ill. And Harry was rarely entirely still, yet there he sat, his hands lying limp on the desk surface, his body slumped listlessly in his chair.

She turned a chair around and sat in front of him, with only the desk top between them. "I know about the vision you had," she said sympathetically. "Is that what's bothering you?" He sat still, then finally gave a small nod.

"Have you considered putting the memory in your Pensieve?" she asked quietly. "That might help."

"After what happened to me when I used it after Casey died, I'm afraid to use it for horrible things like this," he said honestly. "I don't want to be ill like that again."

"I understand." She sighed. "I can't imagine how ghastly this vision was for you. But you simply must get past it. You aren't helping those children by letting the memory of what happened make you ill."

"There's no way to help them now," he said bleakly.

McGonagall reached across the desk and put her hand on his, rubbing it gently as she spoke. "I know. I'm so sorry you had to see that. I'm sorry it happened, and that so many families are grieving now. It's completely unfair and tragic in every way. But you mustn't let it break your health or your spirit."

He glanced up at her. She rarely showed such personal concern for her students, usually doing her best to keep a professional distance. Something in the way she was behaving was getting through to him, at least a little.

She took his hand in hers, turning it over and examining it. "You have good hands, Harry. Strong, capable, kind, gentle hands." She sighed, wishing she knew the right words to help him through his pain. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," she began.

"Voldemort," he corrected automatically.

She shook her head in frustration and sighed, then went on. "He apparently wanted your eyes, or eyes like yours. Who knows why? But he's recognized the great power you have, and it worries him. What he'll never have is your heart." She took his hand in both of hers, running her fingers over the calluses created by hours of playing Quidditch, gently touching the long, elegant fingers, the strong joint of his thumb that evidenced his resilient character. "You have such fine qualities, Harry – eyes that recognize the good in people, a clever mind, such purity of heart, talent in every pore of your body. You're a truly good person, no matter how many

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school rules you've flagrantly broken over the years," she said, a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. "You have done nothing wrong. None of this is your fault. No, don't argue with me," she said as she saw his temper rising. "It most assuredly is *not* your fault."

She studied his face quietly as he sank back into his lethargy. "You need to know something, I think." She straightened her shoulders and swallowed, preparing herself to say something difficult. "I've never said this to another student in all my years of teaching. I want you to know that," she said, watching to be certain he was paying attention. "Of all the students I've taught over the years, you are my favourite. I so enjoy the way your mind works, your sense of fun, the tremendous loyalty you feel for your friends. I have the utmost respect for you. You're not the cleverest— "

"That would be Hermione," he said quickly, the hint of a smile on his face.

"Yes, it would," she agreed, "followed closely by your father and Sirius Black. You're not the best-behaved. You're not the best student. You don't apply yourself as well as you should all the time. But you are a joy to me in ways I can't explain. What I want you to understand is that you are loved and appreciated and admired, Harry, not just by fan girls or people who fawn over celebrities or those who want something from you. You need to understand that. *Nothing you do can change that*, either. It's important for you to understand that, as well. Am I getting through to you?"

Harry was touched by the things McGonagall was saying. He knew she was careful to keep her distance from students. She never expressed affection, never played favourites, yet here she was, actually telling him she *loved* him! Something in his heart clicked, and a tiny ray of light seemed to open up in his mind. He swallowed hard, clasped his hand around hers and said, "Yes, you're getting through. Thank you."

She nodded. "Good. I know it will take you some time to get past this awful thing, but you're strong. You will get past it and get on with your life. And if there's any way I can help you with that, you just have to say the word. For now, I'm excusing you from the homework assignment, and the rest of today's classes. Get some rest, Harry. You look like you haven't slept in days."

"I haven't. I keep having the same nightmare over and over – that vision," he said with a shudder of revulsion.

"Then I suggest you see the nurse about having some Dreamless Sleep Potion," she said, releasing his hand, sitting back and becoming her normal, brisk self. "Take Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger with you to the hospital wing for the potion." She raised her voice, looking at Ron and Hermione still sitting nervously in the back. "I'll write a pass for you two. Take him back to Gryffindor Tower and put him to bed. Make sure he takes the Dreamless Sleep Potion so he will rest." They both nodded. She moved behind her desk and wrote notes for each of them. "Right then. Off you go."

Harry took his note, grabbed his bag and stood up, looking uncertainly at McGonagall. "Professor?"

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"Thank you."

"Take care of yourself, Harry," she said with a smile.

He nodded and followed Ron and Hermione out of the room.

Late that afternoon, Harry awoke from his nap. He stretched and glanced around, surprised to see Ron sitting by his bed. Ron had put him to bed in the Head Boy suite so he'd have more privacy and the girls would be allowed to visit.

"Hi!" Ron said cheerfully. "Feeling better?"

"Ginny can't sit with me right now for some reason, so you're my Weasley guard, right?" Harry said with a weary smile.

"Yeah," Ron said with a grin. He thought Harry seemed to be in a somewhat better mood.

"Thanks," Harry said, sitting up and putting his glasses on. "How long have I slept?"

"It's just after dinner time," Ron said. "Hermione brought up a tray for us. I've eaten mine, but yours is right here. It's had a Warming Charm on it so it would stay hot. Ready to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat, mate, or you'll blow away in the next stiff wind," Ron chided him. "Come on now, eat at least part of it. It's some of your favourites, steak and kidney pie and treacle tart." Ron set the tray on Harry's bedside table, then loaded a fork and aimed it at Harry.

"Open up the tunnel, here comes the train," he said, playfully waving the fork around in front of Harry's mouth.

"I'm not hungry, Ron," Harry insisted.

"You have to eat at least a little," Ron insisted right back. "Open up or I'll put you under the Imperius Curse and force you to eat!"

"If you think—" Harry began tartly, but as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, Ron jabbed the fork in there, neatly depositing the food. He pulled the fork back and grinned at Harry triumphantly.

"Chew!" he commanded.

Harry looked grumpy, but chewed anyway, forcing himself to swallow. Ron sat poised with another forkful in front of Harry's face when there was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," Ron called, shoving the fork into Harry's mouth when he opened it to say something else.

Harry made grouchy sounds while he chewed, which made Ginny and Hermione laugh as they entered.

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"He's eating! However did you manage that?" Ginny said.

"He's force-feeding me!" Harry protested, putting his hand between the fork and his mouth as Ron tried to deliver another load.

"Oh, well done, Ron!" Hermione said gaily. "You look better, Harry. The nap did you some good, then."

"Yeah," Harry said, turning his face away from Ron's probing fork. "Lay off, Ron!" His patience was nearly gone.

"Let me," Ginny said, taking the fork and plate from Ron and sitting on the edge of Harry's bed. "Come on, sweetheart, take a bite," she said, holding the loaded fork in front of his face.

"Stop it!" he snapped. "I'm not hungry! And if I was, I could feed myself! I'm not an invalid!" He shoved past Ginny and got to his feet. "Leave me alone!"

Ginny sat back looking hurt. Ron's face fell. Hermione gave him a reproachful look.

"That's not on, mate," Ron said reproachfully. "We're trying to help you."

Harry growled, trying hard to control his temper. "I. Am. Not. Hungry. What part of that do you not understand?"

"You haven't eaten more than a bite of toast for days," Hermione said carefully. "You've lost a lot of weight. You weren't fat to start with, Harry. You can't afford to lose that much weight. It's not healthy."

"I don't care. I'm not hungry. Bugger off!" he snarled, then stormed out of the room.

"Where's he going?" Ginny asked quietly.

"Dunno. The loo, maybe," Ron said, getting to his feet. "I'll go check on him."

Harry was in the bathroom, throwing up what little food he'd taken in.

"You look like a ghost," Ron said in concern when he entered the bathroom. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," Harry snapped.

"Did you chuck?"

"Yeah."

"You have to eat something. Maybe soup would be better. D'you want Dobby to bring you some of his pumpkin soup? You always like that."

"No. Don't bother Dobby. He doesn't need to come here," Harry growled. He turned and rested his forehead against the cool stone wall.

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"Harry, you need to calm down," Ron said reproachfully. "You scared the girls, and hurt Ginny's feelings."

Harry turned and looked at him, guilt hitting him suddenly. "And yours, as well?"

"I'll be all right," Ron said with a shrug, but Harry could see the hurt in his eyes. "We're just trying to help you."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time right now."

"We know that. What can we do to help?"

Harry sighed. "I don't think anyone can help me."

"I'm going to get some soup from the kitchen, and you're going to eat it without fighting me about it," Ron said stoutly. "Understand? Don't make me thump you!" He grinned, a teasing light in his eyes.

"You'd thump me while I'm in this condition?" Harry protested, trying to go along with Ron's game.

"Absolutely. Let's get you back to bed, mate, and then I'll get the soup while you talk to the girls. No serious snogging, or you'll set off the alarms."

"Yeah. Nobody would want to snog me the way my breath smells right now anyway," Harry said, a bit rueful.

"That's what Breath Fresh Potion is for," Ron said, pulling a flagon out of the cabinet. "Here, swirl some around in your mouth and spit it out. You'll like yourself better afterwards, I expect. Or at least your mouth will taste better."

"You sound like a commercial on the telly," Harry said, doing as he was told.

"Maybe I'll have a career in Muggle telly, then," Ron said playfully. "I'm handsome enough," he added, preening theatrically in front of the mirror. He'd seen a television programme in a shop window when he and Harry had taken the girls to a Muggle film.

"You're cute, not handsome," the mirror corrected.

"Oh, shut up!" Ron said, not really upset.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, trying to play along. "I can see you on the telly."

They arrived back in their room and Harry wrapped his arms around Hermione, who was nearest to the door. "I'm sorry."

"We're just so worried about you, Harry," Hermione said as she returned his hug.

"Thanks." He turned to Ginny. "You know I'd never deliberately hurt your feelings, right?" She nodded, unshed tears sparkling in her lashes. He touched her lashes with a gentle finger,

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lifting the tears away. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what it's going to take for me to get past this, but I'm afraid I'm going to be bad company for a while longer."

"We've been through your 'bad company' phases before," Ginny said resolutely. "We'll manage this one as well."

"Thanks," he said, then climbed back into bed. When Ron returned with soup, Harry ate it obediently and managed to keep it down, as well.

"That's better," Ginny said approvingly.

"It's a start," Harry said gloomily.

Harry's "start" didn't take very well. With the help of the Dreamless Sleep Potion each night, he was sleeping now, but he ate little, spoke less, and was just barely paying attention in his classes. All of his teachers and friends were increasingly concerned.

A few mornings later, Dumbledore stopped by the Gryffindor table at breakfast. "Harry, a word, if I may?"

Harry didn't answer, just got up dully and followed his headmaster, his shoulders slumped and his feet dragging. Dumbledore led him all the way up to his office and had him sit down by one of the spindly-legged tables that held his delicate silver instruments.

"Do you know why I brought you up here?" Dumbledore asked. Harry shook his head, his eyes flat and expressionless. "I brought you up here because you need help, Harry, help that you aren't getting by going to class and hanging around with your friends. I thought going back to a normal routine would help you heal after that horrible vision you had." At these words, Harry's head snapped up and his body shuddered involuntarily. "Yes, that vision. You're still haunted by it, aren't you? Are you sleeping well?" Harry shook his head, dropping his eyes again and studying his shoe laces. "Are you sleeping at all?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"I'm fine," Harry said dully.

"No, you're not. Tell me the truth," Dumbledore insisted.

Harry finally lifted his eyes and looked directly at his headmaster. "With the Dreamless Sleep Potion, I sleep, but I'm exhausted when I wake up. Without the potion, I sleep sometimes, but I have nightmares. I'm not getting any rest. I'm tired all the time."

"What are the nightmares about?"

"It's that vision, over and over. I can't get the images out of my head. I see them when I'm awake. I see them when I'm asleep. I see them when I'm trying to eat."

"I would suggest you use your Pensieve, but Professor McGonagall told me what you felt about that. I wish you'd reconsider." Harry shook his head adamantly. "You have lost a good bit of weight. Are you eating at all?"

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"Not much, and what I do get down doesn't stay down for long. I'm only able to eat soup right now, and not much of that," Harry said with a shrug.

"We need to change that. I think this situation calls for an unusual solution, Harry. I'm pulling you out of classes."

"What?" Harry said, shocked out of his stupor.

"I'm going to teach you myself. I still have a great deal to teach you, and we're running out of time."

"What do you mean, we're running out of time?" Harry said, confused and a bit frightened. Dumbledore looked terribly serious.

"You will soon be through with Hogwarts, and then you'll be out in the world chasing Voldemort. I know you. You won't go quietly to Auror School. You'll try to take the battle to Voldemort as soon as you're free."

"I want to do that now!" Harry snapped, fighting back his temper as he saw the silver instruments beginning to tremble in response to his rage.

"I know, but you still are not ready. I want you to be as prepared as I can make you, and I can't do that with you going to your usual classes. I was exhausting you before this happened by teaching you for so many hours, and then letting you continue your normal routine. It's time that stopped. It should make no difference to the Auror School, they have already accepted you without N.E.W.T. scores. I will, of course, explain to Mr. O'Connell what I'm doing and why. What I'll be teaching you will help you in Auror School as well as in your hunt for Lord Voldemort. "

"What about Quidditch? And the D.A.?" Harry said, finally paying close attention to what his headmaster was saying.

"You may continue to play Quidditch and work with the D.A. if you wish. It will do you good to spend some time with your friends. But for the next several days, you'll be staying here in my guest quarters, concentrating on getting past this depression and getting as much of my knowledge into your head as possible. We'll take meals here for the next few days, as well. I have the feeling you want to find a hole to crawl into and hide for a while. I'm providing that hole. Does that sound all right to you?"

Harry thought a moment. He honestly did want to find a cave somewhere and just stay there away from everyone for a long time. Dumbledore was offering him a viable alternative, and an exceptional educational opportunity, as well. "Yes, that sounds good to me," he replied. "Thanks. How are you going to explain this to the rest of the school?"

"I'll simply tell them the truth," Dumbledore said sadly. "You are preparing to fight Lord Voldemort. I'm doing all I can to help you prepare. It seems to be time for us to set aside mundane things like school rules and do what has to be done. I can think of no better solution for both your depression and the amount of training I feel you still need."

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Harry snorted with sudden derisive laughter as an idea hit him. "Couldn't you just open a vein in each of our arms and share your magic with me? Wouldn't that be faster than trying to get things through my thick head?"

"You are anything but thick, Harry," Dumbledore chided him gently. "It would be nice if I could share my knowledge so easily. If that were possible, I'd gladly give you every drop of blood in my body."

Harry was shocked. Dumbledore was being quite serious. "Oh, no, sir! I wouldn't want you to do that!"

"If it would help you, dear boy, I would do it, and gladly. But since it simply doesn't work that way, we'll have to do it the old-fashioned way: teacher and pupil. I'll order up some breakfast and we can get started. What would you like to eat?"

"Nothing," Harry said dismissively.

"You must eat if you wish to learn. I'll order you some porridge and toast. You can eat one or the other or both, but you must eat something. Now, while I'm contacting the kitchen, why don't you look at the instruments on that table and see if you can guess what they're for?" He waited to see the boy's nod of agreement, then left, giving Harry time to ponder his new situation.

While Dumbledore was gone, Harry stared listlessly at the various delicate instruments. Some had parts that were spinning. Others hummed. One belched out tiny puffs of grey smoke every so often. He waved his hand idly over the smoke and was amazed to see pictures forming in the smoke. He didn't understand what he was looking at, but he could see that the image was of people interacting somehow. His curiosity was piqued now. "Show me," he said instinctively, and the images enlarged rapidly until he could tell he was watching Mundungus Fletcher doing something he couldn't make out with people he didn't recognize.

"I see you're having some success already, Harry," Dumbledore said, sounding pleased, as he came back to his comfortable chair by the small table.

"It's Dung, but what's he doing? Who are these people? Is this instrument keeping track of him?" Harry asked.

"Yes, because he's on a mission for me at present," Dumbledore replied. He leaned forward and studied the image Harry had conjured from the instrument. "Ah, I see he's doing a little business on the side," he said with an amused smile. "See the bag at his feet? I suspect he's found a bargain of some sort that he thinks he can turn a profit on. Do you recognize where he is?"

"It looks a bit like Knockturn Alley," Harry replied. "I've only been there once, and that time by accident, so I don't really know if I'd recognize it or not."

"Right in one! Well done," his headmaster said. "He's doing some work for the Order. I sent him down there to sit in the pubs and wander through the shops and just keep his ears open. He's our best operative for such work, since none of the rest of us 'fit' in such places as well as he does."

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Harry smiled a bit, understanding exactly what Dumbledore meant. "Is this the instrument you use to keep track of me?"

"It's similar to this one. Yours is over there on my desk, actually," Dumbledore said, gesturing absently behind him. "I've been keeping an eye on you a lot recently. That's why I came to speak to you today."

"You've been *watching* me?" Harry said in horror, thinking of the time he'd spent with Ginny in the Shrieking Shack and elsewhere.

"I don't pry into your privacy, Harry," Dumbledore said, correctly guessing the reason for his sudden pallor. "I have an instrument that lets me know where you are, if you're healthy, injured or ill, and who you're with. It isn't a visual tracking method like the one I use for Mundungus, who we both know isn't the most trustworthy person in the Order. I only use a visual method of tracking you when I think you're in trouble."

"Oh," Harry said, glad Dumbledore thought enough of him to give him some privacy. "And you can find me anywhere?"

"There are places that my instruments can't read for various reasons. The Shrieking Shack is one, because of certain wards I put on it for Remus's protection years ago. That's why I couldn't locate you when you went there Christmas Eve." Dumbledore lifted his head as a knock came on the door. "Ah, that should be our breakfast," he said with a smile. As he opened the door, the house-elf carrying their breakfast was followed closely by Ron, Hermione and Ginny.

"Why is Harry up here? We asked Professor McGonagall and Remus what was going on and they just said you'd tell us when you were ready," Ron said, looking aggrieved. "Mate, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, smiling at his friends for the first time in days. It wasn't a wholehearted, happy smile, but it was much better than the scowls and sad looks he'd been wearing lately.

"You look better!" Ginny said, coming into the headmaster's office and sitting on the arm of Harry's chair. "You must feel better! I'm so glad."

"A bit," Harry allowed as he slid his arm around her back, the first sign of real affection he'd made toward her since his vision. Dumbledore had managed to distract him for a little while, and he could feel the tiniest bit of lightness, even hope, in his heart that hadn't been there before – it was just a glimmer, but it was there, it was real, and he was happy about that. Added to the bit of light he'd gotten from McGonagall a few days earlier, things were looking a good deal brighter to Harry.

"I was going to have your teachers explain things to you today, but since you're here," Dumbledore said, motioning for them to sit down and offering them tea, which they all refused, "I'll explain things to you now. Harry will no longer be going to class. He will be working here with me. He will stay with me for meals and at night so we can work as many hours as the two of us can manage, at least for the next few days. If this system works well, he may stay up here longer. Time will tell. I can cover what he needs from most of his classes

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here, and we have a great many other things to work on, as well. He'll still be able to play Quidditch and work with the D.A., and if he wants to continue his Inter-Beings Languages, Care of Magical Creatures or Potions classes, that will certainly be fine with me, since I won't be covering those subjects with him. Seeing his friends every so often will be good for him."

The girls and Ron were stunned. "Why?" Ginny asked.

"What's he done that he's being pulled out of class?" Ron said.

"What are you protecting him from?" Hermione asked sagely.

"He's done nothing wrong. I'm not protecting him from anything except his own grief, which seems to be consuming him at present. I need to help him get past that first. And, I've decided that he doesn't have enough time left at Hogwarts for me to continue teaching him outside of class hours. The Auror School will take him without N.E.W.T.s, so his exams don't matter. He has a challenge ahead of him – defeating Lord Voldemort. I'm going to do my best to finish preparing him for that. The way we've been working, with all the other things Harry has to deal with, we haven't had enough time for me to teach him everything I think he needs to know to deal with Voldemort. This is the best solution I could come up with."

"He won't be in our dormitory anymore?" Ron said unhappily.

"Not for a while, no," Dumbledore said. "I expect we'll be working very late. It will be easier if he stays in the guest rooms here. And if Harry's as much of a night owl as I am, we might even work during the night. It depends on how things work out. A few days to a couple of weeks of intensive work like this, and I think he'll be able to move back to your dormitory and have a meals in the Great Hall. He'll miss his classes, but most of what we're doing is well beyond what Hogwarts normally teaches anyway." He saw the hungry gleam in Hermione's eye. "I'm sure Harry will share what knowledge he can with you, but please don't push him. He has a great deal to absorb in only a few more months here. You do understand, don't you?" All three of Harry's friends nodded, their faces unhappy as they looked from Dumbledore to Harry, who gazed uncomfortably back at them.

"We'll miss you, Harry," Hermione said softly. "We've always studied together, gone to class together, eaten together. It will be so strange without you."

"Just pretend I'm in the hospital wing, and it will seem more normal," Harry joked, but his joke fell flat. No one even smiled.

"May we come to see him, Professor?" Ginny asked, her eyes wide and sorrowful.

"You and Harry have communication rings, right?" Dumbledore said kindly. She nodded.

"You can contact him each evening and ask him if he is ready for company or not. Mr.

Weasley, you and Miss Granger can do the same with your Famous Wizard Cards. You may send messages via the cards, or arrange a time to get together if he feels up to it. Give him a few days to get accustomed to our new routine before you try to see him, though, all right?"

They all nodded. "Right then. I will leave you together for a short time, and then you lot need to go to class," he said, picking up a piece of toast and walking back toward his quarters.

"Whoa, Harry. This is a strange setup, isn't it?" Ron said nervously. "Was it your idea?"

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"No, it was his. He's seen how depressed I've been and wanted to help me through it, and then he decided he had too much to teach me for me to keep going to class," Harry said with a shrug. "I guess I won't need what you lot are learning anyway."

"Why not?" Hermione said anxiously. "You need everything you can learn in Hogwarts! How can you manage without finishing Seventh Year?"

"Fred and George seem to be managing rather well without having finished Seventh Year," Harry reminded her.

"What about your future?" she insisted.

Harry stood up so quickly, his chair fell over. Ginny had jumped up when he had, the only thing that kept her from falling when his chair fell. Harry's eyes were furious, flashing green fire. The silver instruments tinkled, vibrating violently in the waves of fury emanating from him.

"Hermione, my future involves fighting Voldemort *until one of us is dead!* That's as far into the future as I can see right now. So what 'future' do I have to worry about?" He cringed when he heard Ginny's horrified gasp. He did his best to control his temper as he turned to look at her. "I plan to survive, Ginny. I do want a future. But I can't think about it until Voldemort is gone. Please understand." He folded her into his arms, rubbing her back soothingly. "I'm sorry I yelled. I'm just about at the limit of what I can bear these days."

"We understand, mate. It's just a lot to deal with, you not taking classes anymore and all. I'm not sure I can sleep without hearing your snores," Ron said, trying to lighten things up.

"Yeah, same here," Harry replied, giving his friend a half-hearted smile. He rested his cheek on Ginny's hair. "Are you all right?"

"No! When will I see you again?"

"At Quidditch practice and D.A.," Harry promised. "And then more later, I suppose. He's only just told me about all this. I'll have to see how things work out."

Ginny nodded, then pulled back and looked up at him. "Don't forget me."

"How could I? You and I will talk on our rings every night, all right?" He looked up at Ron and Hermione. "Same for you with the Famous Wizard Cards. I'll want you to come see me, as well. We'll work out a time, once I see how he wants to work."

Dumbledore came back into the room. "You're going to be late for class if you don't leave now," he said gently. "You'll see him again soon."

Ron and Hermione nodded and turned toward the door. Hermione stopped and looked back at Harry, then ran to him, hugging him tightly. "Take care of yourself! And—"

"And remember everything I learn so I can teach it to you," he said, smiling at her affectionately. "Got it."

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"Yeah," she said, standing on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. She looked at him sadly, then turned and hurried toward the door, glancing back as she and Ron walked through it, sobbing as they started down the spiral staircase.

Ginny had moved aside when she saw Hermione coming to hug Harry. Now she moved back into his arms and held on to him, resting her head on his chest.

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry said bracingly. "I'll be right here."

"But I won't get to see you," she said tearfully.

"It won't be for long, baby," he promised, hoping he was right. He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face. "Give me a kiss to remember," he murmured.

Dumbledore thoughtfully left again, returning when he heard the door close behind the sniffing Ginny.

"I know this is hard for you," Dumbledore said, "but I think it's best in the long run."

"Let's get to it," Harry said determinedly, sitting down at the table once more.

Chapter 21 – The Wizard's Apprentice

Harry and Dumbledore worked together late into the night on a wide variety of new spells, and began again early in the morning the next day. After several hours of effort, Dumbledore stretched and said, "I have something to show you. I think the break will be good for both of us. Come with me." He moved to the shelves where the Sorting Hat sat, next to the display case holding Godric Gryffindor's sword. "There's something you may have suspected that you and I have not discussed, Harry. It's time I told you who you are."

"Sorry?" Harry said, confused.

"After your adventure in the Chamber of Secrets," he said, taking the beautiful sword out of the case, "I told you only a true Gryffindor could pull this sword out of the hat. I think you suspected then that you might be the Heir of Gryffindor, but I wasn't ready to lay that burden on your young shoulders then. But you're nearly a grown man now, and it's time."

Harry frowned, trying to follow what his headmaster was saying. "Time. . .for what?"

"Harry, you are the Heir of Gryffindor. That's why the sword came to you."

"Erm. . .OK. What, exactly, does that mean? Why is it a burden for me?"

"As the Heir of Gryffindor, you have certain responsibilities. It's easier to show you than to tell you. Put on the Sorting Hat," Dumbledore said, lifting the ancient hat from the shelf and handing it to his student.

Harry looked at Dumbledore sceptically, but put the hat on his head. "Now what?"

"It's time to tell Harry the secret," Dumbledore said.

"And about time!" the hat grumbled. "I wondered why you waited so long!"

"Let's not be cheeky. Just tell Harry the secret, all right?" the old wizard said patiently.

"What secret?" Harry said uneasily.

"The hat is the Secret Keeper for the Heirs of Gryffindor. It will tell you the secret you need to know. Pay attention," Dumbledore instructed.

"Potter?" the hat said. "Are you paying attention?"

"Uh. . .yeah?" Harry replied.

"Good, because I can only say this once. You are the next Heir of Gryffindor. Take his sword and touch the top of the right-hand edge of Gryffindor's portrait – your right hand, not his – with the tip of the sword, and let the blade also touch the wall. Draw the sword down the length of the frame edge with the tip touching the wall, then replace the sword in its case. The rest you should be able to sort out yourself." With that, the Sorting Hat's ripped seam closed and it spoke no more.

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"Did you understand what it said?" Dumbledore asked, holding out the sword, hilt first.

"I think so," Harry said uncertainly. He took the sword in his hand and felt an odd sensation in his arm, as if the blade was singing to him somehow.

"Do you feel it?" Dumbledore said quietly, his eyes intense.

"I feel something. . . ."

"The Heir of Gryffindor is told the secret when he's seventeen," Dumbledore said. "Until then, this sword feels like any other sword to him or anyone else who touches it. When the Heir is seventeen, he is a fairly mature wizard. At that point, the sword will begin to sing to him. This is one of the signs that young man is ready to take his place as Heir of Gryffindor."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"Do what the Sorting Hat told you to do, and you'll begin to understand," Dumbledore said mysteriously. He took the hat off Harry's head and replaced it on the shelf, then watched the young man expectantly.

Harry looked at his headmaster nervously, then moved to the nearby portrait of Godric Gryffindor. He looked into the man's eyes for a long moment, surprised to see him looking back, an expectant twinkle in his eye. Gryffindor's portrait had always been quiet when Harry was around, never speaking and rarely even moving, unlike the other portraits of old headmasters. At that moment, Harry realized that every time he'd been in Dumbledore's office and noticed Gryffindor's portrait, the man had been quietly watching him, a pensive expression on his face. Now Gryffindor actually smiled at him, then nodded toward the side of the frame Harry was supposed to be touching with the sword, apparently wanting Harry to get on with it. Harry tore his eyes away from his ancestor, then touched the tip of the blade to the top right corner of the frame, the tip barely touching the wall. Ever so carefully, he slid it down the length of the frame. He was shocked to see an opening appear in the path of the sword. Soon an entire section of wall moved aside silently.

"Whoa! What's that?" he said, his eyes wide. He could see a small entryway with torches on either side of the door, and an opening that seemed to disappear into darkness.

"This, Harry, is part of your inheritance as Heir of Gryffindor. This is Gryffindor's secret chamber. As Slytherin had a Chamber of Secrets, Gryffindor had a Chamber of Knowledge. Come with me," Dumbledore said, leading the way. When they were both inside the wall, Dumbledore pointed to a golden griffin medallion on the wall near the opening. "Touch that," he instructed.

When Harry did so, the door slid closed, and torches lit both in the entry room and in the distance past the opening, their flickering light casting dancing shadows on the walls. Harry turned toward the opening and was astonished to see that the floor fell away steeply. "Is that. . .?"

"A slide, yes," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "You and Gryffindor both share a wonderful sense of fun. I rather like that aspect of both of your personalities. Follow me after you hear me call up that I've landed, all right? It's a fast ride – I prefer to do it with my hands

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over my head. It's a soft landing, don't worry. Have fun!" With that, Dumbledore sat at the top of the slide and pushed off, shouting with glee as he disappeared around the first curve.

Harry heard his headmaster's voice growing fainter and fainter as he whooped happily on the way down. Finally, the joyful noises stopped and the old wizard called up, "Your turn!"

Harry swallowed hard and sat down cautiously at the top of the slide. The slide disappeared around a turn just a few feet ahead of his long legs, and was sharply curved as far as the eye could see. It was shaped like half of a big tube, so he doubted he'd have problems staying on it around its curves. He took a deep breath and shoved off, nervous at first, then quickly getting into the spirit of things and whooping with joy as he whooshed down the slide. When he came to the bottom, he was out of breath, but laughing. "What a ride!"

"Amazing, isn't it?"

"But how do we get back up?" Harry asked, looking at the slide. It was too slick to climb.

"When we're ready to return, you will touch this golden griffin in the wall. The slide will disappear and a lift will appear. You will step onto the lift, which is just a platform with a rail around it, grip the handle, and it will take you to the top so quickly, you'll be dizzy when you get there."

"Does it spiral up?"

"Oh, yes! That's half the fun, isn't it? Spinning around at such speeds?" Dumbledore said with an impish grin.

"Yeah," Harry breathed, looking up the slide. "How far down are we? Where are we?"

"We are deep in the bowels of the mountain on which Hogwarts is built," Dumbledore told him. "We're about one hundred feet underground here. Gryffindor built this chamber before the castle was built. He provided the site for the school, you see. This was his land. He built this chamber as a stronghold to protect his family. You'll see there are living quarters down here that are quite luxurious. Heirs of Gryffindor who become Hogwarts headmasters and have families often live down here. Their children can run and squeal to their heart's content without disturbing the school."

"Aren't they ever allowed outside?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Oh, of course they are! But this is a quiet place away from students and stress, as well as being safe from anyone who might try to attack the school. I stay down here from time to time myself. You'll see why in a moment. Follow me," he said, his eyes dancing as he led Harry away from the slide.

Harry was looking at the life-sized portraits on the walls, all of which were studying him with great interest. "Are these all the Heirs of Gryffindor?"

"Oh yes," Dumbledore said. "I often come down here to confer with them."

"Were they all headmasters of Hogwarts? Wouldn't their portraits be in your office?"

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"No, not all of them were headmasters or even teachers. Many pursued other careers or interests," Dumbledore explained. "Here's Godric Gryffindor himself. You'll notice this is a different portrait than the one in my office."

"He looks a lot younger," Harry commented. "No offence," he told the portrait when Gryffindor frowned at him.

"None taken," Gryffindor said.

"You spoke! I've never heard you speak before!" Harry said, astonished.

"I didn't have anything to say before, Harry Potter," Gryffindor said with a roguish grin. "I want to welcome you to my Chamber of Knowledge."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said politely.

"If you ever have questions, please feel free to ask me or any of my heirs," Gryffindor said kindly.

"I will. Thank you."

Gryffindor turned to Dumbledore and smiled warmly. "He'll do. Carry on."

"Yes, I thought he'd do, as well," Dumbledore agreed, then led Harry further into the Chamber.

"I'll do what?" Harry said in confusion.

"You'll do very well as Heir of Gryffindor," Dumbledore explained.

"Exactly what does that mean?"

"You'll see," Dumbledore said mysteriously. "It's not a simple thing to explain."

"OK," Harry said uncertainly. As they walked, he smiled and nodded at the various portraits, all of whom responded with warmth to his greetings. Suddenly, Harry stopped, his jaw dropping in surprise. He gasped, then moved close to a portrait. "Is that. . .?"

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore said, smiling fondly at the boy. "That's your father."

Harry turned to his professor. "He was Heir of Gryffindor too?"

"Yes."

Harry turned to study his dad's portrait. It was like looking in a mirror that was just a little bit off – the eyes didn't match, and Harry was now a good bit taller than his father. "How old was he here?"

"I'm seventeen," the portrait answered saucily. "Who are you and why do you look like me?"

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Harry gasped, then looked at Dumbledore. "How is this possible? He's talking with me, but he doesn't know me – I'm confused."

"When he was seventeen, he was dating your mother, not married to her," Dumbledore explained. "I'm afraid I never had the heart to tell him what happened. He's been quite happy thinking things were just as they were."

"He doesn't know?" Harry said, aghast.

"Hello! I'm right here!" James Potter said, waving his hands to get their attention and sounding exasperated.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, you are! Hi."

"Who are you?" James repeated.

"I'm your son, Harry."

"What?" James said, shocked.

"Harry, I'll leave you two to chat. I have some work to do over here," Dumbledore said, indicating a library just past James's portrait.

"OK," Harry said happily, pulling a chair away from the library table and sitting down in front of his father's portrait. "I'm your son, Dad. You married Lily Evans and had me a few years later."

"I married Lily?" the portrait said with delighted surprise. "Ah, that's wonderful! Are we brilliantly happy? Have you enjoyed your life with us?" He studied his son's face for a long moment. "You have her eyes," he said tenderly. "She has the most beautiful eyes. Wow. Lily and I have a son. Absolutely amazing!" He was quiet another moment, simply gazing at his son, then grinned and said, "How are the Marauders, anyway?"

Harry's face fell. "Erm. . . I have to tell you a lot of stuff, Dad," he began hesitantly. "You might want to sit down." He waited until James sat on the chair in his portrait, then began telling his father the story of his life. When he got to the point of Voldemort's attack, James was aghast.

"*Peter* betrayed us?" James leaped to his feet, outraged.

"Yes," Harry said, working hard to control his emotions. "You and Mum died when I was just over a year old. Voldemort killed you trying to kill me. That's how I got this scar," he said, pushing his fringe aside to reveal the now double zigzag scar on his forehead.

"I'm sorry," James said sadly. "And you – where did you live after that?"

"I grew up with the Dursleys," Harry said with disgust. "Mum's sister and her husband and their son Dudley."

"Petunia had a son? What's he like?"

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"Like his dad. Did you know Uncle Vernon?"

"No, I don't think I met him before this portrait was painted. Are they nice then?"

"Erm. . .no," Harry said honestly. He didn't want to make his father unhappy, but he also didn't want to lie to him.

"Did they treat you badly?" James said, his face sorrowful.

"You could say that. They hate anything to do with magic," Harry said, his voice filled with tension.

"What's your full name?" James asked after a moment's thought. He seemed to want to get onto more pleasant topics.

"Harry James Potter," Harry said, smiling at the look of pride on his dad's face.

"You're named after me," James said, his eyes shining. "Lily did that, I'm sure of it."

"I don't know. But I've always liked my name," Harry said sincerely.

Just then, Dumbledore came back. "Time to move on, Harry," he said.

"But –" Harry began.

"Wait! How's Sirius? How's Remus?" James asked imploringly.

"It's a very long story, James. Harry will be back frequently now, and he can tell you more then. Telling the story is very hard on him, as I'm sure you can imagine. Please allow me to get on with the work we have to do today, and you and Harry can visit again soon. All right?" Dumbledore said kindly.

"OK," James said, sagging into his chair, apparently exhausted by all he'd learned in such a short time. "You will tell me the rest, won't you, Harry?"

"Of course! I'll come and talk with you often. I don't remember the sound of your voice, so this is a real treat for me," Harry said sincerely.

James smiled. "All right, then. Off with you!"

Harry grinned and turned back to his headmaster. "Now what?"

"Since we're here, let's take care of this one little detail," Dumbledore said. He opened a door in the wall and pulled out a huge picture frame, leaning it against the wall next to James's portrait. Using his wand, he levitated the frame up to hanging height, then attached it to the wall with a Permanent Sticking Charm. "Stand in front of that, Harry," he instructed.

"Why?"

The Time of Destiny

"It's for your portrait," Dumbledore explained. "Oh, go look in the mirror over there and make sure you look the way you want to. This portrait will be here forever. You should be happy with how you appear in it," he said with a smile.

Harry moved to the mirror on the opposite wall and worked on his hair, made sure his glasses were clean and his robes relatively tidy. "OK, I guess I'm ready," he said with a nervous grin. "How do we do this?"

"Stand in front of the frame. I'll cast a spell and while I'm casting it, you will need to talk to me about anything at all. The portrait needs to get a sample of your expressions, your voice, your vocal inflections, the way you speak, your body language, all of that, so it will be a true portrait."

"I thought artists did this kind of portrait," Harry said as Dumbledore began the spell.

"Most of the paintings in the castle are by artists, that's true," Dumbledore replied, "but these were all done this way. This place is secret. No artist could be allowed down here unless he was the Heir, so this spell was developed to create the portraits without the need for the artist. I suppose it might have been an early form of photography."

"Where's your portrait?" Harry said, trying to think of things to say as Dumbledore continued to wave his wand.

"Around the corner here. Keep talking. Talk about anything."

"Can I talk to my dad while you're doing this?"

"Of course. Go ahead."

"Dad, Remus is a professor here," Harry told James. "He put some memories in a Pensieve so I could see you and Mum." He had to stop himself before he added, "and Sirius." He hadn't told him about Sirius's imprisonment or death yet. "I saw you playing Quidditch. You were brilliant! I play Seeker on the Gryffindor team."

"That's wonderful!" James said. "Are you good?"

"Pretty good," Harry admitted.

Dumbledore chuckled. "He's being modest, James," he said. "Harry is the best Seeker Hogwarts has seen in the last century. He's being scouted by professional Quidditch teams."

"You are?" James said excitedly. "Wow, that's fantastic! What teams?"

Harry and James talked about Quidditch quite happily while Dumbledore worked on the charm.

"Harry, why don't you tell him a bit about Ginny?" Dumbledore suggested. "I'm sure he'd like to hear about her."

"Ginny?" James said, a teasing light in his eyes. "Is she your lady love?"

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah, actually, she is," Harry replied. He began to tell his father about her, blushing a bit at first, then warming to his topic as his father proved to be a good and enthusiastic listener.

"A redhead, eh? It must run in our family to fall in love with redheads," James said when Harry slowed down.

"Maybe so," Harry agreed, grinning happily. Sharing such a conversation with his father was a treat he'd never expected to have.

"All done," Dumbledore said at last. "James, I'm going to have to take Harry off to do some work now. You'll have the portrait of him to chat with while we're gone."

"OK," James said, turning to look toward Harry's portrait.

"Professor," Harry said quietly. "Can my portrait move between frames like the paintings upstairs?"

"Yes, Harry, it can," Dumbledore said, understanding at once.

The portrait of Harry had been listening to their conversation, looking from Harry to Dumbledore as if watching a tennis tournament. When Dumbledore finished speaking, the portrait of Harry turned to face the side of his frame closest to James's frame.

"How do I do this?" the portrait of Harry asked.

"Just start walking toward the side of the frame," Dumbledore told him.

A moment later, Harry and James were both in James's frame. "Dad?" Harry's portrait said hesitantly.

"Harry," James said, and then they were in each other's arms, hugging like the long-lost family they were.

The real Harry stood with tears in his eyes. "I never thought I'd be jealous of a picture," he murmured when he noticed Dumbledore watching him. James and Harry were still embracing, murmuring quietly to each other. James only came up to Harry's chin, so Harry had bent over and enveloped his father in his long arms.

Dumbledore rubbed the boy's back sympathetically. "I didn't bring you down here to add to your depression. I'm sorry."

"No!" Harry replied. "No, it doesn't make me depressed! Well, in a way, but. . .I can talk to him now! I can hear stories about him and Sirius and Remus, we can talk about Quidditch, and Mum, and . . .it's wonderful, Professor! Not depressing!"

"All right, then, lad. But I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

The Time of Destiny

"James's portrait, like some other things down here, have the same kind of danger as the Mirror of Erised. You can lose yourself in them. I don't want that to happen to you. Promise me you'll be careful to limit your time with your father's portrait and the other things I'm going to show you. All right?"

Harry took a deep breath. This was a serious restriction, but he could understand the reasoning behind it. "All right."

"Wonderful. I have so much to show you! Come along," Dumbledore said, leading Harry around the corner.

"Whoa! Hermione would love to see this!" Harry breathed. Before him rose rank after rank of books in a tremendous room. Shelves of books ringed the walls and more shelves were lined up neatly side by side through the centre of the room. Work tables were scattered around the huge room. Comfortable library chairs ringed the tables. Cushy armchairs and ottomans were scattered around the room, as well. "It's a whole library! Are these the same books as the ones in the school library?"

"No. Many of these books are one of a kind. They go all the way back to Merlin's time, actually. These are the books of the Heirs of Gryffindor, ones they've collected for reference as well as some they've written. Godric Gryffindor has a tremendous collection. And the ones Merlin wrote are, as you might imagine, quite entertaining." He smiled at the thought, then grew serious when he saw the question in Harry's eyes. "Your father didn't live long enough to add much to the collection, Harry. There are a few papers of his, that's all. He died before he really assumed the mantle of the Heir." He saw the disappointment in the boy's eyes.

"What happens if the Heir dies before the new Heir is seventeen?" Harry asked suddenly. "I mean, if you'd already been gone, and my dad died, how would I have known?"

"That's an excellent question, Harry. In each case, the Heir designates someone else of the bloodline as their 'second,' I suppose you would say. So in our case, Minerva McGonagall, who is a cousin of mine, would be the one to tell you about your being the Heir."

"But I don't have any family left," Harry said plaintively. "Who will I have as my second?"

"You have some very distant cousins here and there, Harry. We'll find an appropriate person for you," Dumbledore promised. He stood thinking for a moment. "Ah. I know the perfect person," he said with a smile.

"Who?"

"Neville Longbottom. He's a very distant cousin of yours," Dumbledore informed him. "But there's no rush. I'll think about it a bit more, maybe do some research on the bloodlines and see if there's anyone else so you can have a choice."

"Neville's fine with me," Harry said. "He just has to know what to tell the next Heir, right?"

"Yes."

"What if. . . what if I never have children? Who will be the next Heir?"

The Time of Destiny

"If both Professor McGonagall and I are gone by that time, Mr. Longbottom, or whoever you choose as your second, will need to check the bloodlines to see who the possible Heir may be. Then there are other things he'll need to do to be positive this is the right person. But that's a long time in the future, and probably won't come to pass anyway, Harry. Let me show you some interesting things," Dumbledore said. He could see Harry was worrying about the future, his thoughts going to a dark place he didn't want Harry to visit now.

"OK," Harry said, understanding he was being diverted from that course of thought.

Dumbledore moved to a large book on a tall stand. "This is the catalogue for the library. Anything you want to look up, just look for the subject in here and it will direct you to the proper book. Also, when new books are added to the shelves, this catalogue automatically updates itself with the name and author of the book and a listing of its contents in the proper categories."

"Wow, that's some spell!" Harry said, realizing how complex a spell it would require to have the catalogue do all those tasks automatically.

"Yes, it is. One of the Heirs had a wife who was a librarian. He worked out the spell based on her suggestions. It's quite useful, actually," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Why don't you browse the shelves and get an idea what's in here? I have a bit of work to do. If you see a book that interests you, go ahead and take it down. Oh, one more thing. Before you start browsing, be sure to tap the catalogue and say, 'Twentieth Century English,' unless you want to try to read Old English or some foreign language."

"You mean the catalogue translates the books as well?" Harry said, astonished.

"It's something like a Glamour Charm, but yes, it translates the books. The spell only lasts for four hours, so if you're working down here longer, you'll need to return the book you're using to the shelf and do the charm on the catalogue again."

"Cool!" Harry breathed, following Dumbledore's instructions for the Translation Charm, then browsing the stacks of books.

Some time later, both Dumbledore and Harry were immersed in reading heavy old books. Harry looked up at his headmaster. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Would it be possible to take one of these books up to show Hermione? This one has information on the Animagus transformation that might help her."

"No, I'm sorry, Harry. The books can't leave the Chamber. There are spells on the Chamber that protect them from deteriorating with age. If they left the Chamber, they might fall apart. However, you may bring your friends down here if you wish – but they must be sworn to secrecy."

"They can come down here?"

The Time of Destiny

"Normally, only the Heir's family is allowed down here, but Ginny, Ron and Hermione are like a family to you, aren't they?" he said with a smile. "It will be fine to bring them here. They won't remember how you opened the Chamber, since the Sorting Hat won't tell them how it's done. It will be new to them every time, and they'll forget it right away. But the Chamber itself, they will remember. Just explain to them that it must remain a secret. Actually, one of the Weasleys could be your second, if you want. They're distantly related to you."

"They are?"

"Yes, quite distantly, but close enough that any of the Weasleys could be your second. Mr. Longbottom is more closely related to you than they are, but the second doesn't have to be a close relation."

"Cool!" Harry said. "Ron could be my second, then!"

"Yes, he could," Dumbledore agreed.

They went back to reading for a while. Eventually, Dumbledore finished the notes he'd been taking, shut his book and shelved it. "Ready to see some more?" he asked Harry.

"Yes," Harry said eagerly.

"Write down the name of the book and the page number so you can find it again," Dumbledore suggested. "You cannot put a book mark in any of them. They're simply too fragile."

"Right," Harry said, making a note of where he'd stopped reading, then shelving the book. When he finished, he turned an excited face to his headmaster. "What's next?"

"Come this way." Dumbledore led him out of the library room and into a room full of a wide variety of instruments. Harry walked through the room quietly, careful not to touch anything, staring around him in awe. There was a huge lunarscope, several Dark Detectors, instruments similar to those in Dumbledore's office, and in the centre of the room, quite a large crystal ball.

"Was Gryffindor a seer?" Harry asked curiously as he noticed the sphere.

"No. This isn't a crystal ball, Harry. It's a Seeing Glass."

"What's that?"

"It shows you people you want to see. Look into it – don't break eye contact with it or you'll break the spell – and think of someone you'd like to see."

That was easy. Harry gazed into the globe and thought of Ginny. Instantly, she appeared. "There's Ginny!"

"Where is she? What is she doing?" Dumbledore prompted.

Harry chuckled fondly. "She has ink on her nose. She's in class, taking notes."

The Time of Destiny

"Bend down and look through the side of the glass, then move around it, standing up tall and bending down low, to see all the parts of the room. Tell me who's sitting next to her. Tell me which row she's sitting in. You should be able to see a great deal of detail."

Harry followed his instructions, heeding the warning Dumbledore gave again to not break eye contact with the glass. "She's in the third row from the front, sitting next to Colin Creevy. Luna Lovegood is sitting behind her. Professor Flitwick is walking between desks, lecturing on something. Can we hear what they're saying somehow?"

"No, this is a visual aid only, I'm afraid," Dumbledore told him. "If you can create a charm to make it also allow the Heir to hear what's being said, that would be a tremendous help."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because many of us have tried and none of us have succeeded," Dumbledore said with a shrug. Then he smiled. "It's your turn."

Harry chuckled. "My turn, eh? What else is it my turn for?"

"Many things. All in good time, though, lad. See who else you can find in the glass."

Harry glanced up, breaking the charm, then looked into the glass again, thinking of Ron. He laughed. "Ron's asleep in class again," he said. "Oh, I suppose I shouldn't have told you that," he said, his cheeks pink.

"I am aware that some classes don't capture students' interest as much as others," Dumbledore said benignly. "What else can you see?"

"Hermione's taking notes. Parvati is in front of her, next to Lavender. Neville is next to Hermione, and Dean's next to him. Ron's face is about to fall off of his hand. He's really sound asleep." Harry laughed out loud then. "Hermione just poked him awake. He looks silly." Then his face pinked again, remembering that he was usually asleep in class whenever Ron was. "Has to be History. He doesn't sleep like that anywhere else since we got out of Divination." He heard Dumbledore chuckle quietly. "Professor Binns is lecturing, as usual. Everything looks just as it always does, except that I'm not there."

"Let's see who else you can see. Try another vision."

Harry thought a moment, and then his face became very serious. He gasped when the vision in the glass changed to show Voldemort sitting at a table, reading something and taking notes on it. "I see Voldemort."

"You do?" Dumbledore said sharply. "No, don't look up! Don't lose the vision," he urged. "Where is he?"

"In a room, sitting at a table. He's reading something and making notes."

"Move around. Tell me what else you can see. Look at what he's reading. Can you make it out? Can you find anything recognizable in the room, or out of the window, perhaps?"

The Time of Destiny

"Do you mean I've just found him? You didn't know where he was?" Harry said in astonishment.

"You have a connection with Voldemort, Harry. He puts wards around himself that keep the glass from seeing him."

"He's aware of this glass?" Harry said, startled enough that he almost broke eye contact with the glass.

"No, but he knows there are a wide variety of ways to search for him," Dumbledore explained. "Move around. Tell me what you see."

Harry straightened up and tried to read over his enemy's shoulder. "It's a potion recipe," he said, squinting as he tried to read it. "I can't make out the title. He has his hand over that part of the page. But from the ingredients," he said, struggling to read them past the man's shoulder, "it looks like a . . . preservative type of potion, I think. I mean, one that will preserve things, make them last a long time."

"For his eyes, most likely," Dumbledore said.

"Yeah," Harry said darkly. "Can he tell he's being watched?"

"No, he shouldn't notice you watching him at all," Dumbledore assured him. "Where is he? Can you tell?"

"It's a normal-looking room. Plaster-type walls – the walls and windows look like those in a Muggle house, I mean. But he's using candles and oil lamps, not electricity. I can see a hill with a few trees on it through the window." Harry squatted down and moved around, trying to see more of the room, or something else outside the window. "I'm sorry, Professor. I can't see anything that's recognizable, or that's unique enough to make it easy to find."

"He chooses his lairs well," Dumbledore sighed. "They're normally quite difficult to find. The fact that you can see him in the Seeing Glass is a wonderful thing, Harry. We might be able to track him down faster now."

"Great," Harry said grimly, staring hard into the glass as he stood up and bent over the top of it. Suddenly, he made a growling sound.

"What is it?" Dumbledore asked warily.

"His potion. It's to preserve his Eye Restoring Potion. I can read his notes. He's bending over the book right now. But he's written that he needs more eyeballs and three human spleens."

"Spleens?"

"Something to do with purifying the blood, I think," Harry said. "His notes are a bit cryptic and his handwriting's atrocious." He jumped back suddenly, falling to the floor.

"What happened?" Dumbledore asked as he helped the young man to his feet.

The Time of Destiny

"He looked right at me! I thought you said he wouldn't know I was there!" Harry was panting as if he'd just run a race.

"Did he look as if he knew he was being watched?" Dumbledore said in concern.

"He seemed to be suspicious of something, but I broke the contact as soon as he looked at me," Harry said, trying to breathe normally again. "What does it look like to people who are being watched? Can they see a shimmer from the glass being in the room or anything?"

"No, nothing," Dumbledore assured him. "Spleens and more eyes? Are the spleens for the potion?"

"I think so," Harry said, shuddering at the thought. His good mood had completely evaporated.

"Well done, lad. That's enough of the Seeing Glass for today. This is one of those things I don't want you to spend too much time on, all right?"

"Yeah, no problem," Harry agreed, still shaken by what he'd observed and what it meant. More people were going to be sacrificed for the monster's experiments. More people were going to die because Harry Potter had the bright idea to scratch out the eyes of Lord Voldemort. He tried to shake off the dark mood that had overtaken him again so suddenly, but was unsuccessful.

Dumbledore sighed. A whole morning's effort at brightening the boy's attitude, totally wasted. "I'm sorry, lad. I should not have pushed you to stay in that vision."

"No, it's all right," Harry said. "We need to know as much as possible about what he's up to, right?"

"Yes, but not at the cost of your peace of mind."

"I'm fine," Harry said dully.

"No, you're not, but we'll work on that," Dumbledore said stoutly. "Come on, I have more to show you." A long walk later, they were in a huge room with strangely dark walls.

"What is this place? It's as big as the Great Hall!" Harry said in amazement.

"It's under the Great Hall, actually," Dumbledore told him. "This is the Spell Chamber. The walls are made to absorb spells without being damaged and without allowing them to bounce off. So we can practice spells that aren't explosive down here. Watch." He cast a spell at the wall and the red light of his Stunner just went into the dark, oddly soft-looking wall and disappeared.

"Cool," Harry said, trying to get back to the good mood he'd had only a short while ago.

Dumbledore realized the room wasn't capturing Harry's attention sufficiently and sighed. "Come on, Harry. Let's go to my office for some lunch. I believe we've earned it."

The Time of Destiny

They followed this routine for several days, working in the office or the Chamber, never going into the corridor or seeing any other students until Harry had Quidditch practice one afternoon. He was looking forward to seeing his friends, and was whistling cheerfully, his broom on his shoulder, as he headed toward the locker rooms.

"HARRY!" Ginny cried, running to him eagerly. Harry laid his broom down and grabbed her and swung her around happily. "You look so much better, baby!" she said, laughing as he swung her faster, then finally set her on her feet.

"I feel better," he said with a crooked grin, then bent down and kissed her soundly.

"How did Dumbledore make you feel so much better so quickly?" she asked as she laced her fingers through his.

Harry bent down and picked up his broom, then led her toward the locker room. "We've talked for hours and hours and hours," he said quietly. "And what he's teaching me is fascinating, so he's keeping my mind far too occupied to brood. But the best thing is, I've learned so much in just these few days, I feel a lot better prepared than I did."

"Better prepared?"

"To kill Voldemort. To defeat him completely. I had an idea how to do it and had started working on it a bit myself. Now Professor Dumbledore is helping me with it. He thinks it will work!" Harry's eyes were bright and excited.

"Wonderful! You'll have to tell me all about it," she said happily.

"I want to work it out more before I try to explain it to anyone," he said. "I'm still sorting out the whole concept. But it's cool. I think it will work."

"And then we can get on with our lives," she said happily.

He stopped and looked down at her, his eyes soft and warm, a sweet smile on his face. "Yes," he said, "we can." He leaned down to give her a serious kiss but was interrupted by Colin's excited shout.

"Harry! Harry's here!" Colin cried when he spotted his friend near the door.

"Hey, mates! Good to see you!" Harry said as he entered the locker room. His team mates were pounding him on the back, shaking his hand, ruffling his hair, greeting him with all the enthusiasm anyone could hope for.

"Why aren't you going to classes anymore?" Euan asked when things settled down a bit.

"I thought it was all explained," Harry said uncertainly, looking at Ron, then Ginny, both of whom nodded but looked uneasy. "I was told the professors would tell you lot about it."

"They did, but. . .," Euan said, but then his voice trailed off as he realized he should have kept his mouth shut.

The Time of Destiny

Harry saw the boy's discomfort. "It's OK, Euan," he said kindly. He looked at his team mates, all of whom, except the Weasleys, looked just as eager to hear Harry's explanation as Euan did. "All right, you lot, sit down, and I'll give you the short version, OK?" They needed no further invitation. They all sat perfectly still, looking up at him expectantly. Even Ginny and Ron seemed to be eager to hear what he had to say, and they knew what had pushed Dumbledore to this decision. He sighed, wondering exactly how to begin. "What did the professors tell you?"

"McGonagall told us that you were in training with Professor Dumbledore and didn't need to go to class anymore," Euan said promptly.

"Are you Dumbledore's apprentice?" Colin asked eagerly.

"Apprentice?" Harry said, considering. "I guess you could say that, yeah."

"Why did he decide he needed an apprentice?" Dennis asked.

"I don't think that was his initial idea," Harry said, trying to find the simplest way to explain things. "Um. . .you all know I have to fight Voldemort." They nodded. "You also know I only have a few months left at Hogwarts." More nods. "Dumbledore thinks I need more training to be ready to defeat Voldemort than I can get in the last few months of Hogwarts. The Aurors School has already accepted me, so N.E.W.T.s aren't really necessary – they said they'll understand if I don't manage to take them. Ron and I actually tested out of some classes in Auror School because of our training with the D.A., isn't that cool?" He saw smiles and nods from the older kids.

"What do you mean, 'tested out'?" Fiona asked.

"We already know what they're going to teach in some classes, so we don't have to take those classes in Auror School," Harry explained.

"Wow!" Fiona said, obviously impressed. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks," Harry said. "So anyway, Dumbledore decided he can teach me what I need to know faster than I can get it in class, and faster than I could do if I had to deal with homework from other classes. So I'm spending *very* long days with him, from dawn until the wee hours of the morning most of the time, trying to learn everything he can teach me. That's why I've been staying up there in the guest quarters off of his office, so we can work long into the night if we want to, without me disturbing my roommates by coming in so late. I'll still be taking a few classes, the ones he can't cover for me. And I'll still be here for Quidditch practice and for D.A. meetings. After we get a bit further in my lessons, I'll be able to stay in Gryffindor Tower again, because we won't need to work so many hours per day once we get a routine worked out. That's it. OK?" His team mates nodded, and Harry put his broom over his shoulder again. "Anyone for Quidditch?" he said with a grin.

"How was practice?" Dumbledore asked when Harry returned to his office.

"It was great! I wish I could fly every day," Harry said happily as he stood his broom in the corner of the guest room where he was staying.

The Time of Destiny

"When you're playing professional Quidditch, you'll be flying quite often," the headmaster said with a smile.

"Yeah, that will be brilliant," Harry replied, his eyes dancing at the thought. He went to his desk and picked up the spell book he'd been working with last, then looked at Dumbledore seriously. "I had to explain to them why I'm up here."

"I thought that would come up," Dumbledore said. "The teachers have explained it to their classes as well as possible, but I expected your friends would want to hear the story directly from you. What did you tell them?"

"I left out the vision I had to recover from," Harry said with a shrug, "and told them the rest. I didn't tell Ginny or Ron about the Chamber yet. I thought I'd wait until I could show it to them."

"That's probably a good idea," Dumbledore concurred.

"Colin asked if I'm your apprentice," Harry said, watching his headmaster carefully.

Dumbledore chuckled. "That's an excellent question. I suppose you are. An apprentice in any trade tries to learn everything he can from the master craftsman. That's what we're doing here – I'm trying to teach you all I know. So yes, Harry, you are my apprentice."

"That's cool," Harry said with a smile. "What are we working on next?"

Several days later, Hermione and Ron were trudging down to Hagrid's for Care of Magical Creatures class.

"I can't stand it!" Hermione said huffily after walking in silence for some time.

"What?" Ron said, looking at her curiously.

"Harry's not here! He said he was going to keep taking Care of Magical Creatures, and that he would come to class today, but he's not here! Do you see him anywhere?" she said, looking up at him.

"Nope."

"He and I only have two classes together now, and when he's not in those. . . . I didn't realize I'd miss him so much," she said sadly. "We always have such fun in this class."

"Yeah," Ron replied. "I miss him too. I hate being the only Gryffindor in Inter-Beings Languages." He put his arm comfortingly around her shoulders as they continued down the hill. When they rounded Hagrid's hut and headed for the paddock beyond it, they were surprised to see a glint of light in the edge of the trees. A moment later, Harry jogged over to them.

"There you are! Where've you been?" Hermione said eagerly.

The Time of Destiny

Harry shrugged. "I was running late, so I flashed here."

"Must be nice!" Ron said with a laugh.

"Yeah," he replied. "So how are you two doing? I miss you."

"We miss you too," Hermione said, slipping her hand through his arm and pulling him close.

"We're fine. Buried under N.E.W.T. revision," Ron said. "You're lucky you don't have to do it!"

"Yeah," Harry said lightly, biting back the retort that wanted to burst from him. *I don't have to do normal work because I have to learn how to destroy Voldemort. I'd much rather be living a normal life! Don't you know that?*

"What's Dumbledore teaching you now?" Hermione asked.

"I conjured an elephant a little while ago," Harry said, looking quite pleased with himself.

"An elephant? Why?" Hermione said, her eyes wide.

"Because it's such a large animal. He showed me how to control it, as well. It was pretty cool!"

"Wicked! How do you control a conjured animal?" Ron said excitedly.

"It depends on how you conjure it, and what you conjure and a lot of other variables," Harry explained. "I made sure the elephant I conjured was a trained one, not a wild one, for starters. That made him easier to control."

"What did you have him do?" Hermione said eagerly.

"I had him carry logs with his trunk and tusks, and I had him knock on Hagrid's door with his trunk – Hagrid loved it!" Harry said, chuckling.

"Did he keep it?" Ron said warily, glancing around to see if there was an elephant lurking somewhere nearby.

"No, I vanished it after I finished with it," Harry replied.

"So how will that help you conquer Voldemort?" Hermione said.

"I can conjure large animals and send them charging at the Death Eaters, for one thing," Harry said, "very much like that nasty beast that attacked Ron, Remus and me."

"But they might trample the D.A. members!" she said in concern.

"That's something we're working on, trying to set parameters on the spell so it will avoid trampling certain people. We don't know if it will work or not, but we're playing with it."

The Time of Destiny

"So you're inventing more spells?" she said, sounding wistful.

"Sometimes it's necessary," he replied with a shrug.

When class was over, Harry said, "Can you help me catch up with Inter-Beings Languages, Ron? And Potions, Hermione? It's time I started going to them again."

"Why take Potions if Dumbledore's letting you out of class?" Ron said curiously.

"Aurors need to be well-trained in Potions," Harry replied, then continued with an easy grin, "and I seem to get poisoned on a regular basis, so knowing antidotes is a good idea for me."

Ron snorted with laughter. "Yeah, you're right. When do you want to go over the stuff you've missed?"

"Dumbledore said I can stay out until eight o'clock tonight," Harry replied, "so I can eat dinner with you lot and go back to the Common Room to study until then. Is that OK with you?"

"Yeah, great! Ginny will be glad to see you, mate," Ron said.

"I'll be glad to see her too."

"Harry!" Ginny cried when Harry showed up in the Great Hall for dinner that evening. She got up from the table and threw herself into his arms.

"Hi, baby! I've missed you!" he said, giving her a hug and setting her back on her feet. Anything more and the whole Hall would have been filled with hooting students cheering them on.

"Talking to you on our rings at night just isn't enough," Ginny said, leaning against his arm after they sat down together.

"Yeah, I know," he said, leaning over to kiss the top of her head. "That's the worst part of this. But the rest of it is brilliant. We'll manage. I think it's good training for next year when I'll be off at Auror School and you'll still be here."

"I don't think I'll be able to stand you being that far away for so long," she said, sighing heavily. "I can barely stand this much separation, and you're still at Hogwarts!"

"We'll manage," he assured her. He looked across the table at Ron and Hermione and grinned suddenly. "Are you three terribly busy this evening?"

"Just homework – normal stuff," Hermione answered. "Why?"

"Come with me after dinner. I have something to show you. Bring your books, we can study too," he said, his eyes dancing. Dumbledore had told him that morning that he could invite his friends to visit sometime soon if he wanted to, and he was welcome to show them the Chamber.

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"What are you doing?" Hermione asked in shock when she saw Harry opening the display case in Dumbledore's office housing Gryffindor's sword.

"Just watch," Harry said with a mischievous grin. He drew the sword down the picture frame's edge revealing the opening in the wall.

"What's this?" Ginny asked leaning into the opening.

"Come on, I'll explain as we go," Harry said, ushering his friends into the entryway.

"Are you sure we're allowed?" Hermione said nervously as the wall closed behind them.

Harry was quiet a moment. "I told you when I brought you to the office that I was going to tell you things and show you things that you must keep secret. This doorway is one of them. What I'm about to tell you is another, as is the stuff I'm going to show you below here."

"Below?" Hermione asked nervously, glancing at the slide.

"Patience, Hermione," Harry chided her gently. "Here's the thing. I'm the Heir of Gryffindor. This is Gryffindor's Chamber of Knowledge. It's like Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets, but it isn't dangerous." He put his hands on Ginny's shoulders. She was understandably nervous, especially after he mentioned the Chamber of Secrets, where she'd nearly died her first year at Hogwarts. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you, don't worry. This is a good place." He turned to the slide. "This is the way down. Ron, you should go first. It's made for men, and the girls are so small, they may go shooting off the end if you're not there to catch them. It's just a big spiral slide, that's all. It's wicked fast, and loads of fun. Gryffindor apparently had a wonderful sense of humour and was rather playful. He has fun things like this in various parts of the Chamber."

"How do we get back up?" Hermione asked, looking worried.

"I'll show you when we get down there," Harry promised. "Right, then. Ron? Go on. It's most fun if you hold your hands over your head."

"OK," Ron said, putting his bag in his lap as he sat down, then pushing off and putting his hands over his head. Shouts of laughter soon wafted up the shaft to the three waiting above. "I'm down!" Ron called a few moments later. "That was brilliant!"

"OK, I'm sending Hermione down," Harry said, helping his friend to sit down at the top of the slide with her bag in her lap. "You don't have to hold your bag. It will stay in your lap, no problem."

Hermione just looked frightened and held her bag tightly.

"Did you ever ride down slides in playgrounds when you were little?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

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"Yes. But I could see where they were going!" she said uneasily.

"This one's going to toss you right into Ron's waiting arms," Harry promised. "Off you go," he said, giving her the gentlest push possible.

Hermione was quiet for a moment, then started moaning, which turned into a squeal and finally laughter as she got used to the ride and wound up in Ron's arms, exactly as promised. "I'm down!" her laughing voice called up the shaft. "It was great fun once I got used to it!"

"I knew you'd like it," Harry called down. "I'm sending Ginny now." He gave her a kiss and helped her get her bag settled in her arms, then pushed her off gently. Ginny laughed and squealed joyfully the whole way down.

"I'm down!" she called. "Come on, Harry!"

"Coming," he said, giving himself a hard push off so he'd slide down as fast as possible. "WOOOOOOOO-HOOOOOOOOO!" he cried as he slid down the spiral, landing neatly on his feet by his friends when he reached the bottom.

"That was so much fun!" Ginny cried. "Can we do it again?"

Harry laughed. "I have a lot to show you. You can do it again when you come back, OK?"

"OK," she agreed readily.

"Harry," Hermione said, looking up the spiral slide, "how do we go back? And where are we?"

"You're a hundred feet below ground, under Hogwarts. And to get back up, I touch this golden griffin," he said, demonstrating, "and the slide disappears and becomes a lift, see? Dumbledore and I are the only ones who the griffin will work for, but the lift will work for any of you when it's there. You just step onto it – and it will hold all of you at once, don't worry – grasp the handle and bend your knees. It spirals up the way the slide came down, and it's wicked fast like the slide!" He went on to explain about the reasons for Gryffindor creating the Chamber, and then started them on the tour. When they reached his dad's portrait, James waved and said, "Harry! Who are the babes?"

"Hi, Dad," Harry said with a grin. "I'd tell Mum on you for looking at other girls if it would do any good."

"Lily knows I only love her," James said with a cheeky grin that faded for a moment. "Well, she knew it, anyway." He forcibly brightened his face and said, "Introduce me to your friends, although I suspect I know who that pretty little redhead is."

"You're right, Ginny's my girlfriend," Harry said. "And this is Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. They're my best friends."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," he said, smirking at Harry after gazing appreciatively at Ginny. "Very nice to meet all of you, especially you, Ginny."

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"Erm, thanks," Ginny said nervously. She turned to Harry while Hermione and Ron were speaking to James and murmured, "Is that really your dad?"

"Yeah, when he was seventeen. He's more like a brother than my dad since we're the same age. It's kind of weird, but at least I get to talk to him now."

"Harry, you're in the next frame!" Hermione said. "Nice picture!"

"Thanks!" the portrait of Harry said with a cheeky grin. "Look what I can do, Hermione!" With that, he walked into James's frame and the two of them stood side by side, Harry's hand on his father's shoulder.

"You really look like brothers, mate," Ron said in awe, staring at the two seventeen year old Potters in the frame in front of him. "You're almost twins!"

"Yeah, almost," James said happily. "You play Quidditch, don't you? Harry, here," he said, indicating the portrait Harry, "has told me loads about all of you. Ginny, he's awfully sweet on you."

"Yeah, I know," Ginny said, blushing.

"Son," James said importantly to the real Harry, "I think you've done well there. Pretty as a picture, plays Quidditch, red hair – who could ask for more?"

"Thanks," Harry said, laughing. "Come on, you lot, he'll keep us here all evening if we aren't careful. See you later, Dad." Harry led his friends around the corner despite their protests.

"But. . .but Harry! That's your dad! We want to talk to him!" Hermione said anxiously. "What could be more . . .oh!" she gasped as she rounded the corner and saw the library. "Wow."

"Yeah. This is where I expect you'll want to spend most of your time. We can do homework here, and there are reference books here that don't exist anywhere else," Harry said. He showed them how the catalogue worked and activated the Translation Charm. "Now all of the books are in modern English so we can read them more easily."

"Wicked!" Ron said, gazing at shelf after shelf of books of spells, jinxes, hexes, charms, and more magic than he'd ever even heard of.

After they'd spent time exploring the library, Harry showed them the Seeing Glass and the other instruments, and the Spell Chamber. "There's loads more to see down here, but these are the things I know best so far," he explained. He glanced up at one of the many small mirrors near the ceiling. "Professor Dumbledore has company coming. We'll need to stay down here until they leave."

"How do you know?" Ginny asked.

"Have you noticed the mirrors near the ceiling everywhere?" His friends nodded. "Those are sort of like a Foe Glass. They show when someone's approaching the office door in the corridor, when they're on the spiral staircase, and when they're in the office. If we see

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someone coming and want to talk with them, we flash to the office before the person gets to the top of the spiral staircase, so it appears we've never left the office," he concluded.

"Wicked!" Ron breathed. "Do you need to be up there, mate? We can wait for you down here."

Harry glanced up at the mirror. "It's Professor Snape. Yeah, I should go, I think. You lot stay in the library so you won't get lost, OK? I'll come back for you in a bit." He led them back to the library, where they settled down to do their homework. "See you," Harry said, then turned into a phoenix and flashed away.

Harry reappeared in his quarters, changed back into himself and hurried into the office. "Do you want me here? I saw Professor Snape approaching the office door."

"Yes, I'm glad you came up. Are they enjoying themselves?" Dumbledore said with a smile.

"They're having a great time. I left them in the library," Harry said, sitting at a small table near Dumbledore's desk and checking the small silver instruments on it. "Dung's back in the Hog's Head. He's finished in Knockturn Alley, then?"

"For the moment. We had a report of some Death Eater activity near Hogsmeade," Dumbledore said. "I asked him to check into it." Just then, Snape knocked on the door. "Come in," Dumbledore said pleasantly.

"Headmaster, I have news," Snape said urgently as he rushed into the room, then glared at Harry. "If we could have a moment?"

"You can say whatever it is in front of Harry," Dumbledore said mildly. "He's my apprentice. I'm keeping no more secrets from him."

Snape sighed heavily, then nodded. "As you wish. The Dark Lord has the giants and mountain trolls camped across a valley from each other. He plans to use them to attack Muggle villages, possibly even in whatever *battles* may come." He looked significantly at Harry as he said this.

"Do you know their location?" Dumbledore said eagerly.

"Yes." He named a town in the most mountainous region of Wales.

Dumbledore's eyes flitted from Snape to Harry. "Are you up for an adventure?"

"Headmaster, surely you're not suggesting—"

"Harry needs to learn diplomacy as well as battle tactics and spells, don't you think?" Dumbledore said mildly. He turned back to Harry. "Well?"

"Uh. . .what do you want me to do?" Harry said cautiously, having leaped into too many adventures without checking them out first.

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"You're learning!" Dumbledore said approvingly. "You and I will be emissaries to the giants. We'll let the Ministry deal with the trolls – they can't be reasoned with at all and will simply have to be moved by force. You and I will approach the giants and try to turn them to our side."

"OK," Harry said, wondering what he was getting himself into this time.

"Did you have fun?" Harry asked his friends as he escorted them to the office door. He hadn't told them what Snape wanted, nor what it meant for his own immediate future. He didn't want to worry them any more than necessary.

"It was brilliant!" Ron enthused. "I don't know if I liked the slide or the lift best!"

"And the library!" Hermione breathed in awe. "I could spend years exploring it!"

"I was just glad to spend some time with you," Ginny murmured, her arms tight around Harry's waist.

"Me too," he assured her. "Thanks for the help on the homework, guys. I'll try to make it to class regularly now, at least Potions, Inter-Beings Languages and Care of Magical Creatures."

"Cool. Let us know when we can get together again!" Ron said with a grin as he held the office door for the girls.

Hermione stood on tiptoe and kissed Harry on the cheek. "I miss you being with us all the time."

"Me too," he said, kissing her in return. "See you." He gave Ginny a lingering kiss and stood waving to them as they rode the spiral staircase down to the main door. He sighed and turned back into the office, ready to shoulder his burdens again.

Several days later, Dumbledore and Harry stood looking across a valley cupped between three mountains. The valley was filled with a strange mist that climbed half-way up the shoulders of the surrounding mountains.

"What do you see, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, watching the young man as he scanned the area.

"Fog when there shouldn't be fog," Harry said, a puzzled look on his face. "It's too warm for fog. I don't smell anything, so it isn't smoke. What is that?"

"Very good," Dumbledore said with a pleased smile. "Take your wand and reach toward the fog. Tell me what you feel."

"But I can't touch it from here," Harry began.

"That doesn't matter. Just point your wand in its direction."

"And I'm supposed to feel something?"

Dumbledore nodded.

Harry held his wand out as instructed and concentrated on his feelings. "I feel . . . something dark. Something cold. Something . . . I feel magic! Magic's been done here, dark magic. Is that right?"

"Excellent! Now, how do we get this fog to lift so we can see what we came to see?"

"I don't know," Harry said honestly.

"Think about it. You can work this out, Harry. Concentrate. Let your wand and your senses speak to you," Dumbledore instructed.

Harry held his wand out again, not certain how to do what Dumbledore wanted. *Let my wand and senses speak to me. What does that mean?* he thought in confusion. *One step at a time*, he decided, and concentrated on clearing his mind. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, finally achieving the soft, relaxed focus that worked best for him. A moment later, his eyes still closed, his hand began to move and a soft incantation fell from his lips. When his hand stopped moving and the words stopped flowing, he opened his eyes. The fog was gone. "What happened?" he said in amazement. "Did I do that? Or did you?"

"You did it yourself, Harry," Dumbledore said, obviously pleased with his student. "You sensed the spell used and reversed it. Tell me how you did it."

"I don't really know. I . . . I, erm, sort of heard a voice in my head saying an incantation, and then I just knew how to reverse it, so I said the right words. I didn't really *think* about it, it just kind of happened," he said with a shrug.

"Excellent! You're becoming more intuitive with your magic! Well done, Harry, really. Were you aware you were speaking in Parseltongue?"

"I was?"

"Yes. That means you just reversed a spell cast by Voldemort himself. Does your scar hurt?"

"No, not at all," Harry said, rubbing his scar as his frowned. "How could I reverse a spell I've never heard? And in Parseltongue?"

"You sensed the spell, understood it despite never hearing it before, and know enough magic now to be able to reverse it," Dumbledore explained. "I'm very proud of you. This is a tremendous achievement."

"Thanks!" Harry said, amazed at what he'd just learned. After a moment, he asked, "Voldemort put fog here to hide the giants and trolls from the Aurors, didn't he?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. "Have a look," he added, nodding toward the Omnioculars hanging around Harry's neck. He raised his own spyglass and scanned the other mountains and the now-revealed valley below.

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They were on the sole unoccupied mountain. The lower portion of the mountain to the west, which had been hidden by the mist, was riddled with caves filled with mountain trolls. The giants had sent up camp on the mountain to the northeast, also in an area that had been hidden. Dumbledore lowered his spyglass and looked at Harry, who was studying both camps through his Omnioculars.

"Tell me what you see, Harry."

"I see about fifty giants," he said quietly. He swung his Omnioculars to the other mountain. "There are probably thirty trolls, but it's hard to tell. Some of them could be in the caves." He pulled his Omnioculars away from his face. "Fifty giants. Hagrid said there were only seventy or eighty left. Where are the others?"

"I saw only male giants. Possibly they left their wives and children at home," Dumbledore replied, looking through his spyglass again.

"That would explain it," Harry agreed. "Are you certain you don't want me to fly over there as a raven to check things out?"

"No, Harry. Giants and trolls both move remarkably fast when they want to. They might decide you look tasty and snatch you out of the air before you can get away."

"That wouldn't be any fun at all," Harry said with a crooked smile.

Dumbledore chuckled. "So, what do you think?"

"I think we're crazy," Harry said with a nervous laugh. "Do you honestly believe we can talk sense to the giants?"

"I've done so before," Dumbledore said serenely. "It can be done again."

"You think they'll like our gifts?"

"I'm certain of it. You do remember your part, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You need to disguise yourself. They have probably heard at least a description of you, and certainly your name."

"OK," Harry agreed, then lengthened his hair down past his shoulders and grew a moustache. "How's this?"

"Very nice. I imagine Miss Weasley would approve," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Can you change the colour?"

"To what? Red? Brown?"

"Not brown, that's too close to black. Not red, it's too distinctive. Something less unusual, perhaps?" Dumbledore said, letting the younger man make his own choice.

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Harry thought a moment and then concentrated on an unspoken spell Dumbledore had taught him recently. A moment later, his black hair became light sandy brown with gold highlights. "How's this?"

"Excellent! Whose hair did you think of when you did it?"

"Seamus's," Harry replied, feeling the loss of his friend quite sharply for a moment.

"Good choice. Don't forget your eyebrows and eyelashes," Dumbledore said as he studied Harry's new appearance. "Ah, wonderful," he remarked when Harry had completed his change. "If you don't mind, I'd like to add a small detail." He lifted his wand and waved it over Harry's face.

"What?" Harry asked, trying not to flinch from the wand near his face.

"Freckles," Dumbledore said with a smile. "And a Glamour to cover your scar."

"A lot or a few freckles?"

"Not too many. Far fewer than Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore assured him.

Harry pulled out the mirror he used for communication with Remus and looked at his reflection, his eyes wide with shock when he saw the stranger looking back at him. "I wouldn't have thought of freckles," he commented with a grin, "but they make a huge difference!" He looked at his unscarred forehead. "I've never seen myself without the scar. It looks so odd for it not to be there."

"Remember to use the Glamour Charm whenever you want to hide it," Dumbledore said. "And yes, the freckles do make you look quite different. The only way anyone would recognize you now is by your smile, which is quite distinctive. But I somehow doubt that any of the Death Eaters have seen you smile quite so wholeheartedly. They wouldn't be able to describe it, even if they thought of it, because they've never seen it." He pondered a moment. "I cannot call you 'Harry.' If I need to introduce you, what name shall I use?"

Harry thought a moment. "Erm. . .James. . .James Evans."

"James Evans. Very good," Dumbledore said with a smile. "All right, then, James. Ready?" Harry nodded, and they Apparated to the foot of the mountain where the giants were camped. They approached the giant camp warily, holding their gift above their heads as they entered the fringes of the camp. They headed straight for the Gurg, who lay on a bed of soft pine needles in the centre of the camp.

"Good afternoon," Professor Dumbledore said in a genial voice as they approached the giant's leader. "I am Albus Dumbledore. I bring a gift to the Gurg of the giants."

The Gurg grunted, looking avidly at the package still held aloft by the old wizard and the young man beside him. "Famhair has heard of Dumbledore. What you bring? Who is the young one?"

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"This is James Evans, my associate. We have brought you a rare delicacy – dragon meat. If you'll forgive me, I must enlarge the package when we set it down. While it would be easy for any of you to carry such a quantity of meat, it is quite a burden for humans," he said mildly as he and Harry set down the package. At the Gurg's nod, he waved his wand, making the package enlarge to quadruple its size.

"How much meat?" Famhair demanded.

"An entire side of dragon," Dumbledore replied, "along with the organ meat."

The giant began to drool. "What does Dumbledore want in exchange for this gift?"

"A small favour. We would like to talk with you about your situation here, and your plans for the future. We don't need to discuss it at this time. We will return tomorrow with another gift for the Gurg," Dumbledore said easily.

"Another gift?" the Gurg said.

"Yes, a wonderful gift indeed. Thank you for your hospitality. We will see you tomorrow," Dumbledore said, taking a step back from the package of meat. Harry mirrored his action and walked at his side as they left the camp. They had barely cleared its fringes when they heard the growling of the giants as they demanded the Gurg share with the rest of them.

"That went well," Dumbledore said, looking quite pleased with himself.

"You think?" Harry said uncertainly.

"Oh yes. They will listen to us, I believe."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm going into the forest so I can send a quick Adfero to Minister Bones, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Why don't you keep an eye on the trolls and giants. Let me know if any of them are coming this way."

"All right. I'm going to climb up to that rock," Harry said, indicating a sheltered ledge above them, "so they can't see the sun hit my Omnioculars."

"Good idea. I won't be too long."

Harry was watching the trolls fighting among themselves when the hair on the back of his neck stood up. With sudden inspiration, he removed his glasses and concentrated on changing the colour of his eyes. He'd never tried it before, but if he could change the colour of his hair by thinking about it, why not his eyes? He crossed his fingers, pulled his wand and turned to face whoever was coming up behind him, keeping his wand hidden in the folds of his robes.

"Well, look what we have here, lads! A tourist! Are you on holiday, then?" a rough-looking man said. Harry recognized several of his companions as Death Eaters.

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"Yes, just travelling in the mountains a bit," he said calmly, dropping his voice as low as he could comfortably in case any of them might recognize it.

"We're looking for a young man with green eyes," the man said with an evil leer. "Come out of the shadows and let us have a look."

"My eyes are hazel, not green," he said, hoping the change he'd tried for had worked.

"Come out here!" the man snarled.

"I'm not bothering anyone," Harry said. "Leave me alone!"

"Cheeky li'l devil, i'nt he?" another man said with a foul laugh. "Let's get 'im!"

Harry tightened his grip on his still-hidden wand, preparing to fight, when a sneering cool voice behind the rowdy group of men said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"We found a bloke," the second man replied. "Could be 'e has green eyes! 'E has light 'air. 'E's kinda pretty – maybe the old man will let us keep 'im a while to play with when 'e's done wi' 'im," he said with a leering grin, licking his lips lasciviously.

"You're disgusting," Snape snarled, moving through the crowd. "Let me see." He gazed at Harry quizzically, squinting as he studied the boy's face. "I won't hurt you. Just let me have a look at your eyes, all right? We're looking for someone with green eyes," he said silkily as he neared Harry.

Harry's eyes flashed furiously at first, but then he forced himself to be open to Legilimency. He willed Snape to understand who he was, and that Dumbledore was nearby.

Snape's eyes widened in surprise as he realized who he was looking at. "No. His eyes are hazel. He's not the one we want," he said, a slight frown of confusion between his eyebrows. "Why don't you go on your way, young man? We have things to do here that don't concern you."

Harry swallowed back the sarcastic reply he was tempted to give, then nodded curtly and slid down the rock to the path below. He made a concerted effort to use a different walk and change his body language to add to his disguise. He slumped his shoulders and shuffled his feet rather than striding out confidently as he normally did, feeling the eyes of the men behind him on his back. Why hadn't they simply attacked? What was Snape doing here? Who were they looking for with green eyes? His stomach dropped as he realized he might have been one of those whose eyes were being "harvested" for Voldemort's Eye-Restoring Potion. He swallowed the bile that rose at the back of his throat and followed the path into the woods. Once he was well inside the woods, he changed into a raven and flew as fast as he could to find Dumbledore.

"Professor! Professor!" he cried when he saw him and changed back into his "James Evans" persona. "Snape! Death Eaters," he gasped, completely out of breath.

"What are you talking about?" Dumbledore said in concern. "Calm down, take a deep breath." He waited while the young wizard complied. "There, that's better. What happened?"

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Harry told him what had happened and what he suspected about their reasons for stopping him.

"Do you think they followed you?" Dumbledore asked in concern.

"I changed into a raven as soon as I got far enough in the forest," Harry said. "I don't think they saw me."

Both of them trained their magical glasses down the path behind Harry, then scanned the woods around them.

"It appears we're safe for now, lad. Are you quite all right?"

"Yeah," Harry said, finally getting his breath back.

"You were very wise not to try to take them on yourself," Dumbledore said with a smile. "I'll contact the Aurors and let them know there are Death Eaters here who need to be dealt with." When he'd sent his message, he looked at Harry and said, "You changed your eye colour? I didn't know you could do that."

"I didn't either, but I had a feeling I should," he said. "Did it really work? Are they hazel?"

"Yes, they are! Well done!"

"Great! So do we go after them, or what?"

"We'll let the Aurors do their job this time, Harry. They'll be here soon."

"What about Snape?"

"If he did Legilimency on you, he knows I'm here as well. He will find some way to leave before they capture him." He glanced up and smiled as the first Auror arrived.

"Hello, Kingsley. It seems we have a bit of a problem," Dumbledore said.

"I want to hear the details," Shacklebolt said. Dumbledore told him about the situation and about Snape's being there.

"Who's this?" Kingsley said, looking hard at Harry.

"It's Harry. He's in disguise."

"Really? Bloody fine disguise, lad," Shacklebolt said with approval. "I wouldn't have known you. The glasses did make me wonder, but still – you look so different."

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile.

"That grin of yours would give you away to those who know you, though," Shacklebolt chuckled. The other Aurors had arrived and were coming to join him. "All right, we'll go deal with the Death Eaters, then." He looked around at his gathered team. "Let's get to work," he

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said, then turned back to Dumbledore and Harry. "Professor, you and that young man need to go back to school now. We'll take care of this."

"Thank you, we will," Dumbledore said.

"We aren't going to stay and fight?" Harry said, looking appalled as the Aurors hurried toward the gap in the trees that led to the valley.

"Not today, lad. We've tried to give the giants an impression of us as peaceful emissaries. If they see us fighting. . . ."

"Oh," Harry said in a small voice. "I understand."

"You said there were only eight Death Eaters anyway, right?" Harry nodded. "So our ten Aurors should be fine. Let's go back to school, then, shall we? And change into James Evans instead of Harry when we return, all right?"

"OK," Harry said with a last, regretful glance at the gap leading out of the woods through which the Aurors had disappeared. They could already hear the sounds of battle. "Are you certain we. . . ."

"Let's go," Dumbledore said firmly. Harry sighed, then changed into a phoenix along with his headmaster. They flashed back to Hogwarts, directly into Dumbledore's office. As they became human again, Dumbledore said, "I wanted you to remain as James Evans because it might be hard to match your appearance exactly the next time. Why don't you stay like that until we're done with this mission?"

"What if someone sees me?" Harry worried.

"We'll just stay here in my office to keep that from happening," Dumbledore said, "although we are going to need to go to the Ministry of Magic tomorrow after our meeting with the Gurg."

"You want me to stay like this then too?" Harry said curiously.

"Yes, I believe so."

"What if someone at the Ministry sees me?"

"I don't think it will be a problem, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "It will be interesting to see how people respond to 'James Evans,' actually. I suspect the majority of people at the Ministry won't recognize you."

"But I have to be identified when we go through the Security gate," Harry said, puzzled. "How can I fool them? Isn't that against the law?"

"You're right, of course," Dumbledore said with a sigh. "All right, we'll have to make a picture of you to refer to for the third day." He stood thinking a moment, then waved his wand, muttering an incantation. He then pointed his wand at the wall. The paintings of past headmasters and headmistresses shifted aside, leaving a blank space on the wall. In seconds, a

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moving portrait of Harry appeared there, cheeky grin in place, but all the other details completely foreign to anyone who knew him.

"Whoa! Cool!" Harry said, looking at the picture. "How did you do that? How long will it last? It isn't like the one in the Chamber, is it?"

"No, it's a different spell. I'll show you how to do it later – it's a frivolous thing, not something you need to worry about right now, and it doesn't last long. By the time we get back day after tomorrow, it will already be fading. But it will help you prepare your disguise properly before we leave."

Harry had walked over to the picture and was studying it carefully. "It really doesn't look much like me, does it?"

"No. That's a wonderful disguise," Dumbledore said just as a knock came at the door. "Come in."

Ron, Hermione and Ginny came into the office. "Professor, where's Harry? He said we could study together this afternoon and he hasn't shown up yet," Hermione said, then noticed the stranger across the room. "Oh, I beg your pardon. We didn't know you were in a meeting."

"This is James Evans," Dumbledore said, a twinkle in his eye.

Harry had removed his glasses as soon as he heard his friends' voices in the doorway behind him. Now he turned and looked at them gravely. "Very nice to meet you," he said, lowering his voice as much as he could comfortably. He tried very hard not to squint, but even without his glasses, he could see the girls smiling but looking a bit puzzled, Ron looking uneasy.

"Mr. Evans, this is Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley," Dumbledore said seriously, doing his best not to smile. He turned back to the students. "Mr. Evans stopped by on his way to a meeting," he said by way of explanation.

"Did you go to Hogwarts?" Hermione said. "You look a bit familiar."

"Several years ago, yes," Harry replied, keeping his voice low while fighting down laughter.

"Why is there a picture of you on the wall?" Ginny said in confusion. She looked back at the tall, handsome young man before her. Dark blond hair falling to his shoulders in handsome waves, a moustache, freckles, hazel eyes. . .but those eyes were shaped like Harry's, crinkling in suppressed humour exactly the way Harry's did, and there was a slight dimple in his chin. . .a dimple she enjoyed nibbling on. . . . She grinned. "Harry?"

Harry burst out laughing. "I wondered how long we'd be able to fool you!" he said, grinning madly.

"No! Is that really you?" Ron asked. Harry nodded. "Bloody brilliant disguise!" Ron said approvingly. "What are you made up for?"

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"A meeting we had this morning," Harry replied. "We have to repeat the meeting twice more. Professor Dumbledore created this temporary painting so I can refer to it when I do this again." His friends clustered around him, the girls touching his hair, Ron admiring his freckles.

"You could almost be a Weasley with those, mate," he said with a grin.

"I considered making my hair red, but Professor Dumbledore thought red was too distinctive. He wanted me to be easier to forget than redheads are," Harry said, tugging gently on Ginny's long mane as he spoke. He got his glasses out of his pocket and put them back on. "There, that's better!"

"Your eyes look different," Ginny said. "They aren't as green."

"That's because I tried to make them hazel. Do they look hazel to you?" he asked curiously.

"They look hazel to me, mate," Ron said. "How'd you do that?"

"The same way I did my hair colour," he said with a shrug and a glance at Dumbledore. He didn't want to tell them about the Death Eaters looking for more green-eyed people if he could avoid it.

"How did you hide your scar?" Ron asked, studying Harry's smooth forehead. "You look so strange without it."

"Yeah, I know. It's a Glamour Charm. Professor Dumbledore did it," Harry replied.

"How are you managing meetings without glasses?" Hermione said curiously. "And who are you meeting? What's going on?"

"I wore my glasses," Harry explained. "We thought I was disguised enough to get away with wearing them in front of people who've never seen me before. I took them off just now because I knew you'd guess as soon as you saw them."

"It still would have taken me a moment," Hermione admitted. "But you haven't answered my other questions yet."

Harry looked at Dumbledore questioningly. Seeing a nod from his headmaster, he said, "We visited the giants who have come to help Voldemort fight us."

"*WHAT?*" Hermione gasped.

"Giants?" Ginny said in a tiny squeak.

"*Bloody hell!*" Ron said. "What happened?"

"Come and sit down," Harry invited as Dumbledore conjured a tea tray. Once everyone was settled, Harry told his friends all about what had happened with the giants.

"And you're going back tomorrow?" Ginny said, looking a bit squeamish.

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"Yeah," Harry said calmly, hoping his friends wouldn't be too frightened for him. "We'll be fine, don't worry."

"Were you scared?" Ron asked, his eyes wide in amazement.

"A bit," Harry admitted, "but everything went exactly the way Professor Dumbledore said it would. It was amazing. At least this Gurg speaks good English. That made it easier."

"Where did you get the dragon meat?" Ron asked.

"Charlie. Professor Dumbledore contacted him, hoping to find at least a good bit of dragon hide. As it turned out, a Common Welsh Green was killed last week in a fight with another dragon, so he sent the meat and the hide over, after he had the hide made into a giant-sized cloak."

"A giant-sized cloak?" Hermione said with a gulp. "It must be huge! What are you going to do with it?"

"It's the second gift for the Gurg. Charlie said it took nearly the entire hide to make it," Harry replied. "It's a bugger to carry, really heavy and cumbersome despite being trussed up. And we can't levitate it," he said as he saw Hermione open her mouth to make that very suggestion, "because giants don't like wizards using magic around them. Professor Dumbledore asked permission before enlarging the package of meat when we were with them." His friends sat in stunned silence for several minutes.

"Since you're all here, if you want to study together, you're welcome to use Harry's room," Dumbledore suggested. "I think you'll be more comfortable in there, and you can speak freely about today's adventures. Such things shouldn't be discussed in Gryffindor Tower. Harry has a large desk and several comfortable chairs, and he can conjure a table if you need that as well. I'd offer you the Chamber, but Harry and I have quite a few documents spread out over the tables, so there wouldn't be much room for you to work."

"So you don't need me for a while?" Harry said.

"No, I have some things to do. Why don't you go study with your friends? The break will be good for you."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said with a grin, then led his friends into his room not far from the headmaster's office.

They settled down to their work in short order, but they hadn't worked very long before Ron said, "What's it like, Harry?"

"What's what like?"

"Walking into a giants' camp. Looking so different. Doing stuff with Dumbledore like this. I mean . . . I can't get my mind around it!" Both girls lifted their heads, following the conversation closely.

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"Walking into the giants' camp was . . . scary. But it was exciting, as well. Looking like this, I felt . . . free, somehow. If I'd gone in looking like myself, I think I would have been afraid. I mean, they know Voldemort wants to kill Harry Potter. But James Evans," he said, spreading his hands wide and smiling happily, "he's a free man. He can move around the country with no one trying to kill him just for being who he is. That's an amazing feeling, you know?" His friends nodded. "And doing this kind of stuff with Dumbledore . . . he's decided I need to learn about diplomacy as well as magic. That's why he's taking me with him on these trips. Tomorrow, we're giving the Gurg that cloak and talking about terms of an agreement. Then we'll go to the Ministry and force them to listen to reason if they won't go along with the terms willingly. That should be interesting!" he said, his eyes twinkling. "Dumbledore's amazing. It's just . . . awesome . . . to watch him at work. I'm learning so many things from him."

"What an opportunity," Hermione breathed wistfully.

"I know. And I will, as promised, share as much as I can manage, whenever I can," Harry said, grinning mischievously at her. "Patience is a virtue, Hermione."

"One you've never had a great deal of," she said tartly, teasing him.

"True, but I'm getting a bit better about it," he admitted.

"You will be careful tomorrow, won't you?" Ginny murmured as she leaned against him.

"You know I will," he promised.

The next day at about the same time, Harry and Dumbledore again entered the giants' camp. The Gurg was waiting for them eagerly.

"What you bring this time?" he said as he studied the bundle they carried over their heads.

"We've brought you a dragon hide cloak, made from the dragon whose meat we gave you yesterday," Dumbledore said. "This cloak will protect you, keep you warm in the winter, and dry in the rain, and as you can see, it's very handsome." As he spoke, he and Harry set the bundle down and untied the cords that bound it into a manageable package. Harry shook out the cloak to display it. The dragonhide shimmered with iridescent colours and had beautiful fastenings large enough for a giant's hands to manage.

"This dragon was bothering a village in western Wales," Dumbledore lied smoothly. "Mr. Evans, here, heard the tale and was curious about the dragon, so he went there. He killed the dragon and saved the village. When he heard I was coming to meet you, he asked to come along. He wanted to honour you with a gift from his first dragon kill."

"Why?" the Gurg asked, looking at Harry.

Harry cleared his throat, quickly going over his story one last time before speaking. "I am learning all I can about the various races of beings in order to help bring peace to the wizarding world in whatever way I can." He bowed slightly. "I am honoured to be able to speak with the great Gurg of the giants, and to bring him such a fine gift."

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"How you kill this dragon?" the Gurg said, studying the tiny human before him. Giants stayed away from dragons. How could a puny human kill one? The thick, slow gears in the giant's mind turned ponderously as he tried to picture the battle between this small light-haired man and a huge green dragon.

"The dragon was a Common Welsh Green, as you can tell from its hide. The plates on their stomachs separate when they move in certain ways. I knew this might be a vulnerable spot on the dragon if I had to fight it. I went to see the dragon, hoping to observe it at a distance, but it attacked when it saw me. I was on my broom and flew up to avoid it, but it flew after me. We dodged each other for a while. Whenever I tried to fly away, it came after me. I didn't think I'd be able to escape. Finally, it reared up to strike me, and the plates on its belly separated. I conjured a sword and pushed it all the way to the hilt between the plates on the dragon's belly, then flew away as fast as I could because the dragon was falling. It died soon after that." Harry shrugged a bit, as if killing a dragon was an everyday occurrence. He'd deliberately avoided saying anything about casting spells on the dragon. The Conjunctivitis Curse that worked to subdue dragons was also one of the few spells that worked against giants, and he didn't want to offend his host by referring to it.

"Famhair likes your gifts," the giant told Dumbledore, "and your story," he told Harry. "What is it you wished to talk about?"

"An agreement between the giants and the Ministry of Magic. We would like your promise that you will not fight for Voldemort nor attack humans. In exchange, the Ministry is prepared to offer you a home in the mountains west of here where you can live at peace. There are no wizard or Muggle habitations nearby, so you won't be bothered, and there is plenty of game in the mountains there, so your hunting will be good. We will bring a document signed by the Minister of Magic stating these terms if you will agree."

"Lord Voldemort told us we can have whatever land we want if we came to fight on his side," Famhair said sceptically.

"Lord Voldemort is an outlaw in this land. He does not have the power to grant you the use of any land at all," Dumbledore said carefully. "The Ministry of Magic, however, can grant you land and put protections on it so that you will never be disturbed by humans. Lord Voldemort cannot give you what he promised. The Ministry can."

Famhair sat quietly for a while, apparently thinking quite hard. "How we know wizards will keep their word? They chased us out of mountains before," the Gurg said suspiciously, his teeth bared in a snarl, his hand suddenly tense on the club by his feet.

"The Ministry understands that the giants were unfairly treated in the past. The document we will bring will ensure that you are not bothered by wizards, as long as you leave us in peace. It will be a magically binding contract between the Ministry of Magic and the giants," Dumbledore explained.

"Does Dumbledore work for the Ministry now? Famhair was told Dumbledore worked in a school."

"Yes, I am headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, that's true. But I also help out the Ministry from time to time."

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"And this one?" the Gurg said, nodding toward Harry.

"He is my assistant. As you can see, I'm getting old. Sometimes I need help with things," Dumbledore said with a small smile.

"You bring someone from Ministry along with document, or we will not speak again," Famhair growled. "We do not trust Ministry of Magic. We will talk with them before agreeing."

"I will be happy to bring someone from the Ministry with me tomorrow, when we will also bring you another gift," Dumbledore said, realizing the giant was beginning to lose interest.

"Another gift?" the giant said, immediately intrigued. "What?"

"It will be a delightful surprise!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "You will enjoy it immensely, I believe. I will come back tomorrow with the agreement and a representative from the Ministry, and your wonderful gift."

The Gurg grunted. Dumbledore and Harry took that as signal enough to leave and walked out of the camp as calmly as they could manage.

"That wasn't bad," Dumbledore commented as he and Harry walked into the woods to flash to London.

"Not bad? I thought he was going to eat us at one point!" Harry said in amazement. "When he was growling about not trusting the Ministry and bared his teeth? I thought we were goners."

"Honestly?" Dumbledore said with a crooked smile, "I was a bit worried then, myself! Come on, we need to go to London now. Ministry of Magic Atrium, by the statues, all right?"

"The Fountain of Magical Brethren has been restored?" Harry said curiously.

"Yes, but with better statues," Dumbledore said with a smile. "You'll see. When you reappear, be sure you look like Harry Potter, not James Evans, all right?" Harry smiled and nodded. "Let's go." With two quiet "pops" the wizards Disapparated, reappearing moments later in the Atrium by the fountain.

The Fountain of Magical Brethren, which Harry had first seen when he was taken to the Ministry for a hearing, had been destroyed in a battle with Voldemort two years prior. Dumbledore had spelled one of the statues to guard Harry, sending two others off to bring back Ministry officials, and using one in his battle with Voldemort. Now, where the effete-looking wizard, vapid witch, the typically humble house-elf and abnormally subservient centaur and goblin had stood, were new sculptures. An attractive witch and wizard were shown shaking hands with a noble-looking centaur and a wise-looking goblin, illustrating the new spirit of cooperation between beings that Minister of Magic Bones was promoting. A statue of a house-elf looked on approvingly.

"I like it," Harry said, dropping a coin in the fountain.

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"I think it's a wonderful improvement," Dumbledore agreed. They got their visitor's badges and passed through Security, then took a lift to the huge meeting room where they'd met with the British and French ministry officials after the battle in France the previous year.

"Here we go," Dumbledore said as he put his hand on the door. "Cross your fingers," he added with a smile just before pulling the door open.

They entered a cacophony of sound. The room was filled with Ministry officials, all of whom were talking loudly, gesticulating broadly and creating a general rumpus. When Dumbledore and Harry stepped inside and closed the door behind them, everything ceased instantly. All eyes turned to stare at them. Harry shifted his weight uneasily. What was going on?

Madam Bones smiled at them and said, "Welcome! We're glad you're here. Please, sit down." She indicated two chairs at a table in front of the high bench where she and the top officials of the Ministry were seated. The other Ministry officials were seated in serried ranks around the room.

"Let the record show that our witnesses are here. Please state your full names for the record," Madam Bones said formally.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

"Harry James Potter."

"And the two of you have just come from meeting with the giants who are now encamped in Wales?" Minister Bones prompted.

"Yes, we have," Dumbledore agreed.

"Please tell us what transpired there," Minister Bones said.

Dumbledore launched into the tale, but was soon interrupted by Madam Bones.

"May I ask why you took Harry Potter with you, when the giants were brought here by Voldemort, who must have informed them that Mr. Potter is his primary target?" she asked imperiously. "Mr. Potter, is, after all, a student. Why would you expose him to such danger?"

"He was in no more danger than I was, possibly less," Dumbledore said comfortably. "Harry is my apprentice now. I thought it important that he learn about diplomacy first-hand. He is adept at disguising himself, as you may recall from hearing how he managed to go unnoticed at that concert last summer." He glanced around and saw many heads nodding. "Since he plans to be an Auror, working on disguises is useful for his education, as well. So Harry changed his appearance and came up with a pseudonym so he could accompany me. His disguise was good enough that his own friends didn't recognize him at first when we returned to Hogwarts."

"Can you show us your disguise, Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones said, turning to him.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not. If I show it, I can't use it again," he said simply, hoping he wasn't causing offence with his refusal.

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"Well said!" Mr. O'Connell of the Auror School cried. "He will make a fine Auror."

Madam Bones smiled warmly at Harry. "That's another test you passed, young man. I was hoping you'd refuse, but I felt I had to ask."

Harry grinned in sudden relief.

"Go on with your story, Professor," Madam Bones prompted.

The tale was soon told, complete with all the details except for Harry's false name and description. When Dumbledore told the Council the terms he'd discussed with the giants, an outcry rang out.

"You promised them a section of the mountains?" one man shouted. "How dare you! You overstepped your authority!"

"He did exactly as I asked him to," Madam Bones snapped. "He and I worked out the terms of the agreement before they went up there. This meeting is to ratify this agreement and choose a delegate to meet with the giants, as they requested."

As the Council muttered among themselves, Harry leaned toward Madam Bones. "Minister?" he said quietly.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Did they capture all the Death Eaters? And were any of the Aurors injured?" he asked uneasily. He still felt bad about leaving without helping them fight.

"All of the Aurors are fine, and yes, they captured all of the Death Eaters in that group. And I, for one, am glad you didn't participate in that battle. Let the Aurors handle such things whenever possible, all right, young man?" Madam Bones said with a small smile.

Harry gulped. "Yes, Minister."

As the Council's discussion settled down, Minister Bones raised her voice to address them again. "As to the terms of the agreement," she said, glancing around the room, "do you have any questions?" Questions were asked and answered, points were discussed, and the terms of the agreement finally approved and signed after a great deal of pointless wrangling.

"Now we need a volunteer to go meet with the giants tomorrow," Madam Bones said, looking around the room. "Anyone?"

"I'll go," Mr. O'Connell said, at the same moment as Arthur Weasley stood up and said he would go.

"We have two volunteers. Excellent. But we only need one," Madam Bones said.

"It should be O'Connell," a man declared. "He can fight his way out if things get dodgy. Weasley's no fighter."

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"I beg to differ with you on that point," Dumbledore said mildly. "No offence to either of you," he said with a genial nod to each man, "but I believe the giants would be more comfortable with Arthur Weasley, who has a less threatening appearance than O'Connell does."

"Mr. Potter, you met the giants. What do you think?" Madam Bones said.

Harry cleared his throat nervously. "Erm. . .well, look at us," he said, indicating himself and Dumbledore. "An old man and a boy." He turned to Dumbledore and said, "I don't mean to be disrespectful, sir."

"You're merely stating the facts. Do go on," Dumbledore encouraged him with an approving smile.

"I don't think the two of us appeared to be any kind of threat to the giants. So logically, Mr. O'Connell, who looks like a fighter, might be perceived as a threat, while Mr. Weasley, who is a wonderful fighter but doesn't look like one, might be more acceptable to them. We told them we were coming in peace. If we bring someone from the Ministry who looks that much like a warrior, it might appear that we aren't keeping our word."

"A point well taken," Madam Bones said thoughtfully. She looked at O'Connell, then at Arthur Weasley. "You're quite willing to go, Arthur?"

"Yes, Minister," he said respectfully. "I'd like to help out any way I can. I believe I can represent the Ministry's interests satisfactorily."

"I agree. All right, then. You are deputized to represent the Ministry of Magic in this meeting with the giants. Thank you for your willingness to serve," she said with a smile. "Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, the Ministry thanks you for your efforts. We wish you good luck in concluding the matter."

"Thank you, Minister," Dumbledore said, inclining his head respectfully. Harry followed his example.

"Hagrid? Is it ready?" Dumbledore asked as he and Harry approached Hagrid's cabin later that evening.

"Hello, Headmaster! And Harry! Good ter see ya!" Hagrid said happily. "Yeah, it's all finished. I have it in me hut, here." He led them inside and picked up a long, thin log about six feet in length from his table. It had holes along one side of it and a mouthpiece carved in one end.

"Is that a flute?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yeah, giant-sized. Sounds interestin'," Hagrid said, lifting to his lips. He filled his lungs with air and blew into the flute with all his might, producing a lovely soft note, rich and full. His face grew red as he continued to blow into the massive instrument. An exquisite melody floated in the air, deep-throated and solemn. Hagrid gave up with a gasp. "That's the best I can do, Professor Dumbledore, sir," he said.

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"It's wonderful, Hagrid, truly!" Dumbledore said happily. "I think the Gurg will like it very much. Music is a magic that's beyond anything we teach at Hogwarts. I think this flute will work its magic on the Gurg quite nicely. Thank you."

Hagrid blushed at Dumbledore's praise. "It's nuthin'," he said, his cheeks flaming red over his bristly black beard, his eyes dancing happily. "I'm just happy ter help out."

"It's beautiful, Hagrid," Harry said, admiring the carved vines spiralling up the length of the instrument. "It must have taken you a long time to do."

"Professor Dumbledore asked me ter do this ages ago, so it would be ready whenever we approached the giants again," Hagrid explained. "I just had ter polish it up a bit for it ter be ready. I hope the Gurg likes it. Who's Gurg now, anyway?"

"Famhair," Harry replied.

"Oh, I met him!" Hagrid said happily. "He was one o' the ones who were injured and hiding in the caves. Olympe and me talked ter him and his mates a long time. So he's Gurg now, eh? Good for him!"

"You said the ones in the caves were the ones who were most interested in what you had to say," Harry commented.

"Yeah, that's right," Hagrid agreed. "That's probably why you got this far in talkin' to him."

"I believe you're right, Hagrid," Dumbledore said with a smile. "He does seem interested in more than just the gifts. I think this flute will be just the thing to end our negotiations successfully."

"Good luck, Professor," Hagrid said, waving as his two friends left his cabin.

Dumbledore, Harry and Arthur walked slowly into the giants' camp, the huge flute, well-wrapped, held above their heads. The Gurg, sitting with his dragon hide cloak wrapped around him, looked up expectantly as they approached.

"Good morning," Dumbledore said genially. "We bring greetings to the Gurg of the giants from the Ministry of Magic. We also have a wonderful gift for the Gurg."

"Who is this?" the Gurg said, looking suspiciously at Arthur.

"This is Arthur Weasley," Dumbledore said. "He is here to represent the Ministry of Magic in finalizing the agreement between the giants and the Ministry." Dumbledore pulled out the document. "I have the agreement here. The terms are as we discussed yesterday. You will be given a section of the western mountains here in Wales where you can live in peace, as long as you don't attack any humans. In exchange, the Ministry will make your area Unplottable and put protections on it to prevent anyone from disturbing you. The document is signed by the Minister herself." He held the parchment out for the Gurg to see. "Are we agreed?"

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"What is gift?" the Gurg asked, ignoring Dumbledore's question and looking hungrily at the package lying in front of the three wizards.

"It is a most wondrous gift indeed," Dumbledore said with a smile as Harry and Arthur unwrapped it. They held it up so the Gurg could see it, then laid it on the ground in front of him.

"What is it?" the Gurg said, tilting his head and studying it. He lifted it and sniffed it, as if it might be good to eat.

"It's a flute. We've brought you the gift of music, which is a magic more mysterious than any other I know." With that, he nodded at Harry, who was in his "James Evans" disguise. "Mr. Evans will demonstrate how it works with his own flute, which was made by the same person who made yours."

Harry pulled out his flute and began playing a haunting melody Hagrid had taught him years ago. The giants, always restless during these meetings, stilled, staring in fascination at the fair-haired young man who was creating such lovely sounds. When he came to the end of the tune, Harry lowered the flute and looked at the Gurg nervously. He didn't feel he was the best flute player in the world, but Dumbledore insisted Harry was better at it than he was, so he'd done his best.

"This can do that?" the Gurg said, indicating the massive instrument on the ground.

"Yes," Harry replied. "Pick it up and put that end in your mouth. Put your fingers over the holes on the front, like this," he said, demonstrating as he spoke. "Then take a breath and blow into the mouthpiece – like this." He blew into his own flute, holding the note until the Gurg followed his example. A squawky squeal came out of the giant-sized flute, making the Gurg jump and growl.

"You simply blew too hard," Harry said. "I can do that too, watch." He blew into his flute as hard as he could, making it screech horribly. "You need to blow into it gently, softly," he explained. "Try again."

The Gurg lifted the flute to his lips, trying to blow more gently. A note sounded, not quite musical, but certainly better than his previous effort.

"Softer," Harry urged, "and then move your fingers off of the holes every so often – that's how you change the notes." He played his flute again, changing notes slowly so the giant could watch him. He smiled as the Gurg finally got a decent sounding note out of the flute and then a few more.

Famhair held the flute out and looked at it after he finished playing. He ran a huge finger along the carved vine spiralling up its length. Finally, he smiled, showing his horrible, brick-sized yellow teeth. "Music," he said simply. "A fine gift."

Dumbledore, Harry and Arthur all breathed a sigh of relief.

"Talk to me of Ministry," Famhair said to Arthur. "Will they keep their word?"

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"This is a magical contract," Arthur told him. "It is legally and magically binding. The magic in it prevents the Ministry from breaking it. You will have that land as a place to live in peace as long as you live in peace with humans."

The Gurg sat quietly looking from the flute to the parchment still in Dumbledore's hands. Finally he stood up and looked around at the other giants and began speaking to them in their guttural language.

"What is he saying?" Arthur asked Dumbledore uneasily.

"He's telling them the terms of the agreement," Dumbledore replied. "Be patient. Look cheerful and positive." He turned twinkling blue eyes toward Arthur and smiled. "That's better," he said approvingly when he saw Arthur working to relax his face. "James, what do you think our prospects are?"

Harry had been studying the faces of the crowd surrounding them. "I'm not sure, but I think he may be persuading them."

"I hope you're right," Dumbledore said, turning to Harry for a moment. "And for the record – I agree."

The three wizards all flinched as shouting erupted from some of the giants. The Gurg shouted right back at them. The argument went on for several minutes. Finally, the Gurg turned to them and said, "Some do not want to stay."

"Are they willing to go back where they came from without fighting?" Dumbledore said calmly.

"Yes. They like mountains we came from better. Our tribe will stay. These others will leave," the Gurg said. "Will Ministry agree to this?"

"Yes, the Ministry will agree. We don't want any of you to stay who don't want to. We just want to avoid a battle that will cost many lives on both sides," Arthur said sincerely.

The Gurg turned back to his people and passed along the information. Finally, there seemed to be agreement. He looked at the wizards and asked, "How we get our wives and families if we go to that mountain now?"

"The Ministry will help you transport your families," Arthur assured him. "So we're agreed?"

"Yes," Famhair said. He took his huge thumb and pressed it into the parchment, raising an embossed impression of his fingerprint. It was as good a signature as any.

"Excellent! I will make arrangements to help you move your families, and for the ones who want to go back to Europe to be transported there safely," Arthur said with a smile. "I can have a team up here this afternoon to get things started. Will that be agreeable?"

"Yes," the Gurg said, picking up his flute and playing it again, looking quite pleased with himself.

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As they walked back to the forest so they could Disapparate back to London, Harry said, "How are we going to keep the Death Eaters from getting to the giants before they're moved? They could mess everything up."

"I'll put a protective spell on this area that will confuse the Death Eaters. They will think the giants have moved their camp. That will take care of things until the Ministry's team gets here to move them," Dumbledore said.

"I'll have them here in a trice," Arthur said, pulling out one of Harry's Famous Wizard cards. Seeing Harry's amused look, he said, "O'Connell told me about this. I thought it was an excellent idea, so I made one too." He contacted O'Connell and soon things were in motion to get the giants moved and settled in to their new home.

"That was a good day's work," Dumbledore said with satisfaction as he watched the first group of Ministry staff arrive to help the giants move. "Let's go."

Ron's mouth was hanging open as Harry finished his story later that evening. "So after all that, you had to go meet with the Ministry again and give them a report?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "It went well."

"Wicked!"

"And it was all peaceful?" Hermione said doubtfully. "No problems?"

"I told you, not all of them wanted to live in Wales. They argued a bit, but they agreed to being moved back to Europe. They didn't want to fight for Voldemort after all."

"Then why did they come in the first place?" Ginny asked.

"Because Voldemort promised them a safe place to live. Dumbledore convinced the Gurg that the Ministry is in charge, and Voldemort can't deliver on such promises," Harry said with a shrug. "This Gurg is a smart giant. As I said before, his English was really good."

"That was lucky," Ron said. "Wonder how he learned?"

"No idea. Didn't seem polite to ask," Harry said.

"Wow, what a story," Hermione said, making notes in the journal Ron had given her for Christmas.

"You can't write this story now, Hermione," Harry warned.

"I know. But someday I'll be able to, and then I'll have my notes right here," she said, patting the cover of the journal as she closed it.

"What do you mean, 'someday' you'll be able to?" Harry asked suspiciously.

The Time of Destiny

"I have ideas," she said mysteriously. "I'll tell you about them when it's time. They're still forming. I don't want to talk about them until I've worked it all out."

Harry shrugged and pulled out a piece of parchment to begin his Potions essay. "I can't believe Snape gave us so much homework today." He sighed, remembering the curious look Snape had given him in class that afternoon. Harry was glad Snape had escaped when the Death Eaters were rounded up. Someday, he'd like to hear how the man managed it. He sighed again, dipped his quill in the ink bottle and started writing down what Hermione was saying about the magical properties of bladderwrack.

The Time of Destiny

Chapter 22 – Memories

The entire D.A. – ground troops, Flying Squad and Healer Squad – was assembled on the Quidditch pitch early one Saturday afternoon in mid-March. It was a beautiful day, crisp and chilly but not really cold, the sky an aching blue that cried out to Harry to fly. But he wasn't here to fly, he was here to train his fighters.

"All right, you lot," he called, raising his voice so everyone could hear him, "gather round." When they were in place and quietened, he smiled at them and began the day's instructions.

"We're here so that we can practice under more realistic battle conditions," he began. "The Flying Squad has bombs that contain powdered sugar, so their hits will be marked. The Healer Squad will fly to those who are so marked and 'tend' these wounded. 'Tending' them in this case simply means you brush the sugar off of them so they can go back to fighting," he said with a smile. "Those on the ground will get practice in watching out for the Flying Squad's bombs, and shooting up at fliers in case the Death Eaters have fighters on brooms as well."

He glanced toward the entrance to the pitch. Adults were coming onto the pitch, led by Remus and Professor Dumbledore. The group included several staff members and quite a few people most of the students didn't know.

"We also have guests joining us today," Harry continued. "Those of you who were in the Battle of Little Hangleton may remember some of these people, but for those who don't – these are some of the members of the Order of the Phoenix. They had a spell on their robes during the battle that made red phoenixes show up when a wand was pointed their way. There wasn't time to come up with a better way of marking who was on our side at the time, but those phoenixes also showed the enemy where people were in the dark. We decided it's best if you meet them, so you'll know who's on our side." He smiled at Tonks, who was wiggling her fingers at him with a cheeky grin on her face. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, Mundungus Fletcher, Ted Tonks, Arthur and Molly Weasley (who were quickly hugged by Ron and Ginny), Fred and George Weasley with brooms in hand, many other old members and new ones such as the leaders of the Auror School who had met with Harry and Ron a couple of months ago, smiled and waved as they spread out facing the D.A. members.

"Look at these faces and memorize them. There are a few who couldn't be here today. They will have phoenixes on their robes if we wind up in battle before we can get them here to meet you. These are the good guys," Harry said earnestly. "*Don't hex them!*" The D.A. responded with nervous laughter. "Those big, serious-looking blokes?" he said, indicating a group standing behind O'Connell. "They're not only Order members, but Aurors, as are Tonks Lupin, Kingsley Shacklebolt. They may have some pointers for us, so pay close attention if they suggest something to you. Remember to keep your spells small today so nobody gets hurt. And when you shoot at the Flying Squad, use Stinging Hexes only – we don't want to shoot anyone down. Listen for my whistle. I'll use it when we need to reorganize or do something different, and so on. If you get hurt and need help, send up red sparks. If you see red sparks, everyone stop what you're doing until we can sort things out, all right?" Seeing nods of agreement all around, he gave them their assignments and the mock battle began.

As Harry, Ron and Hermione soared above the fray, Ron said, "They're doing pretty well, aren't they?"

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah. It's great the Order could come today," Harry replied. "This is good practice for them." He glanced down and saw Zacharias Smith fighting on despite being covered in powdered sugar from bombs thrown by the Flying Squad. "Oy, Smith! You're wounded. Lie down and let the Healers take care of you!"

"That's not what you'd do!" Smith retorted.

Harry laughed. "You've got me there! But for this exercise, you need to let them do their job. You've got Healers following you around trying to clean you up! Healers! If someone refuses treatment, move on to someone else!"

"I'm going down and help the younger ones with their spells," Harry told his two best friends a short time later. They nodded.

Ron and Hermione went back to watching the progress of the battle, discussing strategies, with Hermione sending orders to the squad leaders as needed.

Harry began a slow spiral to the ground as he watched the fighting below him, trying to decide who to help first. He set his Firebolt down, then moved from student to student, correcting a stance here, a wand movement there, always encouraging them, leaving each student with a smile on his or her face rather than the frustrated frown many had just before Harry got to them.

Fred and George Weasley were kept busy re-supplying the Fighting Squad with sugar bombs. After helping all of the D.A. members who seemed to need it, Harry flew over to talk to them for a moment.

"The sugar bombs were a great idea, guys!" Harry said with a grin. "Having a way to see where the bombs actually hit without anyone getting hurt – brilliant!"

"We aim to please," George said with a modest bow.

"And we aim to SPLAT some people," Fred said, bombing Zacharias Smith for no particular reason.

"Are you two why he's so covered in sugar?" Harry said, chuckling.

"Yeah. Sorry, Harry, we just can't help it," Fred said.

"He's still such a git!" George said, lobbing another bomb at Smith, who hadn't cottoned on to why he was being hit so many more times than other D.A. members.

"We spelled some of these to follow him around and hit him when he least expects it," Fred said confidentially.

"Can you spell real bombs to hit only Death Eaters?" Harry said excitedly. "That would be something!"

"Yes, it would, and no, we haven't managed it yet," George said sadly.

The Time of Destiny

"But we're right in the middle of research!" Fred said, sending another bomb Smith's way.

"Cool. Try not to hurt him, OK?" Harry said, chuckling as he flew away from his friends.

"Right you are!" Fred said.

"Cheers, Harry!" George added. They both grinned devilishly and then sped up behind Ron, chucking bombs at him.

"Oy! You're supposed to be bombing them, not me!" Ron protested as he was hit with a third bomb, this time in his ear.

"You're fair game too, little bro!" George chortled, tossing one more bomb Ron's way, then going after Harry, who was on the ground again helping some younger students. Soon Harry's black hair was totally white, but he was laughing along with the twins, and appeared to be enjoying licking his fingers after he wiped his face clean.

Finally, Harry blew his whistle, stopping the action. Everyone looked at him expectantly as he hovered a couple of feet off the ground on his broom. "That was really good!" he said with a grin. "OK, those of us who have sugar on, get cleaned up. Flying Squad, great work! Go ahead and reload your bags. Five minute break, everyone."

When everyone was ready again, he said, "Now we're going to practice the strategies you'll use when Voldemort is involved. What do you do when you see he's on the field?"

In one voice, the D.A. roared, "CLEAR AWAY!"

"That's right," Harry said with a grin. He turned to the Order members and teachers, all of whom looked a bit confused, and explained, his face suddenly serious. "When Voldemort is on the field, I want everyone to keep a good distance away from him. I don't want anyone else hurt by stray spell fire, nor do I need to be distracted by trying to protect those who've wandered too close to our battle. So push the fighting away from us. I guarantee you the Death Eaters will cooperate with you on that." He saw O'Connell and the other Aurors glancing at each other uncomfortably. "Questions?" Harry said, looking directly at O'Connell.

O'Connell looked at his fellow Aurors and sighed. "Not right now, but I'd like to talk to you when you have a moment."

"Sure. Hang on while I get them going again," Harry said. He had a feeling he knew what the Aurors were thinking. Harry was making everyone else stay away from Voldemort, even them. Why would he do such a thing with trained adult fighters working with him? Harry blew his whistle, starting the action, then flew over to O'Connell to speak with him. "Yes?"

"You're surrounded by trained Aurors, lad," O'Connell said, obviously frustrated. "Why not let us help you fight him?"

"Honestly? I don't want to lose any of you. Professor Dumbledore and I have a strategy worked out between us. He's going to help me with Voldemort since you lot will be here to help the D.A."

The Time of Destiny

"What makes you think you'd lose any of us, Harry?" O'Connell frowned, his eyes concerned as he waited for the young man's reply.

"We talked about the prophecy before," he reminded the older man, drawing him away from the sounds of battle. Ron was busy barking orders when passing them via Hermione's Adferos didn't satisfy his need for speed. Between his deep, booming voice, the twins' raucous laughter and all the incantations being yelled, the noise level was tremendous.

"The one about you and Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"I remember."

"Then you know that I'm the only one who can kill him, right?" Harry said earnestly. "I don't want any more good people to be injured or to die. It's *my* destiny to deal with him. Not yours. Not Dumbledore's. Not Remus's. Mine. I don't like it, but that's the way it is. I've fought him enough now to understand how he fights. I can anticipate what he's going to do sometimes, which is a tremendous help. Professor Dumbledore and I have been working together intensively this term, so we understand how each of us moves, how each of us thinks, and we make a good team. We'll deal with Voldemort. You can help me best by capturing or killing as many Death Eaters as possible."

O'Connell looked deeply into the young wizard's serious green eyes. In those eyes he saw determination, courage, selflessness, and just enough fear to give the young man before him a good sense of caution and respect for his opponent. He sighed. "If that's what you want, Harry," he said finally. "I'll tell my team to follow your instructions and keep the Death Eaters away from you rather than trying to engage Voldemort in battle ourselves."

"Good. Thanks," Harry said. "I wish it could be different. I'd love to just say 'go for it!' but I can't."

"I know." O'Connell laid a firm hand on the boy's shoulder. "We're behind you, Harry."

"Thanks."

"I wanted to tell you also – you're a wonderful teacher. I watched you working with the students. You're a natural."

Harry beamed. This was high praise indeed, coming from a man who was not only a teacher himself, but head of the Auror School, as well. "Thanks."

"It's going to be interesting to see how your life develops, Harry. Auror, Quidditch player, teacher – you'd be wonderful at any or all of those," the man said sincerely.

Harry blushed, then said, "That's if I have a future at all."

"You will, lad, you will," the man said with more assurance than he felt. "By the way, I brought you something. Can you give me a few minutes after practice?"

The Time of Destiny

"Yes."

"Then I won't keep you any longer now. Let's get back to it, shall we?" O'Connell said with the eager smile of a seasoned warrior who truly enjoyed training sessions.

They went back to the battle, each of them taking his place in the activities. After a while, Harry landed, laid his broom aside and moved between fighters to the centre of the fray. "All right, you lot, now we're fighting as if Voldemort's here!" he cried, shooting sparks as he pantomimed fighting with his enemy. The fighters obediently moved their own battles away from him, leaving Harry alone in the centre of a huge cleared area. Dumbledore joined him, positioning himself at an angle to Harry, shooting sparks in the same direction the boy was. After several minutes of this kind of action, Harry looked at his watch and then blew his whistle, halting the skirmishes going on in every section of the Quidditch pitch. All the warriors moved toward him, soon surrounding him. Some of them looked quite comical with powdered sugar plastered all over their heads and robes. They laughed and licked their fingers as they brushed themselves off.

"That was a great practice, you lot!" Harry said. "Flying Squad, good work! I think you nailed every one of us, from the look of things. I'm just glad these are sugar bombs rather than the real thing." He grinned ruefully and raked his fingers through his hair, making zebra-like strips as the black showed once more through the powdered sugar he hadn't yet bothered to brush off. The twins had bombed both him and Ron quite seriously once again.

"Order members, professors and Aurors, thank you so much for coming! I think it was a great help to the D.A. to practice with you." The D.A. members raised a cheer for the adults, who had not only rehearsed battle tactics with them, but had helped the ones who still had a bit of trouble with certain spells. "All right, D.A. members, line up and move across the field together. We need to clean up the debris. When we're finished, put away any equipment you were using, and then you're dismissed. Thanks again!" He grinned when he saw Order members and Aurors joining the line of students stretched across the pitch using Cleaning Spells to clear away the debris of dropped bombs and the mounds of powdered sugar. When they were done, he went to tell the Weasleys and Tonks goodbye.

"Harry, dear, you were brilliant!" Molly said as she hugged him warmly. "And you've done such a good job of training the D.A. They were wonderful."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," he said, returning her hug with affection. They had exchanged letters regularly since the holidays, letters that were increasingly honest, funny, heartfelt and warm, which finally healed the breach between them. They were both glad to be on good terms again.

"Well done, lad," Mr. Weasley said as he shook Harry's hand.

"Thanks," Harry replied. "Thanks for the help. It's great to see you all again, as well."

"And you," Arthur replied. "Take care."

"Fred, George – well done!" Harry said as he shook their hands.

"No hard feelings about making you such a target, then?" George asked with an impish grin.

The Time of Destiny

"Nah. At least it's sugar. I expect we'll all be on a sugar high for quite a while now," Harry replied, grinning.

"A well-deserved one, I might add," Fred said, cuffing Harry gently on the shoulder. "See you."

"Yeah, see you," Harry replied. He turned to Tonks as Ron, Hermione and Ginny continued talking to the Weasleys.

"Come here, handsome," Tonks said, opening her arms for him. "Give your old godmother a hug."

"My 'old' godmother?" Harry teased. "Do you see an old godmother around here somewhere? I'd be happy to hug her."

"You're so cute," she said, holding him close. "This was fun! Let's do it again sometime."

"Yeah, it was fun. Thanks for coming," he replied, kissing her on the cheek.

"Ooooo, your godfather is going to be so jealous!" she teased, returning his kiss.

"Ooooo, I'm jealous," Remus said with a laugh as he came up behind them. "Unhand my wife, you young whelp."

"Sorry, she was just too tempting," Harry said, grinning at his godfather.

"Yes, she is," Remus said, smiling down at his bride.

"I'd better go. Mr. O'Connell wanted a word with me, and there's still a bit of daylight left. If he doesn't take too long, I might get some flying in before Hermione makes us get back to revising for N.E.W.T.s. Oh, do you want to fly with me?" he invited.

"No, lad, but thanks," Remus replied. "We have things to do at home."

"I understand," Harry replied, his eyes twinkling. "Have fun, you two! Bye." He waved at his departing friends, then turned to find O'Connell waiting for him.

"Sorry to be so long," Harry apologized.

"No problem, lad," O'Connell said with a smile. "You were taking care of your troops, your equipment, your training ground and morale among your fighters. That's what a good leader does."

Harry's cheeks pinked up at the compliment. "Yeah, and we'd never hear the end of it from some people if we left the pitch a mess," he chuckled. "You said you have something for me?"

"Yes. I brought you pictures of your parents," he said, putting a thick package in Harry's hands.

The Time of Destiny

Harry gasped in surprise. "I thought you said a 'few' photos," he said, grinning at the man. "This feels like a lot more than a few!"

"I had a new camera when I started Auror School, so I took pictures all the time," O'Connell said with an easy smile. "Your parents gave the best parties, always great fun, with good company. I took pictures at those, as well as during our breaks between classes and when we went out to practice field work. I hope you enjoy them."

"Are you sure you don't want to keep at least some of these?" Harry said cautiously. "I wouldn't want to take all of your pictures. . . ."

"Those are copies I made for you. I still have the negatives, and I enjoy developing film. Those are all for you. I hope you enjoy them."

"Thank you!" Harry breathed, delighted beyond words.

"Take care, Harry. See you," the man said with a casual wave as he moved off to join his waiting friends.

Harry stood there staring at the package, then sat down cross-legged on the grass and opened it, pulling out a thick sheaf of photographs. There were his parents, smiling and waving, sitting together on a park bench with other people scattered across the lawn around them. There they were in a large group of people listening to an older wizard. All of them had brooms in hand and excited looks on their faces. In another photo, they were indoors, and his mother had a baby – him – in her arms as she talked with Sirius, Remus, Peter Pettigrew and some other people seated or standing around the room. Every so often, she reached out and patted Pettigrew, who was seated nearest her, on the shoulder. James had his arm around Lily's shoulders, his other hand reaching out and softly tickling the laughing baby's cheek, a tender smile on his face. Every so often, baby Harry would rest his head on his mother's shoulder, looking perfectly content.

Harry reached out a gentle finger and touched his mother's face, then his father's. He wished beyond all imagining that he could share such a moment with them now.

Shadows fell across the picture as Ginny, Ron and Hermione plopped down around him.

"What's that, mate?" Ron asked curiously as he and Ginny leaned over to look at what had Harry so spellbound.

"Is that Sirius?" Hermione said, getting to her knees and looking at the picture upside down. "And Remus! And your parents!"

Harry nodded wordlessly, still lost in the hollow feeling that had come over him when he saw the photo of his mother holding him.

"And look at Harry," Ginny said fondly. "Isn't he a beautiful baby? Such rosy cheeks and so much hair! And look at that smile."

"Yeah," Hermione agreed, admiring the precious baby in the photos. "Where'd you get these? May we see the others?"

The Time of Destiny

"O'Connell was in Auror School with my parents," Harry murmured, trying to shake off the odd feelings he was experiencing. "He was a photographer – like Colin, I guess. He copied his photos for me." He separated the stack of photos into fairly equal parts and handed one to each of his friends. They were soon engrossed in trying to determine who certain people were, and exclaiming over those they recognized. It took them a while to realize Harry was still sitting quietly looking at that one photo.

"What is it, Harry?" Ginny murmured, moving next to him and rubbing his back gently. "What's wrong?"

"My mum," he said sadly. "She's being so kind to Pettigrew." He swallowed the lump in his throat.

"You've known for years now that they were friends," Ginny said quietly.

"I know. It's just – Remus and I are the only ones left from this photo, you know?" He touched his mother's face again, then looked at Ginny. "You do look a bit like her," he mused.

She smiled tenderly at him. She knew he was going through emotional turmoil, yet he was trying so hard to hide it. She handed him her stack of photos. "Thanks for letting me look at them," she said softly. "Do you want to go in now? Or what?"

Harry took the photos she, Ron and Hermione were all handing back and re-wrapped them carefully. "I guess we should go in," he said after a long moment's silence. "We have a lot of revising to do." He stood up, tucked the package under his arm, picked up his Firebolt and started toward the castle, so deeply lost in thought he didn't even notice if his friends were with him or not.

"This isn't good," Ron said quietly, watching Harry walking away with his head held low, his shoulders slumped. "There's enough daylight left, I was sure he'd want to fly a bit."

"We do need to study, Ron," Hermione chided him as they started after Harry. Ginny had already run ahead to walk with him.

"That's not the point," Ron said, glancing down at her, then back at Harry. "He went from being happy to suddenly not talking, not even thinking about flying on a gorgeous afternoon. That's not like him."

Hermione sighed. "You're right. It's awful that seeing those photos makes him so happy and him so sad at the same time."

"Yeah."

A couple of days later, Remus caught Harry as he was leaving the Great Hall after lunch. "Going up to work with Professor Dumbledore this afternoon?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, in a couple of hours. He had some school stuff to take care of after lunch," Harry said with a shrug.

The Time of Destiny

"I've noticed you don't seem yourself lately," Remus said, walking next to the boy. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine," Harry said off-handedly.

"I've heard you say you were fine when you'd lost half of the blood from your body and your skin was in tatters. Don't give me 'fine,'" Remus chided him with a fond smile. "What's wrong?"

Harry sighed, then turned to face his godfather. "Mr. O'Connell gave me photos of my parents, a whole pile of them. They're wonderful, but they make me sad. I think some of them were taken in my house. It looks familiar somehow, but the memories are so faint. Could you take me to my house in Godric's Hollow sometime? I'd like to see it."

"I'll take you if you want, but it's a ruin, Harry," Remus said gently. "It won't look the way you remember it at all. There's hardly a stone left upon a stone anymore."

Harry's face twisted in pain. "It's just that. . . I can almost see things, almost remember, and it's just out of my reach. It's driving me mad."

"Most people don't remember anything from before their third birthday, Harry. You were only fifteen months old. . . well, you know," he replied. "The fact that you can remember anything at all is remarkable. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"I know," Harry said in frustration, "but it . . . I can't explain it. It bothers me a lot."

"Not being able to remember your house?" Remus said.

Harry was silent for a long moment. "Not being able to remember my parents holding me, playing with me. . . I see it in those pictures, and I know I was completely happy then, my life was peaceful and sweet and *normal*. I want to *remember* that."

"It's not healthy to dwell on the past, Harry."

Harry looked at him sharply. "I can't seem to *stop* dwelling on it. Those memories being just out of reach. . . ." He shook his head in frustration.

Remus studied the boy's face for a long moment, then said, "I might be able to help you."

"How?"

"I'm free this evening. Bring your Pensieve to my quarters after dinner and we'll see what I can do, all right?"

Harry's face lit up. "You'll show me your memories?" he said hopefully.

"Yes. I think it might be helpful to you."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely. "I'll see you this evening, then."

The Time of Destiny

"See you then."

"There's that handsome boy!" Tonks said as she opened the door for Harry to enter Lupin's quarters. Most of her hair was shoulder length today, with purple stripes against a black background. The top was pulled up in spikes, the rest absolutely straight.

"Hi, Tonks!" Harry said with a grin as she pulled him into a hug. "How are you?"

"I'm the cutest godmother ever, aren't I?" she said saucily as she kissed him on the cheek.

"Yes, you are," he agreed. He set the Pensieve on the table and looked up at Remus expectantly.

"I've spent the afternoon thinking about which memories would be most helpful or most enjoyable to you," Remus began as he touched his wand to his temple and pulled a long, silvery thread out from between his greying hairs. He dropped that thread carefully into the Pensieve, watching it swirl as he pulled another memory from his head. "I think you'll enjoy what I came up with. I hope so, anyway."

"Anything, anything at all would be wonderful," Harry said eagerly. Talking with his father's portrait in Gryffindor's Chamber of Knowledge was wonderful but heartbreakingly frustrating, as well. The James he'd gotten to know was still an immature youth, not the man who became his father, and that James had no memories of Harry at all. That James saw Harry as a buddy, a brother, a pal. What Harry wanted was his father, not another best mate. Talking with James's portrait made Harry even lonelier for his parents than he had been before. He refused to tell anyone this, though, because he didn't want to be forbidden to talk to James anymore. It was a difficult situation in every direction.

Remus pulled several more silvery threads from his head. "Right then," he said as he dropped the last memory into the Pensieve and looked at his godson. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Take my elbow so we don't get separated," Remus suggested. "One, two, three." They bent over the bowl and soon both felt as if they were somersaulting into the Pensieve, landing on their feet in a place that was all too familiar to Harry.

"King's Cross Station?" he said, looking around. "What are we doing here?"

"I thought you'd like to see when I met your parents – well, your dad, at least," Remus said with a smile. "There I am, over by that wall."

"Why are you standing in the corner alone? Where are your parents?"

A shadow of old pain crossed Remus's face. "They left me here to manage on my own."

"Why?"

The Time of Destiny

Remus looked at Harry quite seriously. "I honestly don't know." He studied his eleven-year-old self sadly and murmured, "I was terrified. Once I got my back to that wall, I wasn't ever going to move. I had no idea what to do, where to go . . . it was awful."

"I remember that feeling," Harry said sympathetically. "My aunt and uncle dropped me off at the station and laughed at me, saying there was no such thing as Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. If I hadn't seen the Weasleys on their way to the platform, I wouldn't have known how to get here at all."

Remus squeezed the boy's shoulder, sharing Harry's remembered pain. He glanced up and said, "Ah, look! There they are."

"Who?" Harry said, his eyes flitting over the mass of milling students.

"James and Sirius." Remus gazed at the approaching boys with a fond smile.

Two small boys were struggling with their trunks, dragging them manfully along the platform toward the train. James noticed young Remus standing alone.

"Oy! What are you waiting for?" he said with a friendly grin.

"Nothing," the child Remus said nervously. "I . . . I don't know where to go."

"A Prefect told me to just get on the train and find an empty compartment," James said. "C'mon, you can share with us. I'm James Potter." He held out his hand for Remus to shake.

"Sirius Black," the other boy said, offering his hand to Remus as well. Both boys had black hair and easy smiles. James's hair stood up in the back and tended to do whatever it wanted, which didn't seem to bother James at all. Sirius's hair was an elegant tumble of loose waves, which seemed to annoy him for some reason. He kept pushing his hair back out of his face. Harry recognized that gesture from his time in Snape's memories. In the teenaged Sirius, it would be a casual and cool gesture and would have girls drooling. Sirius's eyes were mischievous, his grin infectious, and his laugh already sounded like a bark. James seemed a bit more serious, but friendly, with smiling eyes and an easy-going manner.

The young Remus shook both boys' hands solemnly and finally smiled, then followed them toward the steps into the train. James turned back to wave at a Fifth Year Prefect.

The adult Remus pointed to the boy James was waving to. "See that boy? That's Alfred O'Connell, your Auror School friend."

"It is?" Harry breathed, studying the sturdy fifteen-year-old's face and seeing the resemblance to the man he'd become.

"Look back toward your dad, Harry, quickly," Remus urged. Harry looked where he was pointing. "See her? There's your mum."

A pretty little girl with long red hair was struggling with her trunk just behind James and his new friends. James set his trunk aside and dragged hers up the stairs, setting it inside the train passageway. "James Potter," he said with a smile, holding out his hand politely.

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"Lily Evans," she replied, blushing and shaking his hand briefly. "Thank you."

"No problem," James said, bounding down the stairs and dragging his own trunk onto the train. Sirius was standing at the top of the stairs, his hands on his hips, his eyes laughing as James clambered back into the train, his trunk bouncing behind him. Lily had already gone down the passageway and was now out of sight.

"So you're the gentlemanly type, are you?" Sirius teased. "I'm more of a rogue myself."

"Are you? Why do you say that?" James asked curiously as he, Sirius and Remus disappeared down the train passageway.

"That was your dad all over," Remus said with a fond smile. "Good-hearted, generous, friendly. He didn't turn into the prat you saw in Severus's memories until a few years later." Remus chuckled. "Fortunately, his prat days didn't last long. He was a good lad, James. Sirius, too." He sighed, then looked at Harry, whose face was shining with delight. "Did you like them?"

"Yes! I'm glad he wasn't always the prat Snape thinks he was," Harry said as he and the adult Remus followed James, Sirius and the child Remus onto the train.

"Look there, Harry," Remus said, standing in the doorway to the train and pointing back toward the entrance to the platform where the majority of the parents were clustered. "Those are your grandparents, the Potters. And there are the Evanses. That gawky girl must be Petunia."

He turned and led Harry down the passageway. "Your dad, Sirius and I are in the compartment. . .let's see. . .fourth door down, I think. Yes, there we are," he said with a laugh as Sirius poked his head back out of the door, looked up and down the corridor and made faces at passing students.

Harry and the adult Remus entered the compartment with the future Marauders. Harry smiled at his dad and his friends, then moved to look out of the window at his grandparents again.

"Hmm, the Blacks have to be here somewhere," Remus mused, glancing around. "Ah, there they are."

Harry dragged his eyes away from his Potter grandparents to glance at the Blacks. Mrs. Black looked very much like her portrait, forbidding and sour. She was busy snapping instructions to Sirius, who was now leaning out of the window, ignoring her and having quite a good time waving at other people. Harry looked back at his grandparents. Yes, that was Aunt Petunia, sour-looking and horse-faced even as a young girl. His mum looked like her mother, apparently. Mrs. Evans was a pretty redhead with almond-shaped green eyes like Lily's. The Evanses stood back on the fringes of activity, apparently a bit nervous around so many wizards.

"I got my eyes from my grandmother as well as my mum," Harry realized with delight.

"Yes, it looks that way, doesn't it?" Remus said, enjoying Harry's pleasure.

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"And my dad's parents – his mum's the one with black hair, but his dad has my knobbly knees, from the way his trousers are bumped up over them. Or rather, I have his." Harry grinned, elated with his discoveries. "I look like him, too, but more like my dad." He sighed. "I wish we could talk with them."

"This bit is nearly over, Harry. The train is leaving the station. I have several other memories for you to enjoy. Look all you want for now, because they'll soon be out of sight."

As the train left the station, the images of his grandparents faded away. "Wow. That was brilliant, Remus!" Harry told his godfather, his eyes shining. "What's next?"

"You'll see," Remus said, taking Harry's arm and lifting his wand. They were soon in another memory.

"The Quidditch pitch!" Harry said, grinning. "Who's playing?"

"Gryffindor and Ravenclaw," Remus replied with a smile as they climbed into the stands while watching the action above him. "I thought you'd like to see your dad fly."

"He's playing Chaser! I thought he was a Seeker," Harry said, confused. "I saw a trophy with his name on it, listing him as Seeker."

"He played Seeker when he was older," Remus said. "The first year he was on the team, they needed another Chaser. He was good at it. I've just put a small portion of this game and one other in the Pensieve. You'll see him as Seeker in the next game."

"Cool!" Harry said, grinning hugely as his dad scored a goal. "YES! Well done, Gryffindor!" Harry chanted along with the cheering crowd. Remus laughed in response.

"Ready? Let's go," Remus said, and then they were at another Quidditch game, this time with James soaring high above the action. "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, Fifth Year," Remus said.

"That's not. . .Snape?" Harry said, glimpsing a greasy-haired boy with a hooked nose on the Slytherin team.

"Yes. He wasn't very good, but he tried hard," Remus said. "Watch your dad – he'll do something interesting soon." And sure enough, James suddenly began a spectacular dive, racing the Slytherin Seeker toward the ground, pulling up at just the right moment. The Slytherin Seeker ploughed into the ground as James zoomed off leaving a trail of laughter in his wake.

"He faked him out!" Harry said, clapping madly. "Well done!"

"James was a wily one when it came to Quidditch," Remus said with a smile. "There he goes. He's seen the Snitch."

The Slytherin Seeker was back on his broom and trying to catch up with James, who was flying neatly between Chasers and avoiding both Bludgers on his way to capturing the elusive golden ball. He lay flat on his broom and reached as far as he could, finally snagging the

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Snitch with the tips of his fingers. He pumped his Snitch-filled fist in the air in triumph, grinning down at the cheering crowd.

"Brilliant!" Harry said, clapping until his hands were numb. "Well done, Gryffindor!"

Remus watched Harry's pleasure in his father's performance, then glanced back at James, who was spiralling slowly to the ground, surrounded with celebrating team mates. "He was good, no doubt, but you're by far the better flier."

"You think so?" Harry said, tearing his eyes from his dad to look at Remus.

"Yes, I do. I watched every one of James's games, and I've seen all of yours when I've been at Hogwarts. You're simply a more skilful flyer, and your dives are amazing. Even if your dad had ridden a Firebolt, you'd still out-fly him."

"It would be fun to fly with him," Harry said quietly, grinning as he watched his dad being lifted on the shoulders of the happy Gryffindors and carried off to the Common Room, where there was bound to be a rowdy party late into the night.

"He would have loved that," Remus said, watching the Gryffindors leaving the field. "Oh, there's your mum," he said, pointing. Lily was trailing behind the group, talking quietly to a despondent-looking Snape.

"Why is she talking to *him*?" Harry said in disgust. "Did she fancy him or something?"

"No, she never fancied him. Your mum was the sort of person who would take in every stray kitten she found. Severus was sort of a stray kitten in a way, I think. He had very few friends, and your mother felt sorry for him. She was a very kind person, your mother. She's comforting him. He knows he flew badly. I think they became friends in Potions. She was partnered with him at times."

"Why would someone partner a Gryffindor with a Slytherin?" Harry said, looking affronted.

"Different teachers have different methods," Remus said with a shrug. "I think that professor was trying to get the Houses to get along better, so he tried to force some friendships. It didn't work very well, but there were a few odd friendships that formed. Your mother and Severus were one of those."

"I imagine my dad didn't think much of that," Harry said wisely.

Remus laughed. "No, he didn't, but then he was at the peak of his 'prat' stage here. He fancied your mum, but she would barely speak to him."

"How did they get past that?"

"Time and maturity," Remus said with a smile. "Ready to go?" Harry nodded. In a moment, they were in another memory. It was fully dark, and in the light of the full moon, a stag, a huge black dog and a werewolf ran joyfully through the grounds.

"Where's Pettigrew?" Harry asked, tension in his voice.

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"He couldn't keep up with us, obviously, so he waited by the Whomping Willow for us to finish running. Then he'd push on the knot so the tree would stop moving, and we'd spend the rest of the night in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry watched the animals moving so gracefully across the lush grass. The stag bounded along, his huge rack of antlers glittering softly in the moonlight. The black dog's shaggy fur glistened with youth and good health. He ran with his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth, his ears flapping in the wind.

"You haven't changed much, have you?" Harry said, noticing the werewolf of so many years ago looked nearly exactly as he did in the present.

"Larger, and with more scars. That's about it," Remus said, his voice sounding a bit strained.

"If it hurts you to watch this, why did you include it?" Harry asked curiously.

"I wanted you to see your dad as a stag," he said with a smile. "He was impressive, wasn't he?" His voice grew softer as he continued. "They were the best friends anyone could want. To do that for me. . . ." He shook his head and looked at his godson. "And that goodness of heart continues to the next generation," he said, squeezing the boy's shoulder affectionately. "You can't know what it means to me for you and Ron to be willing to run with me."

Harry smiled back at him. "I'm glad we can do it."

"Me, too." Remus sighed again. "Ready to move on?" Harry nodded.

They watched various scenes of James and Lily in classes, in the Common Room, in Hogsmeade, and finally beginning to be a couple. Then came a memory of a warm day in the late spring or early summer. James, Lily, Sirius, Remus and Peter were all lounging under the huge beech tree where Harry and his friends liked to sit. James and Lily were ignoring the others, totally engrossed in each other.

"So they fancy each other now?" Harry chuckled as he watched his parents snogging quite seriously despite the presence of their friends.

"Yes," Remus said with a smile. He watched for a moment, laughing at some rude remark of Sirius's, then turned to his godson. "I don't want you to think they behaved this way in front of us all the time. They usually found someplace relatively private to snog. But this particular day, we were all just relaxing after exams and they couldn't seem to help themselves. They were married not long after this."

As they broke their kiss, Lily leaned back in James's arms and looked up at him, her face glowing with love. Her eyes crinkled in mischief, exactly as Harry's did, and she leaned in and nipped James on the chin.

"Got your dimple," she said with a laugh.

"And you may keep it or return it, as you wish, my lady," James said with a warm smile. Then he nibbled on the end of her nose and went back to kissing her.

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Harry stood slack-jawed in shock.

"What's wrong?" Remus asked, noticing Harry's surprise.

"That's exactly what Ginny and I do. They even said the same words!" Harry said, turning to his godfather. "I didn't know they did that!"

"They did that all the time, Harry, even after they married and had you," Remus assured him. "They must have done it in front of you many times for you to remember it."

"I thought we made it up," Harry said, bemused. "Ginny kissed my chin one time and I asked her if she got my dimple, and it went on from there."

Remus just smiled, delighted that this memory had such significance to Harry. He'd seen Harry and Ginny playing the dimple game and was poignantly reminded of James and Lily. He'd hoped Harry would enjoy this scene.

Several memories later, they came to James and Lily's wedding.

"I put the whole wedding in the Pensieve, but we don't have to stay for all of it if you don't want to," Remus said. "I wasn't certain how much of it you'd want to see."

"All of it," Harry said eagerly.

"Let's sit down, then," Remus said, leading Harry to a seat on a bench near the front of the small chapel. The younger Remus, Sirius and Peter Pettigrew were all busy escorting people to their seats.

"Pettigrew," Harry grumbled in disgust.

"He was a close friend – or so we thought," Remus said with a sad shrug.

Harry sighed, willing himself to accept this fact since there was nothing he could do to change it. "Where are we?"

"The church in Godric's Hollow. That's where your father's family was from, for many generations."

"Since Godric Gryffindor?" Harry asked, his eyes twinkling.

"You know about that?"

"Professor Dumbledore told me only a true Gryffindor could pull Godric's sword from the Sorting Hat. He told me recently that I'm the Heir of Gryffindor."

"I knew you were. James was, so you would have to be. What do you think?"

"Of being his heir? I think it explains a lot of things," Harry said seriously. He glanced up as Sirius escorted his grandmother Evans to her seat a few rows ahead of him. He saw Aunt Petunia seated there, as well.

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"Like what?"

Harry studied his grandmother Evans and his Potter grandparents across the aisle from her as he answered. "Like why the Heir of Slytherin would choose me as his enemy. Like why the Malfoys and I have always been natural enemies. Things like that."

Remus nodded. "You're right, it does explain those things. Ah, the service is starting," he said, nodding toward a small door in the front of the church. The door opened and a clergyman came out, followed by James, Sirius, Remus and Pettigrew. Once they were lined up, Remus turned toward the back of the church as the music swelled. Lily Evans came in on her father's arm, wearing dress robes of palest ivory embroidered with golden griffons. She was followed by three girls in matching dress robes in a shimmering gold fabric.

"Why are the women coming in reverse order from your wedding?" Harry asked curiously.

"Tonks and I had a wizard wedding. James and Lily combined wizard and Muggle traditions to keep both families comfortable," Remus explained. "This is the way it's done in Muggle weddings in England."

"There are more Muggles here than just my mum's parents and Aunt Petunia," Harry said as he looked around. "Won't the Muggles wonder about the robes and so on?" He smiled at his mother as she passed by, then turned to the front to watch the proceedings.

"This is a wizard church," Remus replied. "Godric's Hollow is actually a Muggle town, but many wizards live here as well. It's such a small community they live quite close together, Muggles and wizards, and this is one of the few churches in the area, so it welcomes Muggles as well as wizards. It's impossible to keep the Muggles from knowing about the wizards in their midst, but it's not a problem here. They get along quite well, actually. I wish that was true everywhere, but Godric's Hollow is a very unusual community, or was back then. I haven't returned since. . . ." He left his sentence hanging, not wanting to spoil this happy time for Harry with thoughts of James and Lily's unfortunate future.

Harry looked sharply at him, then nodded in understanding. He turned toward the front, drinking in the sight of his parents glowing faces as they joined their hands, wands and lives in marriage.

After the wedding, Remus took Harry to various memories of gatherings in his parents' home.

"This is your six-month birthday party, Harry," Remus said with a fond smile as he watched Lily carrying baby Harry around to greet their guests. The Evanses were there, but the Potter grandparents weren't.

"Where are my dad's parents?" Harry asked as he looked around the room.

"They died not long before this," Remus said quietly.

"Both of them? Together? What happened?" Harry said, a frown creasing his forehead.

Remus sighed. "I hate to spoil the good time you're having here," he said finally.

"Voldemort?"

"No, Death Eaters. They were targeting Gryffindor's descendents." His voice trailed off uneasily, with something obviously left unsaid.

"To find . . . me?" Harry said in a small voice.

"In part," Remus admitted, looking at Harry with sad eyes. "The rest of it was that they knew their worst enemies would be from the Gryffindor bloodline."

"And how many are left in his bloodline now?" Harry asked carefully.

"Very few, and those are distant relations, not strong in the Gryffindor blood. I'm sorry," Remus said, clasping the boy's shoulder warmly.

Harry swallowed hard, looking at the happy people enjoying the party around them. "And how many of these people are dead now?"

Remus caught Harry's eyes and gazed deeply into them, seeing misery replacing the pleasure that had been there moments earlier. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly.

"All right, then." Remus studied the group gathered in the Potters' living room.

The Evans grandparents were there, as were Remus, Sirius and Pettigrew. Sirius had a young woman with him who apparently doted on him, but Sirius was more interested in playing with baby Harry than paying attention to his young lady. O'Connell was there, as were a couple of other people Harry didn't recognize.

"Your Evans grandparents were killed in a car crash," Remus said, noticing Harry's nod of acknowledgement. "Your aunt told you at the Weasleys' party, that's right. OK. Um, of those at the party, I would say that the couple by the kitchen door, O'Connell, you and I and that young lady with Sirius are the only ones left now."

"You're kidding," Harry said, aghast.

Remus's eyes were sorrowful. "No, I wish I were. That young lady was in St. Mungo's the last I heard. She was an Auror and was tortured into insanity. The others – well, you know what happened to Sirius and Pettigrew. The others died at the hands of the Death Eaters. Those were bad times, Harry, so many people dying for no good reason."

"Like now," Harry said bitterly.

"Yes, like now," Remus agreed.

"Can I see my room?" Harry said, trying to shake off his dark mood.

"Of course! It's just through there," Remus said, glad to change the subject. "Good timing, Harry. I'm going in your room to get something for your mother. We can just follow me," he

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said with a grin. He walked Harry past an open doorway – "that's the kitchen – see your high chair?" – and entered a small room painted a soft blue with white trim, white puffy clouds painted along the walls just under the ceiling, with some Quidditch players painted on the walls in various places, all of them in Gryffindor colours. "Your mother was artistic," Remus said, noticing Harry's amazement at the painting. "Your father insisted on the Quidditch players – he was so sure you'd be a boy," Remus said with a laugh. "They used to pretend to argue about it – they always ended up laughing and saying maybe it would be twins. Your mum wanted a boy as much as your dad did, but she would take the girl's side just to annoy your dad." He chuckled at the memory, making Harry smile a bit.

"What's that?" Harry said, moving over to the crib and pointing to a small flying object circling just inches above the crib mattress. "It looks like a Snitch!"

"It's a toy Snitch for babies," Remus said. "They're made of soft material so the baby won't be hurt if it hits them, and it's too large for them to put in their mouths, so it's safe. It's spelled to fly just a short distance above the crib or floor so the baby has a chance to catch it. James bought that as soon as he found out your mum was pregnant. He was so certain you'd be a boy and would love Quidditch."

Harry laughed in delight. "No wonder I told Oliver Wood I liked the Snitch best when he showed me the Quidditch balls!"

"Do you remember him?" Remus said, pointing to a stuffed toy bunny. It was brown and sat upright, with long floppy ears lying limply on its head.

"No, I don't think so," Harry said, frowning at the toy.

"Watch," Remus said as his younger self finally noticed where the bunny was and grabbed it, passing them as he went back to the living room.

"Are you finished in here? We can't stay long, since I've left," Remus said.

"I remember that tree!" Harry said, pointing to a small tree bearing pink flowers just outside the window.

"You do?"

"I thought it was a painting I was remembering," he breathed as he moved to the window and looked at the tree more closely. "I remember. . . yes, there! Blue tits!"

"Your mother hung those birdboxes to attract them," Remus said, smiling as the pretty little birds twittered about in the beautiful tree. He glanced behind him. "We need to change rooms, Harry. Come on."

Harry followed him back into the living room and saw baby Harry lying on his back on the floor hugging the bunny to him. The baby had the middle two fingers of his right hand in his mouth, the index finger of the same hand holding the bunny's ear against his face.

"You must be getting tired," Remus said fondly. "You only sucked your fingers when you were teething or getting sleepy."

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"Harry, love, you are a tired little boy, aren't you?" Lily said, scooping him up in her arms. "Come on, you and Mister Bunny need a nap." She hummed a lullaby as she carried him into his room.

"Bear Bunny," Harry corrected, then looked puzzled. "Why did I say that?"

Remus laughed. "You do remember! That's what you called him when you learned to talk a bit more. You called him 'Bear' – nobody knew why."

Harry noticed a table and chair in the corner. "Is that where my dad worked?"

"Yes," Remus said.

"That's the table I remember, then – and there's the cat!" he said, seeing a black cat lying curled up on a pillow pushed back in the corner under the table. "I really remembered it, then," he said, referring to a memory that he'd had the previous term of himself as a baby playing next to the cat under the table near his dad's feet.

"Yes, you did," Remus said with a smile.

When Lily put Harry to bed, Remus led Harry away to another gathering in the Potter home. "This is your first birthday party. Your parents actually had a party every month for your birthday until you were a year old," he said, chuckling at the memory. "They enjoyed you so much, Harry."

There were far fewer people at this party. Lily's parents were now dead, as were several of the others who had been guests at the previous party. The tragedy of so many people dying so young, so frequently, bore down on Harry. He sighed heavily, noting the faces of those at the party were much less cheerful. There was a darkness hovering over everyone's mood, although they did their best to act light-hearted and have fun together. Harry listened as they spoke of friends who had died, others who were hospitalized for one reason or another, the increasing number of Death Eater raids in the surrounding countryside. At one point, Lily stood in the doorway with little Harry on her hip. James joined her, putting his arm around her and reaching out with his other hand to tickle his son's cheek, making the baby laugh. O'Connell was taking pictures of this scene. These were the pictures that had disturbed Harry so, and being there now was even more bothersome to him. *They have only a few months left to live*, Harry thought miserably. *That bastard Mum's being so kind to is going to betray them. Sirius is going to Azkaban for twelve years for a crime he didn't commit. They only have three months left. THREE MONTHS!* He swallowed hard and forced himself to look at the people in the room. The couple who'd been talking by the doorway in the previous memory weren't there. Of the others in the room

"Where's that couple? The ones who were by the door in the other memory?" Harry said suddenly. He saw Remus's face tighten. Harry gulped as he reached a conclusion. "You, O'Connell and I are the only ones still alive, aren't we?"

Remus studied the group a long moment before nodding. "Yes. That couple – Ken and Marcia Brown – they died in a Death Eater raid a few weeks before this party. I'd forgotten about that until just now. I didn't know them very well." He looked at his godson and saw the pain on the

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young man's face. "It's time to go, Harry. I didn't mean to upset you. I thought you'd want to see your birthday, and the setting for the pictures O'Connell gave you."

"I did. No, I don't want to go yet," Harry said, gazing intently at his parents' faces. The three of them made such a picture. James and Lily gazed at each other with their love plain on their faces, which only increased when they looked at their baby. Tears streamed unheeded down the adult Harry's face as he watched the scene. He felt a warm arm come around his shoulders.

"There, there, Harry," Remus said, squeezing his godson's shoulders gently. "They were so happy, so proud of you. You have nothing to regret here."

"Yes, I do," Harry said, stifling a sob with difficulty. "They died because of me."

"No, Harry, that's not right," Remus said in concern.

"Yes, it is! He came after *me*. That's why they died. Look how happy they were! How happy I was! I've never felt that peaceful, that content. . .that happy. . .since then." Harry was trembling now as anguish washed over him.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean to upset you. I shouldn't have included this one," Remus said, greatly distressed.

"No, I wanted to see it. I want to see us together. I want to *remember*!" Harry cried in despair. He stood gazing raptly at them for several long moments. "I wish . . . I'd give anything to feel that way again, to hug them again. . . ."

"I know, lad. I'm so sorry," Remus said quietly, his heart aching for the boy. "Let's go."

Harry finally looked at his godfather. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I went off like that."

"It's understandable. This is all a bit much for you to take in, I imagine." Harry nodded. "Are there any memories you want to revisit before we leave?"

"No," the boy said in a low, sad voice, his eyes still locked on the loving scene his parents were presenting.

"Come on, then. It's late. We need to go," Remus said. He took Harry's elbow and counted, "One, two, three," and they were soon standing in the middle of Remus's quarters, where Tonks sat on the couch reading the newspaper.

"Did you boys have fun?" she said brightly.

"Sometimes," Remus said uneasily, watching Harry's face.

"It was. . .erm. . .thank you, Remus," Harry said uncomfortably.

"Let's have some tea. Would you like to talk about anything you saw?" Remus said. Harry had an odd expression on his face, something taut and constrained, and he was holding his body stiffly.

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"Huh? Oh. No. No, thank you," the young man said, acting as if he'd just been awakened from a dream. "It's late. I should go."

"You're welcome to stay a while, Harry," Tonks said kindly, noting Harry's reddened eyes, strained expression, and the tracks of tears on his cheeks, as well as the concern on her husband's face. "Why don't you tell me all about what you saw?"

"Erm. . .no. Not right now," Harry said awkwardly. "You can keep the Pensieve for a while, so Remus can show you himself."

"That's generous of you, Harry," Remus said. He was very concerned about Harry, but didn't know what to do to help him. "Thank you."

"No problem. Erm, I'd better go. You probably need to snog your wife or something," Harry said, trying to grin.

Remus and Tonks laughed, if a bit uneasily. "All right then. Good night," Remus said. "I enjoyed spending time with you this evening."

"Don't be a stranger!" Tonks said, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Take care of yourself, all right?"

"Yeah. Nice to see you, Tonks. Thanks again, Remus." With that, Harry left their quarters and headed back to Gryffindor Tower. He walked with his head hanging down, his hands shoved in the pockets of his robes, lost in thought. The longer he thought, the more miserable he became. When he entered the Common Room, Ron, Hermione and Ginny all greeted him.

"How was it?" Hermione asked eagerly. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"It was . . . amazing," Harry said sincerely, but his body language didn't match his words.

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, her forehead creased with worry.

"Nothing."

"Not nothing. What's wrong?" she insisted.

Harry chewed his lip, trying to decide what to say. "I. . .erm. . .it's just a lot to take in, you know?"

"I can imagine," Ron said quietly.

Harry looked around at his best friends and his girlfriend, then dropped into a chair. He sighed, then told them what he knew they wanted to hear. "I saw my grandparents on both sides, I saw Sirius's parents, I saw my parents, Sirius and Remus when they got on the Hogwarts Express the first time, a lot of their school days, my dad playing Quidditch – he was really good. I saw their wedding and some parties they had, two of my birthday parties. . . ."

"Two?" Hermione said in surprise. "But. . . ." She stopped herself before saying anything else.

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"They had a party for my birthday every month until I was a year old," Harry explained. "I saw my six-month birthday party and my year birthday party. I had a toy Snitch," he said, his voice suddenly soft and sad.

"Cool!" Ron said encouragingly.

"Yeah. Remus told me my dad was certain I'd be a boy. My room had Gryffindor Quidditch players painted on the walls. My mum tried to tell him I might be a girl, but she wanted a boy too, Remus said. My dad bought that toy Snitch as soon as my mum told him she was pregnant." His voice broke as he finished speaking. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be alone for a while." He got up and walked toward the boys' staircase.

"Alone?" Ginny said nervously. "Are you sure? I'd be happy to just sit with you, Harry."

He turned back, his eyes miserable and sad. "I know. But I have to deal with this stuff myself. I just need some time." He turned and trudged slowly up the stairs, leaving his three friends gazing unhappily at his retreating back.

"It sounds as if he had fun memories to look at," Ron said in confusion. "Why is he upset?"

"Because his parents were so happy together and died so young," Ginny said wisely. "He blames himself as much as Voldemort."

"That's stupid!" Ron said vehemently. "Harry didn't do anything wrong!"

"You and I know that, but he doesn't. The fact that he exists was reason enough for Voldemort to kill his parents, so he blames himself." She looked sadly at the boys' staircase. "I'm worried about him."

"I'll check on him in a little while," Ron offered.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

Hermione sighed. "I thought seeing those things might be helpful to him."

"Remus thought so too, or he wouldn't have done it," Ginny said.

"You never know when someone's going to take something the wrong way," Ron said sagely. The girls nodded.

Up in his room, Harry pulled his curtains around his bed, then got out the packet of pictures from O'Connell and spread them out on his bed. He picked them up, one after the other, staring at the images of his parents waving gaily at the photographer; of them kissing playfully, then laughing at being caught by the camera; of them holding their beloved baby, kissing his fat little cheeks, nibbling tenderly on his neck; of James tossing baby Harry in the air, making the baby's body shake with silent giggles. The more Harry looked, the sadder he became. He felt a great bubble of anguish building inside him and didn't know how to deal with it.

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Merlin flew down from his post on top of the curtain rail and settled in, nestling against Harry's side.

"I don't know what to do, Merlin," Harry said despondently. "I can't seem to get past these feelings. I should enjoy these pictures, but they make me feel awful. What can I do? Help me!" Harry took off his glasses and dropped his face into his hands, rocking in pain. "I can't take anymore, I can't, I can't, I can't," he murmured miserably, rocking himself in his anguish. "I just can't take it, I can't, I can't, I can't." Merlin crooned comfortingly to him. Finally, Harry stopped rocking, sat up and pulled Merlin into his lap, cradling the beautiful bird in his crossed legs. Merlin continued to croon, helping Harry the only way he could.

Ron came upstairs and said, "Harry? You OK?" Dean and Neville were both in the library studying, so Harry had the room to himself.

"I'm fine," Harry snapped from behind his curtains.

"You don't need to bite my head off, mate. We were just worried about you, that's all," Ron said. "Are you coming down to study?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm just going to bed," Harry said quietly. "Sorry I bit your head off."

"All right. See you later, then," Ron said, looking at the closed curtains uneasily as he left the room.

Hours later, Ron was awakened from sleep by some small sound. He poked his head through the opening in his curtains, trying to find what it was that had awakened him. Neville and Dean were both snoring softly. Harry's bed curtains were opened a bit. Ron sat up and looked around, wondering where Harry was, and then saw him sitting on the sill of the opened window, Merlin lying quietly in his lap. Ron got up and crossed to the window.

"Hey, mate. Feeling OK?"

"Yeah," Harry said unconvincingly.

"You haven't sat here brooding like this since we were little," Ron commented, leaning against the wall. "You used to do that a lot, with Hedwig sitting with you."

"Yeah."

"What were you thinking about those times?" Ron asked, trying to get Harry to relax at least a little.

Harry sighed. "I was wondering who I was and where I belonged and how I got here, why my life had been the way it was. That kind of stuff," he said, a bit impatiently.

"And what are you doing here now? Those stones have to be cold on your bum," Ron said with a gently teasing smile.

"They are," Harry said, glancing up and smiling at Ron wanly.

The Time of Destiny

"Then why...?"

"Nosy git, aren't you?"

Ron was taken aback. Harry's tone hadn't been friendly or playful at all. "Sorry, mate. I didn't mean to pry. I'm just worried about you. So are the girls."

"Sorry."

"It's OK," Ron assured him.

Harry was silent for several minutes. Ron waited patiently, hoping to find some way to help his friend. Finally, Harry said, "I feel . . . brittle."

"What do you mean?"

"Something's going to break inside me, and soon. I don't know what to do."

"Talk to Dumbledore," Ron suggested, truly worried now.

"No, he can't help. Nobody can help. It's my problem," Harry said miserably.

"No, mate, it's *our* problem. You tell me what's bothering you and we'll work out a way to fix it, all right? That's what mates do," Ron said with more confidence than he felt.

Harry looked at Ron, his eyes sad and dark. "No, it's my problem. You can't help. Thanks anyway."

"What is it, Harry? Is it scar pain? V-voldemort? What's wrong?" Ron asked anxiously.

"You can't help." Harry got to his feet, setting Merlin on the windowsill. He gazed at the bird and said, "I think you're right. I don't know what else to do."

"What's he want you to do?" Ron said, truly worried.

"I'm going away," Harry said shortly, sliding his wand into his pocket and putting on his glasses.

"I'll go with you. Where are we going?" Ron said loyally.

"You can't follow me, Ron. You can't go there. Tell Ginny I love her. Tell her I'll come back for her," Harry said, reaching out and gripping his best friend's shoulders tightly. "Promise me you'll tell her that."

"Why don't you talk to Remus?" Ron said, frantic now. "Or at least wait until morning. Where are you going? Why can't I go?"

"I can't tell you. Merlin will be with me. I have to go or I'll break, Ron. Please understand."

"Break how? What's wrong, Harry? Tell me!"

The Time of Destiny

"Tell Ginny I'll come back for her," Harry said resolutely, then changed into a phoenix. An instant later, he and Merlin flashed out of sight.

The Time of Destiny

Chapter 23 – Merlin's Solution

"Harry? Harry!" Ron called, looking out of the window, hoping to see the two phoenixes flying there. "Harry?" he said in confusion. "What the bloody hell are you up to now?" He stomach clenched in fear for his friend, Ron sat down and thought hard a moment, then pulled out the Famous Wizard Card and tapped it sharply with his finger. "Wake up, you."

"Whassup?" the sleepy image of Harry in his Quidditch robes said from the face of the card.

"I need you to take a message to Professor Dumbledore and Remus Lupin for me," Ron said, then told the small version of Harry what had happened. "I'll wait for a reply."

"Right!" the picture of Harry said, and flew out of the side of his frame.

In the Girls' Dormitory, Ginny was fast asleep when a flash of light awakened her.

"What. . .?" she said muzzily as she sat up, rubbing her eyes. "What happened? Who. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she saw the red phoenix feather lying on top of her covers. "Merlin? Harry?" she whispered with a puzzled smile, looking up at the curtain rail, thinking he must be sitting up there in phoenix form. "Where are you?" she said, then parted her curtain and looked out into the room. No phoenixes or handsome young men were there. Her roommates were all sleeping soundly. However this feather had landed on her bed, it hadn't disturbed anyone else.

What's going on? she wondered. She considered calling Harry on her ring, but the sound of their voices might wake her roommates. Ginny got up, put on her dressing gown and slippers and started down the stairs to the Common Room to see if Harry was waiting for her there. If he wasn't, she'd call him on her ring.

As the sleepiness cleared from her mind, she realized if Merlin had been the one who'd flashed over her bed, it would have been to take her somewhere to meet Harry. In that case, Merlin would have latched on to her with his talons and flashed her to wherever Harry wanted her to be. But he wouldn't do that without sending a note saying why he was having Merlin take her somewhere. So it probably wasn't Merlin. If that was true, it must have been Harry who had flashed momentarily over her bed and left her the scarlet feather. But why? Why would he do that? He'd never done anything like this before.

Ginny shook her head, thoroughly confused now. She looked at the feather in her hand, then stroked her cheek with its soft tip. It was real. She hadn't dreamed it. She shook her head, trusting Harry to have some good explanation for waking her and getting her so confused in the middle of the night. She continued down the stairs, certain that Harry would be waiting for her in the Common Room with some logical, or at least funny, explanation for his actions.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, she peeped around the doorway into the room. "Harry?"

"He's not here," Ron said quietly. He'd gone to the Common Room to wait for a reply from Dumbledore. "Why did you think he'd be here?"

The Time of Destiny

She held up the red feather and smiled. "A flash of light woke me up, and then I found this on my bed," she said, her eyes sparkling in anticipation of some kind of fun. Harry was so inventive sometimes. She couldn't imagine what he was up to this time. "Where is he? What's he up to?" Ron turned a bit and firelight fell across his face, revealing the worry there. Ginny's stomach knotted in sudden fear. "What's wrong? *Where is he?*"

"He's with Merlin somewhere. I don't know where," Ron said with a heavy sigh. "I'm waiting for a message from— hang on," he said as his Famous Wizard card vibrated.

"Dumbledore wants you to go to his office and tell him everything in person," the picture of Harry said. "Bring Ginny and Hermione. Remus will be there."

"Did he say anything else?" Ron asked anxiously.

"Nope."

"OK. Thanks," Ron said with a sigh as he slid the card back into his pocket. He glanced up at his sister. "Would you mind going up and getting Hermione?"

"What's going on, Ron?" she said anxiously. "Is he all right?"

"Just get Hermione and we'll all go see Dumbledore and sort it out then, OK?" he said wearily.

"I'll go get Hermione," Ginny said, her eyes wide and frightened, "but you will tell me *everything* when I get back! You won't wait until we're with Dumbledore! Do you hear me?" He nodded resignedly, and she raced up the stairs to wake her best friend.

"He said he felt . . . *brittle*?" Dumbledore asked as Ron finished his tale.

"Yes," Ron replied. "He looked shaky. He was pale, nervous, not like himself at all. Not really ill, but not right, either."

"And you have no idea where they went?" Remus asked, his face furrowed in concern.

"No," Ron replied.

Both girls sat wide-eyed and frightened, Ginny clutching the red feather tightly. Tears sparkled in her lashes. She'd cried on the way to the headmaster's office once the initial shock had worn off, but she was determined to stay calm now. She forced herself to focus. She knew she needed to understand and remember everything that was said so she could do whatever was necessary to help find her missing boyfriend.

"Is there anything else we should know?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Ginny?" Ron said, nudging his sister, who had slipped from being focused to being numb again, as she had many times in the last half hour.

The Time of Destiny

"Huh? Oh! I was asleep, and then a flash of light woke me, and I found this feather on my covers," she said, holding the feather up but keeping it close to her. She didn't want it taken away from her even for examination.

"Hmm," Dumbledore said, turning to his silver instruments. He soon had several of them whirring or tinkling or pouring out streams of smoke, but the concern on his face didn't clear. "Still nothing. That's odd."

"What is?" Hermione said.

"I can't find him. I tried as soon as Mr. Weasley sent word that Harry was gone, and couldn't find him then, either. Miss Weasley, have you tried your ring?"

"Yes, and he's not answering it," she said. She'd tried it while waiting for Hermione to get her dressing gown on, as well as several times on the way to Dumbledore's office. Now she sat twisting the dainty promise ring around her finger anxiously and rubbing the letters spelling out Harry's name over and over, as if that would bring him back.

"Try it again," Dumbledore suggested.

"OK." She pressed on the ruby and said, "Harry Potter," then waited to see his face appear over her ring – but nothing happened. "That's never happened before. He told me when he gave it to me that we could talk to each other no matter where we were!"

"Yes, I'm familiar with that spell. It will work anywhere in the world, no matter the distance," Dumbledore said quietly.

Hermione understood instantly. "Then where is he?" she said with far more anxiety than she'd shown before.

"Huh?" Ron said, confused.

"If Ginny's ring will work anywhere in the world," Hermione explained patiently, "then if Harry's not answering, he's either unconscious or –" She shut her mouth with a snap, unwilling to allow what she'd been about to say to come out of her mouth.

"Or he's not on this earth," Dumbledore said, nodding approvingly as if that had been what she'd planned to say. "That's right, Miss Granger."

"*Not on this earth?*" Ginny squeaked, appalled. "Then where is he?"

"I honestly don't know," Dumbledore said. "My instruments should show him even if he's unconscious or in other kinds of trouble. So wherever he is, it's not on this earth."

"What exactly do you mean, 'not on this earth'?" Ron asked seriously.

"Merlin may have taken him someplace phoenixes go. I suspected something like this when you said he was going with Merlin, rather than Merlin going with him," Dumbledore replied.

"Could he be someplace Unplottable?" Hermione said anxiously.

The Time of Destiny

"This instrument," Dumbledore said, indicating a tiny confection of silver filigree that spun and whistled merrily before him, "would show him even if he were someplace Unplottable – it would register his life force, even if it couldn't tell me where he was."

"Is he safe?" Ginny demanded. "Wherever Merlin took him, is it *safe*?"

"I believe so. Merlin cares deeply for Harry. He would never deliberately put him in harm's way. I think we're going to have to trust Merlin to take care of Harry for now."

"Professor," Hermione said, "can't you ask Fawkes to take you there?"

"I don't know where they've gone, nor does Fawkes. I did ask him that," Dumbledore said sadly. "He seems to have no idea." The old wizard looked at Harry's friends with sympathy. "I know this is painful for all of you. It is for me, as well. I think I've been pushing him too hard. He's so resilient, so strong, and so eager to learn, I just kept on going with each lesson. I should have let him have more breaks." He shook his head dejectedly. "I'm very sorry to have done this to him. I will be more careful in the future."

"It's not your fault, Albus," Remus said miserably, "it's mine. He was upset by the photos O'Connell gave him, so I showed him some of my memories of his family in his Pensieve. I chose only happy memories, trying to help him, but the last two hit him wrong anyway. He was very despondent when he left me, and he wouldn't let Tonks or me help him."

"What were the last two memories?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"His six month birthday party and his year birthday party. I didn't realize the number of people at the six month party who were dead by the time of his first birthday. It hurt him terribly. He blames himself for so much of it, especially his parents' deaths."

"Those memories shouldn't have caused him so much pain," Dumbledore said, looking puzzled. "What else has been going on with him lately?"

"He was fine until he got those pictures," Ginny said darkly.

"The ones Mr. O'Connell gave him?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes."

"Bring them to me, will you? I'd like to see them for myself," Dumbledore said. "And give me a few minutes to check the Seeing Glass. I'll be back as soon as possible." He disappeared into Gryffindor's Chamber as Ron headed for the office door.

"Be right back," Ron said as he left the office.

Hermione, Ginny and Remus sat in strained silence, waiting for Dumbledore and Ron to return. Dumbledore returned first.

"I can't find him with the Seeing Glass either," he said with a sigh. "What was in those pictures that bothered him, do you know?"

The Time of Destiny

"We didn't see anything awful in them, Professor," Hermione said. "Do you think there's some kind of Dark spell on them?"

"I would trust Albert O'Connell with my life – and have done so in the past," Dumbledore assured her. "He's a good man, and was a friend of Harry's parents. He has the greatest respect for Harry and is eager to have him in Auror School. No, I don't think he put any kind of spell on the photographs, and certainly no Dark spells. I suspect Harry's emotions have simply been overwhelmed, between the photographs, Remus's memories, and the stress he's been under with all the work I've been having him do. And Voldemort is still collecting body parts for his potions, which troubles Harry greatly." He thought quietly for a moment. "Actually, Harry's been through so much, I'm surprised he hasn't had a breakdown before this."

"You think he's had a nervous breakdown or something like that?" Hermione said, aghast.

"Something like that – but I don't think he's had it yet. I think he feels it coming on. That may be why he told Mr. Weasley he felt as if he might break, that he felt brittle. Because he was nearing the end of his rope."

"What –" Ginny began, then had to clear her throat and start over. "What happens to someone who reaches the end of his rope?" she asked in a small, nervous voice.

"They either wind up in St. Mungo's for a long rest or they have a complete mental breakdown, or they kill themselves," Hermione said darkly.

"*Hermione!* How can you say that?" Ginny said, leaning away from her best friend and looking at her in horror.

"She's not wrong, Ginny," Remus said, his voice low and sad. "But Harry's strong, he knows he has good friends, and he knows he's loved," he continued, looking seriously at the girl. "All of those things will help him through this."

Ron returned, gasping from the long run, and handed the photos to Dumbledore. "Here."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said, then opened the package and began going through the photos. After looking at several, he spread them out on his desk and passed his wand over them. "Nothing. No spells of any kind are on these photographs." He sighed. "If there are no Dark spells on them, then it truly must be his own mind that's causing his trouble." He looked at the sad faces across from him. "Now, then. You must all be very brave during this time. I know you can manage, I've seen your courage before. We will keep this a secret among ourselves, all right? That way, when Harry returns, he won't face a lot of uncomfortable questions. We will say he's staying up here with me again, doing more intensive study." Everyone nodded.

"Professor?" Ron said after a moment.

"Yes?"

"What if he's gone long enough to miss Quidditch practice, or the D.A. meeting?"

The Time of Destiny

"Use the story I just gave you, Mr. Weasley. I will do my best to stay up here the vast majority of the time, and I promise you, I will back up your story. As far as anyone knows, Harry is up here, staying in my guest quarters, working very hard on learning new spells. I'll have some of his things moved here to add credence to the story. All right?" He waited until they all nodded again. "Now then. Miss Weasley, would you like a Cheering Charm?"

"Yes, please," she said, her eyes huge and sad.

"Me, too," Hermione added, wiping tears from her eyes.

"All right. Here you go," he said kindly, doing the charm on them. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks," both girls said, looking more bright-eyed but still not cheerful.

"I didn't do a very strong one. It would be natural for you two to be sad when Harry's away from you for so long," Dumbledore explained. "If any of you hear from him in any manner at all, I want you to let me know right away, all right? And I'll tell you if I hear from him, as well." He sighed and got to his feet. "Now go back to your rooms and try to get some sleep. Hopefully, we'll hear from Harry quickly and this will all be just a bad memory."

A long, difficult week passed with absolutely no word or sign of Harry. On Saturday, the morning of the eighth day, Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat quietly doing their homework in the deserted Common Room. All the older students had gone to Hogsmeade, while the younger ones played outside. Ron, Hermione and Ginny didn't have the heart to play, nor to visit Hogsmeade while worrying about where Harry might be.

Ginny heard a tapping on the window and went to open it. She'd sent Hedwig, Pigwidgeon and Barney out with letters for Harry, one owl each day for three days. Pig had come back the day after he'd gone out, the letter still tied to his leg. Barney had come back after two days without having delivered the letter, and promptly been sent out again. When he returned again the next day without delivering the letter, he was allowed to stay at Hogwarts and rest while Pig was sent out again. Barney and Pig alternated days of travel after that, but Hedwig had never returned at all. The tapping on the window now was Hedwig, looking exhausted, hungry and grumpy after so many fruitless days of looking for her master, the letter for Harry still tied to her leg.

"No luck, girl?" Ginny sighed as she let the owl in. "You must be exhausted. Thanks for trying so hard. Come have something to eat." She untied the letter from Hedwig's leg and gave her a handful of owl treats and a drink of water from her own cup. Hedwig hooted mournfully as she ate, looking accusingly at each person in turn, as if it was their fault she couldn't find Harry.

Ginny sat gazing at the beautiful owl for a few minutes, then dropped her face in her hands, the very picture of misery. Hermione reached over and rubbed her back comfortingly and Ron patted her hand, something both of them had done frequently over the last week.

Hedwig sat watching them imperiously for a while, then suddenly lifted off and flew up the stairs to the Boys' Dormitory, leaving Ginny, Ron and Hermione looking sadly after her.

The Time of Destiny

"I guess she's going to sit on his chair," Ron commented. "She misses him."

"As do we all," Hermione said quietly. She looked sadly at Ginny, who still sat with her head bowed, her face in her hands, her shoulders sagging, her hair a dark red curtain hiding her face.

Suddenly, Ginny sat up and turned toward the boys' stairs, her eyes wide and startled. Without a word, she got to her feet and ran lightly over to the stairs and listened hard. Ron and Hermione watched her, wondering what was going on. When she ran up the stairs, they rose and followed her.

At the door of the Seventh Year boys' dormitory, they heard laughter and hooting coming from inside the room. Ginny pushed the door open carefully, not certain if Neville and Dean had gone to Hogsmeade or might still be in their room. Standing in front of his open trunk with a pair of jeans and a t-shirt in his hands and laughing at the joyfully hooting Hedwig zooming around him, was Harry, still wearing the pyjamas he'd left in. Merlin was sitting on his perch, preening himself complacently.

"*Harry!*" Ginny cried, racing across the room and throwing herself into his arms. "Where've you been? Are you all right?"

Harry lifted her off her feet and whirled her around before stopping and kissing her soundly. "It's good to be back! I was worried! I thought I might be too late!"

"Too late for what?" she asked when she could speak again. Between her excitement at his return and the kiss he'd given her, she was quite breathless.

"I lost all track of time, and suddenly, I was afraid it was the end of your seventh year. I'd promised to come back for you, and I needed to be here when you finished Hogwarts," he said, smiling at her tenderly. "So I came back as fast as I could. I was glad to find my things here, so I knew I wasn't too late."

"You. . .you thought a whole year had passed?" Ginny gasped, her eyes wide in shock.

"Where the bloody hell were you?" Ron asked impatiently. "Welcome back, by the way!"

"None of Dumbledore's instruments could find you, the Seeing Glass couldn't find you, our Famous Wizard Cards couldn't find you, Ginny's ring couldn't find you – where *were* you?" Hermione said anxiously. "You look loads better, though. What happened to you?"

"Dumbledore's instruments couldn't find me?" Harry said, looking surprised. "Huh. I suppose I need to talk to him."

"Yeah, I just sent a message to him and Remus to let them know you're back," Ron said, waving his Famous Wizard Card, whose picture was presently empty. The small image of Harry flew back into the frame just then.

"He wants all of you in his office right now!" the little Harry on the card said urgently.

The Time of Destiny

"Thanks, mate," Ron said, pocketing his card. "Ready to go?" he said, looking at Harry expectantly.

"Yeah, in a minute" Harry replied. He let go of Ginny and hugged Hermione, then punched Ron gently in the shoulder. "Sorry to worry you lot," he said gruffly. They all looked strained and tired. "How long have I been gone?"

"Today's the eighth day," Hermione said, "or the ninth, depending on how you count, I suppose. You left on a Friday, and now it's Saturday, a week later."

"Only eight or nine days?" he mused. "I had no idea."

"*Only eight or nine days?*" Ginny shrieked in rage, her voice cracking with emotion. "It was FOREVER!" Hermione nodded her agreement. Ron just sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Ginny's famous Weasley temper had overwhelmed the relief she'd felt at his return. She stood glaring at Harry for a moment, then smacked him hard on the shoulder. "How could you just take off like that without a word? Do you have *any idea* what you put us through?"

"Ow! I suppose I deserved that," he said mildly as he rubbed his shoulder where she'd hit him. "I'm sorry, baby," he told Ginny sincerely. "I really am. It just couldn't be helped."

"Don't you *ever* leave like that again without telling me – not just Ron, *me directly!* – where you're going, *do you hear me?*" Ginny said, her face flushed with anger. After a moment, she smacked his other shoulder for good measure.

"But I didn't tell Ron either," he protested, taking a literal step back in the face of her fury. He sighed and shook his head in frustration, then tried to soothe her. "Ginny, I'm sorry. I really am. I just couldn't talk to anyone then. I don't know how to make you understand. I'm so sorry." He reached out a gentle hand and tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear. "I love you. I never meant to hurt you or upset you." He looked up at Ron and Hermione. "You, either. I'm sorry. I simply didn't know what else to do. And I didn't know exactly where Merlin was taking me, quite honestly." He stood with his head cocked to one side, studying his girlfriend's face, where rage, worry and relief were warring with each other. "Can you forgive me? I did come back, after all."

Ginny glared at him for another long moment, still livid that he'd frightened her so. His penitent expression got through to her. She felt as if her heart would burst with her love for him, and her relief that he was safe and back at school where he belonged. "I . . . I was s-s-so s-scared!" she sobbed as tears began to stream down her face.

Harry drew her into a warm embrace, kissing the top of her head and letting her get her emotions under control in her own time. He glanced up at his two best friends, glad to see they weren't nearly as angry as his girlfriend was. He gave them a rueful smile, then bent to kiss Ginny's hair, her temple, her cheek, rubbing her back all the while. When she finally relaxed, he pushed her back enough to look her in the face. "Are you all right now?"

"I'm fine," she said shakily.

The Time of Destiny

Harry smiled. "That's usually my line. Are we all right now?"

Ginny studied his face. He'd looked so haunted, so miserable, and now there was a huge difference. His eyes were . . . serene. That was the only word she could think of to describe them. They weren't playful or teasing or simply happy – there was a tranquillity there that she'd never seen in him before. She thought about this for a long moment. Whatever had happened to him, wherever he'd gone, he was the better for it. She sighed, accepting the fact that it was time to stop scolding him and move on. "We'll be fine after I hear everything that happened."

"I will tell you everything, I promise."

"Every single thing," she demanded, not entirely willing to let him think he was forgiven yet.

"Absolutely. Can it wait until we get to Dumbledore's office so I don't have to tell everyone twice? It's a long story."

"OK," she agreed after a moment's thought.

"Great," he said, smiling as he bent to kiss her. "Now let me change my clothes, OK?"

Ron herded the girls toward the door, but Ginny stopped in the doorway, looking back at Harry uneasily. "You will stay here now, right?"

"Yes, I promise. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"OK," she said in a small voice, then followed Hermione down the stairs.

Ron stood with his arms crossed, keeping a wary eye on Harry as he changed into the jeans and t-shirt he'd been holding. "Are you all right now?" Ron asked cautiously.

Harry glanced up at his friend and grinned. "Except for that scolding from Ginny, I've never been better!" he replied cheerfully. "Let's go." Harry hesitated in the doorway. "Merlin?" he called. "He'll want to talk to you, too." The phoenix flew to Harry's shoulder and perched there, riding serenely as the two boys bounded down the spiral staircase.

The girls were waiting in the Common Room, Ginny staring up the stairs as if she could make Harry appear by sheer force of will. She sagged with relief when he descended the stairs, put his arm around her and headed for the portrait hole.

"Why won't you tell us where you were?" Hermione asked as they walked to the Headmaster's office.

"Because there are some things I don't want to talk about in the corridor," Harry said quietly, "and this is one of them. I'll explain everything when we're all together, all right?"

"OK," she said, subsiding into a tense silence as she walked between him and Ron down the hall, with Ginny on Harry's other side.

The Time of Destiny

When the four friends neared the office, they saw Remus giving the password and the gargoyle jumping aside to reveal the moving spiral staircase.

"Harry!" Remus cried when he saw him. He moved toward his godson with open arms. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" Harry said, giving his godfather a hug as Merlin hopped over to Ron's broad shoulder. "Sorry I worried you."

Remus pulled back from the embrace and studied his godson's face seriously. "You look so much better. What happened?"

"I thought it might be best if I tell it to everyone at once," Harry replied. "It's a long story."

"Right then. Let's go," Remus said, letting the girls get on the staircase first, Ron, Harry and Remus following, Merlin still on Ron's shoulder.

When they entered the headmaster's office, Harry was shocked at the change in Dumbledore. He knew the man was old, but he'd aged visibly in the time Harry had been gone. "Professor? Are you all right?" he said in concern as he rushed across the room.

"I am now," Dumbledore said with a brilliant smile as he clasped the young man's broad shoulders. "I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see you again. And you look wonderful! Wherever you went, the rest did you good."

"It wasn't just rest," Harry said with a sly grin.

"Sit down and tell us everything," Dumbledore invited, gesturing toward six comfy chairs arranged in a circle. A small table in the centre held a tea tray filled with scones and biscuits. "Tea?"

"Yeah, thanks! I'm starved," Harry said, grabbing a scone and taking a huge bite out of it. As he ate, he looked around at his friends. "I really am sorry I scared you lot. I didn't mean to, but I just couldn't help it."

"Tell us what happened, Harry. Why did you leave? Where did you go?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Well. . .I was. . .erm. . .I felt. . .um," he began haltingly. He took a deep breath and blew it out hard as he tried to organize his thoughts. "I've been in the land of the phoenixes."

"What?" Hermione said, shocked. "There's no such place! They nest on mountaintops in Egypt, India and China. It says so in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander."

"Yes, there is such a place," he insisted. "Yes, many phoenixes nest on mountaintops in those countries, but there's this other place, as well. I don't know why there's a different place, I can't explain it. I only know that I was there. You lot said you couldn't track me with instruments, the Seeing Glass, Ginny's ring, or the Famous Wizard cards. If you couldn't find me, then how could I be on a mountain peak in a well-known country? There's another place,

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a *beautiful* place," he said, his face glowing with an inner light, "where phoenixes live. Merlin took me there."

"Why?" Ginny asked quietly. "Why did he take you away? Why did you go with him?"

Harry looked at her seriously. "I don't know if any of you understood what I was going through. Since I had that vision with the green-eyed children—" his voice broke for a moment, "I had nightmares about that over and over. I wasn't sleeping. I haven't felt much like eating."

"We noticed, mate," Ron said supportively. They'd all commented on how much weight Harry had lost, but had given up on trying to talk him into eating more. They'd hoped he'd work through his problem soon and regain his weight on his own.

Harry smiled at his best mate briefly, then turned to his mentor. "The time here with you, Professor, was a tremendous help, especially the time in the Chamber. But talking with the portrait of my dad – it was wonderful, but it was so sad, as well. I wanted to know him as my father, not as a friend, but that's all I had and I tried to make the best of it. I do like talking with him, but there's something missing when we talk that. . .that just *hurts*. It wasn't his fault, it was me. I was expecting too much or something. And then O'Connell gave me those pictures. I wanted to *enjoy* them!" He shook his head, his frustration obvious. "I was so excited to have more pictures of my parents, but I simply *couldn't* enjoy them. They broke my heart. So many people died. From one picture to the next, more people were missing because they'd died. And then Remus showed me his memories of my parents, trying to cheer me up, and that was so wonderful, Remus, honestly." He looked at his godfather with his heart in his eyes. "But there again, so many people died between memories of my parents as adults. And all because I was born."

His friends, Remus and Dumbledore all chorused variations on, "No! It wasn't your fault! That's not true!"

Harry raised his hands to quieten them. "I know that now," he said calmly. "But at the time, it was the last straw. I couldn't bear it, I couldn't stand the thought that so many people had died, that I was leading more people to their deaths by training the D.A., that all those people, especially the children, suffered the loss of their eyes. Most of those died, as well, because I scratched out Voldemort's eyes, and then he planned to go after more eyes and some people's spleens. Where's he going to stop? And I caused that! Do you see?" he said, looking at each of them hopefully. "Can you see what I was feeling? The absolute worst of it was that I was at the centre of everything that happened! Not Voldemort, *ME*! Or at least, that's how I felt." He paused, his face pale and tense as he looked off in the distance, seeing appalling images they couldn't imagine.

"When I told Ron I felt brittle, that I thought I was going to break, I was telling the truth. Before he came to talk to me, Merlin had been trying to talk sense to me, but I wasn't able to hear it. I just couldn't, I was in too much pain. I felt that I had a choice – keep on as I was until I broke and ended up in St. Mungo's mental ward for the rest of my life, or throw myself out of the window and end the pain forever." He looked sadly at the girls when he heard them gasp at his statement. "It really was that bad. I couldn't see any other way to get away from the horrors in my head. Merlin offered me the alternative of going to the land of the phoenixes, but I couldn't see how that would help. Going out of the window was looking pretty good until Ron got up and interrupted my thoughts."

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"Why didn't you come to me for help, lad?" Remus said, his voice breaking with emotion.

"You're surrounded by people who love you, Harry," Dumbledore said sadly. "When I asked you what was troubling you, you said it was nothing, every time, but I knew better. Why wouldn't you let me help?"

"Or us?" Ron said, his voice breaking with anguish. Harry had given him no inkling that things were so bad for him. Ron shivered to think how he'd nearly stayed in bed that night. He'd nearly left Harry alone to sort out his problems himself, as he usually wanted to do. Ron had no idea what had forced him to get out of bed and see what was wrong with his friend. If he hadn't got up then, would Harry really have thrown himself out of the window? Would Merlin have allowed Harry to die that way? He shivered again, horrified at the thought.

Ginny sat silently as Harry spoke, her lashes sparkling with tears, unable to do anything more than listen to the sound of his voice. She barely understood what he was saying, it was so horrifying. Her daze was broken when Harry reached over to take her trembling hand. She clasped his tightly, finally holding his hand with both of hers, as if she'd never let him go again.

By the time Harry had finished his explanation, Hermione had both hands over her mouth in shock, completely speechless for once in her life. Her brain was frozen in horror at the thought of what her best friend had suffered without ever telling anyone and what he'd nearly done to himself.

Harry looked around at his friends, hoping he could make them understand somehow. He sighed, then tried desperately to explain. "It's *my* burden, not yours. I couldn't see any way out of it. I'm not afraid of Voldemort, and I did want to fight him – I still do – but I couldn't live with the pictures in my mind anymore, do you see?"

"If you'd told me your burdens were becoming unbearable, I could have Memory Charmed you to rid you of those thoughts," Dumbledore said with regret. "You didn't have to suffer so, dear boy."

"I thought of that, actually. I almost did one on myself. But I don't want to remove the memories of my parents, and to remove the painful things, I'd have to delete those memories as well," Harry replied. His whole body slumped as he said this, his expression forlorn and sad for a long moment. Merlin hopped from his perch on the back of Harry's chair into his lap, sang one liquid drop of music and the young wizard's face cleared, his posture straightened and he smiled beautifully. "But in the land of the phoenixes, I was healed! I don't know what they did, but the dark places inside me are gone, or at least diminished. If I do get sad, Merlin can cheer me up with one note now."

His eyes took on a distant look, and the glow that had been on his face when his friends first found him returned. "It's such a beautiful place, and the air is filled with phoenix song from *hundreds* of phoenixes! There's no day or night there – the sky always has that pink and gold, 'nearly dawn' look. It's just amazing. Humans aren't allowed in the land of the phoenixes, or I'd take you there," he said, glancing around at his friends. "Merlin and I are the only humans who have ever been there. His phoenix took him there when he decided to become a phoenix rather than dying. He was old and in bad health at the time and needed to be filled with phoenix song – just like me." He looked at Dumbledore and smiled. "You should go,

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professor. Merlin or Fawkes could take you. It would be so good for you! Those aches and pains you talk about would be gone. They healed everything that was wrong with me. Besides the depression, the stiffness that remained in my left arm from Voldemort's whip is completely gone."

"That's wonderful, Harry," Dumbledore said with a warm smile. "It does sound amazing."

"It's fantastic! The only living beings there are phoenixes and huge butterflies as big as both my hands together." He put his long, slender hands side by side to illustrate. "The butterflies are the most incredible colours, but it's hard for me to describe, because phoenixes see colours differently than we do." He smiled at the memory, his face lit with an inner joy. "Merlin settled me in a nest in a huge tree. He sat with me and sang to me, and told me stories. Some of the other phoenixes told me stories as well, about so many amazing things. Hermione," he said, looking at her with a warm smile, "you'd love to hear their stories. Some of them have been with some of the most powerful wizards in history. One of them was with one of the pharaohs of Egypt. Another was with Alexander the Great – I didn't know he was a wizard, did you?" he said, glancing at his headmaster, who shook his head. "One of them was with Jules Verne – he helped Verne with his stories, many of which really happened instead of being fiction," he said with a smile. "I didn't know he was a wizard, either." He chuckled. "One was Merlin's phoenix, and did he have stories to tell about Merlin!" He looked at his phoenix, his eyes dancing with laughter. Merlin ruffled his feathers irritably and turned his back on Harry for a moment, then tilted his head and gave the young man an imperious look before turning around and settling down again. "He was a bit annoyed with that phoenix for telling tales out of school," Harry said, stroking the beautiful bird comfortingly. "Don't worry, I won't share the worst ones, Merlin." The bird crooned one exquisite note and looked serene again.

"The songs and stories filled me up," Harry said softly, getting back on track. "I had no concept of time at all. They sang constantly, told stories constantly, and I felt all the bad things inside me just . . . just float away. I don't know how else to describe it. Near the end of my time there, I began to sing myself."

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore said, leaning in attentively.

"Phoenix song. I'd never sung it before. Have you?"

"No, never," Dumbledore replied. "I can communicate as a phoenix, but singing is one thing I've never managed."

"Merlin said it took him a long time to learn to sing. When I learned how to sing, I felt whole and full and complete and . . . and happy in a way I never have before," Harry said, his face radiant, his eyes seeing things the rest of them couldn't. "Then I suddenly realized some time had passed and that I had to get back here quickly."

"He said he thought it was the end of my seventh year," Ginny murmured. "That's why he came back."

"Why were you worried about the end of Ginny's seventh year?" Remus asked, totally confused.

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Harry looked at Ginny, his heart in his eyes. "When I left, I asked Ron to tell her I'd be back for her." He raised his eyes to his godfather's. "I had to come back for her. I'd promised I would. And if this was the end of her seventh year, as I thought it must be because it felt as if so much time had passed, then I needed to be here to marry her."

"Marry her?" Remus said in surprise, smiling at the young man. "When did you two get engaged?"

"We aren't. I haven't asked her parents permission, and I won't ask her until I've done that. The time isn't right yet." He smiled warmly at Ginny. "I'll know when it is. But whether they agree or not, at the end of her seventh year, we'll be together." His eyes locked with Ginny's. "I promised I'd be back for you."

"And so you are," she said softly, lacing her fingers through his.

"Why would you think a year passed?" Hermione said, trying to understand. "You said there was no day or night, and you didn't feel time passing."

He looked at her and said, "That's right. But when I was completely filled up with phoenix song, I felt as if a long time had passed, and that worried me, so I came back as quickly as I could."

"Why did you leave this red feather for me?" Ginny asked quietly, pulling out the now well-worn feather she'd kept with her constantly since he'd left. She'd so often caressed its silky softness, wishing it was Harry's hair sliding through her fingers instead, it looked quite shabby now.

"It was my promise. That feather came from my chest, over my heart," he said seriously. "I didn't have time to explain. I'm sorry." She smiled at him, a tear caught in her lashes.

"Don't cry," Harry said, touching the tear gently and smoothing his fingers down her soft cheek. "I'm fine now."

"I'm glad," she said simply.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, breaking the moment. "Harry, may I examine you? I'd like to see if I can tell what the phoenixes did."

"Of course," Harry agreed instantly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stand up." Harry stood and Dumbledore waved his wand, muttering an incantation. A golden grid emerged from the young man's body, wrapping completely around him. The lines of the grid glittered brightly.

"What's that?" Hermione said, as always, intrigued by new spells.

"This grid shows spells that have been cast on Harry," Dumbledore replied. "But this is odd."

"What's odd?" Harry said from inside the grid.

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"There should be hundreds of spells showing by now, after nearly seven full years of school, but I don't see any. Hmmm."

"Does everyone have a golden grid like that?" Hermione said as she stood up to get a closer look at Harry's grid.

Dumbledore was concentrating on Harry, so Remus answered. "Harry's is a particularly pure gold," he commented as he watched the headmaster work. "Everyone has their own colour to some extent. It's what draws phoenixes to people like Harry and Professor Dumbledore. If you have a pure, selfless heart, phoenixes are drawn to you. Harry's heart makes his grid this golden colour. When he and Dumbledore took the Black Widow Curse off of you, Hermione, a golden web formed around you which became like a bell jar. The gold was coming from Harry's and Dumbledore's magic, from their hearts. I imagine if we did this same spell to Professor Dumbledore, his colour would also be golden."

"That's right," Dumbledore said, glancing up at Remus.

"What's your colour, Remus?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Mine is milky white, like the full moon, I suspect because of my lycanthropy," he replied.

"Mr. Weasley, stand up, please," Dumbledore said, turning to Ron.

"Why?" he said as he obediently got to his feet.

"You and Harry have been partnered in class for years. The spells on your grid should show on his. I simply want to make a comparison, if you don't mind," Dumbledore explained.

"Yeah, go ahead," Ron agreed.

Ron's grid was a rich cobalt blue. It pulsed with a tremendous number of varicoloured spots, blotches and spatters.

"What's all that? And why is his blue?" Hermione asked, leaning closer to Ron's grid to study it.

"Mr. Weasley's strongest attribute is his loyalty," Dumbledore said, "followed closely by courage and intelligence. The combination of those attributes makes his grid this lovely deep blue. The coloured spots are the spells I'm looking for. You can see what a large number of spells Mr. Weasley has had cast on him. Harry has had a great many more, between my private training sessions with him and his battles with Voldemort. Yet nothing is showing on his grid," he said curiously, removing Ron's grid and turning back to Harry's. "Ah, there's something," he muttered, then poked his wand into the grid in front of Harry's face, prodding something that was a mere shadow in the background.

"What is it?" Harry said from inside the grid, his face and body completely hidden behind the golden lines.

"This is a Killing Curse, and it's rather new – it must be the one you took for Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said. "The green colour shows very faintly." He moved to another layer of the

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grid. "Ah. . . here's the one that gave you the original scar. It's embedded much deeper in the grid than the other one, which shows this spell hit you many years before the other one did. It's odd that those are the only two spells showing," he said, his face puzzled.

"I told you the phoenixes filled me with song. Maybe they erased all of those spells or something," Harry offered.

"It's possible, yes," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. He finally straightened up from his examination of Harry's grid and waved his wand, removing the charm. "You may very well be right. There's no way to know, I suppose. I doubt they've done that for any other wizard, have they?"

"Merlin told me they did it for him, but he can never be human again, so this grid thing wouldn't show up, would it?" Harry said curiously. "Or do phoenixes have them too?"

"Phoenixes don't, but Merlin might," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Merlin, would you allow me to check yours?" The phoenix blinked, then crooned one soft note. "Thank you." Dumbledore did the charm again, and a golden grid like Harry's appeared, with no blotches of colour on it anywhere. "It seems Merlin's history of spells was completely removed. Merlin, can you explain this to me?" Dumbledore said, removing the grid from the phoenix. He performed the spell to make it possible for him to understand Merlin's voice, then listened as the phoenix crooned for several minutes. "Ah, I see," Dumbledore said finally. "Thank you."

"What did he say?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"He said he was never the victim of a Killing Curse – if he had been, he would have died, he's sure of it. The phoenix song cleansed him of all the spells he'd experienced, and no others have been put on his grid because he's been a phoenix ever since. He says no other wizard has been through this phoenix song treatment – I suppose you can call it that – so he doesn't know what will happen when Harry experiences other spells. He thinks the Killing Curse spells show on Harry's grid because they affected him so deeply. Fascinating!" He sat back in his chair, a huge smile on his face. "I just love learning new things," he said in delight. "Thank you, Merlin, and Harry, as well. What fun!"

"So why not do a spell on Harry and see if it shows up on his grid?" Ron suggested.

"Yes, why not?" Dumbledore agreed. "Mr. Potter, if you please, stand up again." Dumbledore and Harry both got to their feet. "What spell shall we use?" the professor mused.

"Something that isn't painful!" Harry said with a cheeky grin.

"As you wish. Now, don't block it, Harry. Let's see what happens," Dumbledore said, then cast a Wiggling Ears Hex on the young wizard.

Harry clapped his hands over his ears, trying to still them, while joining the others in laughing at his plight. "Thanks a lot, professor!"

"It doesn't hurt, does it?" Dumbledore teased him. "All you said was to do something that wasn't painful!" He waved his wand, removing the hex, then cast the grid spell again. "Ah, look, there it is!" he said in satisfaction, pointing to a lavender spot on the golden grid. "So your

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body – and your grid – will respond normally to spells. Apparently, the phoenix song performed a sort of Memory Charm on you, along with a massive Cheering Charm."

"It's a lot more than just a Memory Charm and a Cheering Charm," Harry said. "I feel . . . *peaceful* now, really for the first time in my life. Serene. I know I have awful things in my past, as well as in my future, but I also know I can deal with them. The guilt's been taken away for all those things I blamed myself for. I can't tell you how. . .how liberating that is! It's incredible."

"I believe you," Dumbledore said, smiling at his protégé. "What an amazing experience you've had, Harry! I'm delighted to hear about it."

"I am sorry I worried all of you," Harry said sincerely. "But I'm not sorry I went."

"I don't blame you, lad," Remus said, smiling at the relaxed, cheerful young man. What a change! Harry's eyes no longer looked haunted, as they had ever since Remus had known him.

A small silver instrument whistled sweetly. "Someone's coming," Dumbledore said, getting up to check the instrument. "It's Severus."

"We can go down to the Chamber if you don't want us here," Harry offered. "I'd honestly like to keep where I've been a secret from most people, if possible."

"I quite understand. Yes, go to the Chamber. Keep an eye on the mirrors so you'll know when to come back," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Harry lifted Gryffindor's sword out of its case and used it to open the hidden door in the wall. Ron, Hermione and Ginny stepped through and Harry followed them, with Merlin on his shoulder, after replacing the sword in its case. "See you in a bit," he said, waving cheerfully at his godfather and headmaster as the door swung shut.

After the four of them rode the slide to the bottom, Harry quickly hit the griffin button that converted the slide into a lift, then said, "Let's go to the Seeing Glass and find out what Snape wants." Merlin flew off of Harry's shoulder and they all grabbed his tail, flashing instantly to the room with the Seeing Glass. Harry activated it and was soon watching Dumbledore and Remus comfortably drinking tea while waiting for Snape to reach the top of the spiral staircase.

"Too bad we can't hear them," Ron said, watching Harry study the glass.

"Yeah, there's no audio. I wish. . .wait. Ginny, do you have any Extendable Ears with you?" Harry said, not taking his eyes off the glass.

"Yes." She pulled one out of her pocket and put it in his hand. "Here you go."

"Merlin, I want you to take this end to the office door and try to get it under the edge if you can. I'll need you to hold it in place so it doesn't spring back," Harry said, handing one end to the phoenix, who held it delicately in his beak. "Don't go yet, I need to put a spell on it."

"Harry, it won't reach," Hermione pointed out.

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"Hang on," he muttered, then straightened up and looked at the Extendable Ear lying in his hand. He pulled out his wand and tapped the long flesh-coloured string of the Ear as his lips moved silently in an incantation. The Ear looked no different, but Harry glanced at Hermione with a twinkle in his eye as he told his phoenix, "OK, Merlin. Go!" Harry held on to the Ear as the phoenix flew down the Chamber and up the spiralling path to the office door. The amount of string in Harry's hand didn't change at all, but the bit that had hung over his hand and gone to Merlin's beak grew longer and longer and longer. Finally, the string lay on the floor of the Chamber, with that same initial amount of string still in Harry's hand. He grinned impertinently at Hermione as he stuffed the end in his ear and concentrated on the Seeing Glass again.

"How did you do that?" she gasped, her eyes wide.

"Wicked!" Ron said gleefully. "Wait'll the twins hear about this! Maybe they could build that spell into the Ears." Ginny giggled at Hermione's flummoxed expression.

"Maybe," Harry said quietly. "And Hermione – I'll teach you lot that spell soon. Let me listen now – Snape just came into the office."

Dumbledore and Remus sat chatting idly, enjoying their tea as they waited for Snape to arrive. Finally, they heard a knock on the door.

"Enter," Dumbledore said in a cheerful voice. "Good day, Severus! How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Headmaster," the Potions Master said sourly.

"Come sit down and have some tea. Biscuit? Scone?" Dumbledore said, offering the tray of snacks as his guest seated himself.

"No, thank you. I need to speak with you," Snape said, glancing at Remus.

"You can speak freely in front of Remus," Dumbledore assured him.

"I'd prefer not to, if you don't mind," Snape said stiffly.

"I can come back later," Remus offered, rising from his chair politely.

"Wait, Remus," Dumbledore said. He turned back to Snape. "Will this take long?"

"No."

"Then, Remus, why don't you wait in Harry's study," Dumbledore suggested. "You and I weren't finished with our chat, and you can be comfortable in there. If you don't mind waiting, that is. I'm sure Harry won't mind your being there."

"All right," Remus agreed, and entered the guest room Harry now used as a study, or slept in when staying with Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

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Down in the Chamber, Harry frowned.

"What is it?" Ron said, wishing they could see whatever Harry was seeing.

"Snape wanted Remus to leave. Dumbledore told Remus to wait in my room. I wish he had an Extendable Ear with him. We'll just have to fill him in later," Harry said quietly, concentrating hard on what he was seeing and hearing.

"What do you need to tell me, Severus?" Dumbledore said, steepling his fingers under his chin, his elbows resting comfortably on the arms of his cosy chair.

"Where's Potter?" Snape snapped.

"He's out on an errand for me at the moment," Dumbledore lied smoothly. "Why? Do you need to see him?"

Snape seemed to be considering what he needed to say next.

Harry took a deep breath and made a decision. "Hermione, think about Professor Dumbledore and look into the Seeing Glass. Put the Extendable Ear in your ear. Keep track of their conversation."

"I'm not the Heir of Gryffindor! It won't work for me! And why do you want me to do that?" she said, her eyes wide in surprise

"I'm the Heir. Anyone I give permission can look into the Seeing Glass when I'm not using it. I give you permission to use it right now. Once you break eye contact, you won't be able to see into it again unless I give you permission again. Please, Hermione. You're the only one of us who remembers everything she hears word for word." He held the Extendable Ear out to her again, trying very hard not to be impatient with her questions.

"OK," she replied as she put the Ear into her ear. "What's going on?"

"Dumbledore just told Snape that he sent me on an errand. I'm going to go do one for him and show up at the office," Harry said decisively. "Can you see him in there? And hear them?"

Hermione concentrated on Professor Dumbledore and looked into the Glass, her eyes widening when she saw the office clearly. "Yes! It's as if I'm in the room with them!"

"Great," Harry said in relief. "You keep track of what's going on in there for me, all right? I'll be gone for a bit, then I'll show up. Hopefully, I won't miss Snape. You'll be able to get out of here whenever you need to – the lift is down. Just check the mirrors to see who's in the office and who's approaching it before you come up. Or I'll open the door and call down to you when the coast is clear. Merlin's still here if you need to get somewhere quickly, as well. Gotta go," he said, then kissed Ginny, changed into a phoenix and flashed out of sight.

"What's going on?" Ginny said in confusion.

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"Dunno," Ron said, "but there must be some good reason Remus was sent out of the room and Snape's asking where Harry is." He looked at Hermione, who was gazing fiercely at the Seeing Glass, her brow furrowed in concentration. "What's going on in there, Hermione?"

"Just general chat – Snape isn't getting to the point, and Dumbledore seems to be a bit annoyed about it," she replied.

Ginny was keeping an eye on the mirrors. A few minutes later, she said, "Look! Harry's outside Dumbledore's office, and has a bag with him."

Ron laughed. "It's a Honeydukes bag. He bought Dumbledore some sweets!"

"Dumbledore will like that – and it's a good cover for Harry being gone. Some 'errand' Dumbledore sent him on, huh?" Ginny said, grinning.

"Enter," Dumbledore called when he heard the knock on the door. He smiled benignly, turned to Snape, who was scowling, and said, "It seems to be my day for company, doesn't it?"

"Apparently," Snape sneered.

"Here you go, Professor," Harry said breezily as he stepped into the office. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were in a meeting."

"Come sit down, Harry," Dumbledore invited, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "Did you get what I asked for?"

"Fizzing Whizbees, sugar quills, liquorice wands, and chocolate frogs," Harry said, handing him the bag. "That was everything, right?" He sat in the chair on the headmaster's right.

Dumbledore beamed at him. "Perfect! Thank you so much!" He reached in the bag and pulled out a Sugar Quill and began sucking on it. "Sweet, Severus?" he said politely, offering the bag to the other man.

"No," Snape snarled. "I need to talk to you," he insisted.

"Go right ahead! Sweet, Harry?" Dumbledore said, offering the bag to the young man. Harry pulled out a liquorice wand, bit off a hunk of it and began chewing it slowly while watching the two men with great interest.

"Headmaster," Snape said impatiently, "I do need to speak with you. Privately."

"I have no secrets from Harry, Severus. He's my apprentice. He needs to learn everything I know, and as quickly as possible. You know this – we've discussed it," Dumbledore said, still smiling but with a bit of steel in his voice.

Snape sighed. "If you insist."

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"I do," Dumbledore said with a benign smile. "Harry, I do believe Mr. Honeyduke has changed the recipe for the sugar quills. Do I detect a bit of honey and. . .erm. . .almond, perhaps? Taste one and tell me what you think," he said, offering the bag again.

Harry took a sugar quill and sucked on it for a few minutes, actually taking pleasure in the growing rage on Snape's face as the headmaster pointedly ignored him in favour of discussing sweets with his apprentice. What was Dumbledore up to? Whatever it was, Harry was enjoying himself immensely. "I think you're right, sir. Almond and honey. Delicious!" he said, saluting his mentor with the remains of the quill.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore declared as he finished the quill and dug another sweet out of the bag. "Severus, you were saying?"

Snape sighed dramatically. "Where have you been, Potter? Nobody's seen you all week."

"I've been right here, except when I went to Hogsmeade a bit ago. Professor Dumbledore is teaching me some complex things and it's easier if I just stay here with him," he lied, dropping his eyes to look in the bag Dumbledore had offered him at exactly the right moment for Harry to avoid Snape's all-too-discerning gaze.

"Very. . .*convenient*. . .for you, Potter, to be able to miss class whenever you wish," Snape sneered.

"I explained all that to the staff when Harry became my apprentice," Dumbledore said firmly. "What is the problem, Severus? You interrupted a meeting I was having with Remus, yet you haven't shared any information at all."

"Potter's here," Snape said by way of explanation.

"And I've already told you, I have no secrets from him," Dumbledore said, sounding a bit impatient now. "Even if he weren't with us, I would tell him what you said once we were together again. So just get on with it. Remus doesn't need to stay in Harry's study all day."

"Why's Remus in my study?" Harry asked innocently.

"Because Professor Snape said he didn't want Remus to overhear whatever he has to tell us," Dumbledore explained.

"So get on with it," Harry prompted. "I don't mean to be rude, Professor Snape, but Remus needs to get home to his wife soon, and he had things to discuss with Professor Dumbledore and me."

Snape didn't take well to having Harry instruct him on manners. His lip curled as if he smelled something disgusting before he finally spoke. "As you wish. The Dark Lord is seeking more information about Potter. He wants to know particular things about him. I don't honestly know why, but we have enough former students in the Death Eaters that he's getting a lot of information on Potter's habits, likes and dislikes, and so on."

Harry snorted with laughter. "Nobody who would want to be a Death Eater actually knows my likes and dislikes and so on."

The Time of Destiny

"You like animals. You're openly friendly toward people from other houses. You seem to enjoy running around the lake early in the morning," Snape said succinctly. "You have a vicious temper and things explode, or at least rattle, when you get angry."

"Anyone could know those things," Harry said, shrugging as if this whole conversation meant nothing, "and those aren't such unusual things to like." He willed himself to stay calm and not react to anything the Potions master was saying. He would not give Snape any more ammunition than he already had.

"But they give the Dark Lord clues to your character, possible ways to get to you, Potter," Snape said silkily.

"How are those things going to give him ways to get to me?" Harry asked curiously.

"I'm not privy to that information. I'm just passing along what I've learned," Snape replied.

"Is there anything else, Severus?" Dumbledore said, peering at the man over his half-moon spectacles.

"No. That's it. Keep an eye on Potter, Headmaster. There's something afoot, and I haven't yet learned what it is," Snape said, getting to his feet. "When I know more, I'll tell you."

"Thank you, Severus," Dumbledore said, rising politely from his seat. Harry followed suit. "Have a nice afternoon."

Snape turned and glared at the two of them before silently leaving the office, closing the door softly behind him.

Dumbledore put his finger in front of his mouth and stepped lightly to one of his silver instruments. After waiting a few moments, he said, "He's gone. Go ask Remus and your friends to join us, would you, Harry? And I must say, I enjoyed your ruse to join us in this meeting."

"I was watching on the Seeing Glass and heard you say you'd sent me on an errand," Harry replied as he went to the door to his room and opened it, inviting Remus to join them in the office.

"You *heard* me? How is that possible?" Dumbledore said in confusion.

"Look at this," Harry said, lifting down Gryffindor's sword and opening the doorway. Merlin still sat on the end of the Extendable Ear.

"What have you done?" Dumbledore said with interest.

"I gave the Seeing Glass sound!" Harry said, grinning. "I did the Stretching Charm on an Extendable Ear and had Merlin hold this end. The other end should still be in Hermione's ear." Harry looked down at the end of the Ear in Merlin's talons. "You lot can come up now," he said with a grin. A few moments later, they could hear the lift bringing Harry's friends back to the office from the Chamber below.

The Time of Destiny

"So you heard everything?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Yes, but I don't know what to think about it," she replied, looking puzzled. "I told Ron and Ginny about it on the way up. The Ear worked perfectly, by the way!" She handed him the Ear, its string coiled up like a very long rope.

"That's great! We'll have to work out how to fix one in place or something, now that we know it works," Harry said, shrinking the string down to its normal size and handing it to Ginny.

"But what was he talking about?" Ginny said in concern. "They're studying Harry's habits for some reason?"

"It would appear so. You'll just have to be on your guard, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"As if I'm not already," the young wizard replied, shaking his head in disgust. He glanced at his friends, then at his mentor, then sighed. "Well, this has been fun and all that, but I suppose I should go to my room. I have a lot of studying to catch up on since I was gone so long."

Dumbledore studied his apprentice's resigned face for a moment. "Why don't you take the weekend to spend time with your friends?" he suggested. "We can get back to work on Monday."

"Are you certain?" Harry said hesitantly. "I've been gone so long—"

"That your friends need to spend some time with you. Go on, have some fun," Dumbledore urged him.

"That's great, thanks!" Harry said happily. He draped his arm around Ginny's shoulders and started for the door, Ron and Hermione trailing after them.

"If you don't need me any longer, Albus," Remus said, "Harry was right, earlier. I do have a wife to go home to, and things to do."

"See you later, then, Remus," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Please give Tonks my best."

"I will." Remus followed the young people down the spiral staircase.

When they reached the corridor, Harry turned to Remus. "Please tell Tonks I'm sorry for all this," he said earnestly.

"Tell her yourself," Remus said with a grin. "She takes this 'godmother thing' very seriously, you know."

"Yeah, I've noticed," Harry said with a laugh. He looked at his friends. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend, right? I saw other students in the village." They nodded. "Then what are we doing here?" he said with a laugh. "I'll flash us to Remus's house to get Remus home quickly and apologize to Tonks, and then we can do what we want in Hogsmeade. OK?"

"Harry, you don't have to take me home," Remus protested.

The Time of Destiny

"How did you get here?" Harry asked.

"On my broom."

"Wouldn't it be faster to go back by phoenix?" Harry said reasonably. "I can carry all of you."

"All right, then, let's go," Remus said, grinning at Harry's eagerness.

"OK with you lot?" Harry said, looking at his friends, who all nodded. "Merlin, you can have the day off. I can handle this." Merlin flashed away as Harry changed into a phoenix. They grabbed his tail and flashed to Remus's house in Hogsmeade.

Remus opened the door. "Tonks? I'm home! Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione are with me."

Tonks came running from the back of the small house. "Harry's back? *Harry!* Where the bloody hell have you been?" she said as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. "You're giving me grey hairs!"

"Not that I can tell," Harry teased, poking about in her spiky purple hair.

Tonks pulled back but held on to him, looking him over thoroughly. "You look better than I've ever seen you!" she said, amazed.

"You won't believe where he's been," Ron said with a grin.

"I want to hear everything!" Tonks said, taking Harry's hand and drawing him into the kitchen, his friends and Remus all trailing behind them, sharing amused glances. "I was just making an attempt at lunch. Tell me what happened and I'll feed you – or if it's a better bribe, I won't feed you!" She laughed and pulled him into a tight hug again. This time she held on longer and whispered in his ear, "You had both of us scared to death. I'm barely getting the hang of this godmother thing and you go and disappear on me!" She pulled back and gazed seriously into his eyes. "Don't EVER do that again!" Then she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek before looking dazedly around her small kitchen, trying to work out how to feed six people quickly.

"You don't have to feed us, Tonks," Harry said with a fond smile. "We just came to deliver Remus to you and say 'hi.'"

"And to tell me where the bloody hell you've been! Sit down, Harry, and start talking! Don't make me hex you!" she said, trying, and failing spectacularly, to look threatening.

"OK, we'll stay long enough for that," he said, sitting at the table. His friends pulled out chairs and sat at the table as well.

"Tea?" Tonks said brightly as Remus moved to the cupboard to get out cups and saucers.

"Sure, that would be great," Harry replied. Tonks managed to pour out tea and serve biscuits with it without too many mishaps – her spilling the sugar was the closest thing to her normal clumsiness in the kitchen.

The Time of Destiny

Harry told Tonks the story and answered her questions willingly. When he was finished and they'd all eaten the sandwiches Remus and Tonks had prepared as lunch, Harry and his friends got up to leave.

"Don't you ever let things get that bad for you again," Tonks insisted. "You can come and stay with us if things are too difficult for you at school."

"Really?" Harry said, touched by the invitation. "That's sweet of you, Tonks."

"We mean it, Harry," Remus said. "If you ever need a break, come to us. We're your family, after all."

Harry beamed. "You are, aren't you?" He gave each of them a warm hug, kissing Tonks on both cheeks for good measure. "Thanks. See you later."

"Have fun, you lot!" Tonks said, waving cheerily as the four friends walked away. Remus had his arm around her and was also waving, but soon dropped his eyes to his bride and pulled her inside.

Harry and his friends grinned at each other, having seen the light in Remus's face as he gazed at his wife while closing the door.

"I see a bit of snogging in their future," Ron quipped in his best Trelawney voice.

Harry snorted. "I see a bit more than snogging in their future," he replied with a grin.

"What about our future, huh?" Ginny said, tugging on his hand. "It seems to me you have some making up to do with your girlfriend."

"Making up, huh?" Harry said, smiling tenderly at her. "So I've wronged you in some way?"

"I'd say so, yeah," she said, her eyes playful as she looked up at him.

"Right," Harry replied, sounding stoic. "Harry's been a bad boy. I suppose I must take my punishment." He sighed dramatically, then looked at Ron and Hermione. "Would you excuse us? It seems I have some penance to do."

Ron laughed out loud. "Yeah, mate, you do! Have fun, you two."

"You, too," Harry said. "Ready, m'lady?" Ginny nodded. Harry glanced up and down the street and, seeing no one watching, changed into the phoenix. The two of them disappeared in a flash of light.

"I guess they have custody of the Shack today," Ron said, wrapping his arm around Hermione's shoulders. "What would you like to do?"

"I need a new quill and more parchment," the ever-practical Hermione replied. "Shopping first, snogging later."

"Right," Ron replied cheerfully, giving her a squeeze.

The Time of Destiny

In the Shrieking Shack, Harry was tenderly kissing Ginny, who moaned in response. Clothes were quickly dispensed with and they were soon a tangle of arms and legs, hands and mouths wandering eagerly over each other's bodies. The afternoon sunlight filtered through the boards over the windows, the dust motes gleaming dully as they passed through the light. Harry nibbled his way from the sweet, soft spot behind Ginny's ear, down her neck to her throat, down her sternum to her breasts.

"Hmm, decisions, decisions," he muttered playfully as he kissed first one breast, then the other. "I don't know. Which flavour do I want today, hmm?" He rubbed his barely-scratchy cheek gently along the side of her breast, then nipped and suckled each lovely mound.

Ginny moaned in pleasure, her hands tangled in his hair. "Baby, please. . . ." she murmured, "please. . . ."

"Please what?" he said impertinently, then blew a raspberry on her tummy.

"Harry!" she squealed, giggling as she gently smacked his shoulder. "That's not nice!"

"But it's fun!" he teased, blowing another raspberry, then getting back to the serious business of loving every square inch of her.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," Harry murmured later as he buried his face in the rich red hair lying across the pillow and kissed the tender spot where her neck joined her shoulder.

"Mmmmm, I love you too," she said, holding him close. "Don't ever move."

"Never again," he said, a soft chuckle in his voice.

"Never, ever again," she agreed with a sigh.

"I'll squish you if I stay here much longer," he warned her, raising up just far enough to lick the tip of her nose playfully before burrowing into her neck again. "You smell so good."

"You're sweet – and no, you're not squishing me," she said, her voice warm and sleepy.

"Good," he said, moving down her body far enough that he could rest his head on her shoulder.

"I love this," Ginny said contentedly, her fingers raking through his hair, then stroking the satiny skin on his back. She did her best to not follow the faint tracery of scars from Voldemort's whip that criss-crossed his back, knowing he didn't need any reminders of that aspect of his life.

"You love my head being too big for your shoulder?" he teased. "You're such a bit of a thing."

"I'm just the right size, thank you very much!" she said tartly. "My feet reach the ground, and if anything's too high to reach, I have you to deal with it!"

The Time of Destiny

"Yes, you do. You have all contingencies covered," he said with a contented sigh as he relaxed against her.

"Remember that, sir," she said imperiously.

He raised up to look at her quite seriously. "You are perfect in every way. I will never forget that."

"I love you," she said, pulling him down for a warm, languid kiss.

"Mmmm," he murmured as he traced a line of kisses along the edge of her jaw, working his way back to his resting place on her shoulder. "You make me so happy."

"Ditto," she said. "Oof, now you're squishing me," she grunted as he slipped into sleep and his full weight fell on her.

"Mmm? Sorry," he said, sliding off of her, nestling his head into her shoulder contentedly and dozing off again.

"Don't you dare ever leave me again," Ginny murmured to her sleeping love. "I thought I was going to die worrying about you. You stay right here next to me. Forever. OK?"

"K," he muttered, rousing slightly at the sound of her voice, then drifting off into a peaceful sleep once more.

In his next Potions class, Harry was working hard to get his potion correct. He was smiling and humming a bit as he worked, completely content and focused on his task.

"Mr. Potter," Snape snarled as he stalked by. "What is that on your face?"

Harry looked up sharply. "Sorry?" He glanced at Ron and Hermione in confusion. "Where is it?" he said, rubbing his hands over his cheeks and chin. "Did I splash something on myself? I didn't notice." His friends both shook their heads, looking bewildered, when he looked at them.

"I said, what is that on your face?" Snape said silkily. "And what is that infernal noise?"

"What noise?" Harry said in confusion, looking at his cauldron. It wasn't whistling or anything. It was sitting there looking like a perfectly made potion, no sparks coming out, no weird smell, its colour matched Hermione's. What could be wrong?

"You were making a noise," Snape said. "Stop it." He moved on, his usual sneer firmly in place.

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, completely flummoxed. "What noise?"

"You were humming a bit under your breath, that's all," Hermione said with a shrug.

"And you were smiling," Ron said. "That's all that was on your face that I could see, mate."

The Time of Destiny

Harry frowned. "He doesn't want me smiling or humming?" He shook his head in amazement. "OK, I'll try harder to be less cheerful."

Ron snorted in laughter. "You do that, mate," he said encouragingly, which only made Harry laugh out loud.

"Mr. Potter!" Snape called from across the room. "Are you being disruptive again?"

"Erm. . .no, sir," Harry replied, forcing a frown on his face. That seemed to satisfy Snape, who turned away to annoy some other student.

Harry, Ron and Hermione worked in silence for a while, but then Hermione sighed.

"What's wrong?" Ron said, leaning over to peek past the fall of her long bushy hair.

"Harry's being reprimanded for being *happy* in a class where he's never been happy," she said with a disgusted shake of her head. "That's so unfair."

Harry leaned over so only his two friends could hear him. "Who ever said Snape was fair?" All three giggled, then quickly stifled their laughter before they got in more trouble. A smile lingered on Harry's face. He couldn't help himself. Since the phoenixes had filled him with song, his heart had been lighter than ever before in his life. He found many reasons to be happy these days, and often smiled for no reason at all.

"Potter. What's wrong with you?" Snape demanded, getting right in his face.

"Sorry?" Harry said, shocked at the man's vehemence.

"Detention, Potter. I won't tolerate such cheek!" Snape snarled, then strode off to the next work table.

Harry's mouth was open in shock. "What did I do?" he asked his friends.

"Nothing," Ron replied darkly. "That's not on. That's not on at all."

"Maybe he needs to see you again," Hermione said, leaning close to Harry to whisper in his ear.

Harry looked at her quickly. "Maybe that's it," he said with a shrug and then went back to work, doing his best to avoid smiling or laughing. When he turned in his potion, which was, amazingly enough, exactly like Hermione's, Snape glared up at him and dropped the flagon.

"Oops. Zero points again, Potter," he sneered.

"That's all right, Professor. I made an extra one just in case," Harry said quietly as he handed over another sample. He'd actually made several extras before turning in the first one, expecting Snape to do exactly as he'd done.

Snape sighed and put the flagon in the testing tray with the others. "At least you're thinking ahead these days, Potter," he said grudgingly.

The Time of Destiny

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied, then quickly turned and went back to his work table before there were any more problems.

"Good thing you made extras, mate," Ron commended him as they began to clear away their things.

"I still have several in my pocket in case mine goes missing," Harry said grimly, his good mood erased by Snape's unfair actions.

As the three of them picked up their bags to leave the room, Snape called, "Potter! Come here."

"Yes, Professor?" Harry said politely when he reached the man's desk. He kept a resolutely straight face, determined to not give the man any more reasons to reprimand him.

"You will be here at five o'clock to serve your detention," Snape said, shoving his greasy black hair out of his face as he glared at Harry.

"May I ask what I did to earn this detention?" Harry said politely. "I didn't mean to cheek you, sir. I was just happy today."

"And now you're not," Snape said sharply. "You're dismissed."

Harry sighed. "Yes, sir." He followed Ron and Hermione out of the room, shaking his head in response to their questioning gazes.

They found a shady spot to sit in the courtyard for their break between classes. After they were comfortably seated, Hermione said, "What was that all about?"

"He seemed to want to make me unhappy," Harry said with a shrug, then told them exactly what had been said.

"That's so unfair," Hermione said, frowning in disapproval. "You should tell Dumbledore."

"No, I'll just serve the detention," Harry said with a shrug. "At least he's not Umbridge. He doesn't usually try to do me bodily harm, he just annoys me." He grinned at his own comment, then laughed out loud.

"What are you laughing at, mate?" Ron said, laughing along with him.

"Dunno. I'm just happy," Harry said, grinning broadly at his friends. "Even Snape can't keep me down for long."

"Try to control that while you're with him," Hermione said darkly.

"I will."

"Here, Potter. Grade these homework papers for me," Snape said, handing Harry a stack of parchments. "The answer key is on the top, as before."

The Time of Destiny

"Yes, sir," Harry said, sitting down, setting out his ink bottle and quill and getting to work. He'd only been working a short time when Snape spoke again.

"Why are you smiling, Potter?" He sounded genuinely curious this time.

"Erm. . . I was just. . . um. . . ." Harry forced his face into a blank expression. "Sorry, sir."

"No, really. Why were you smiling?"

"Um. . . I was wondering if my answers were as funny as some of these First Years when I was a kid," Harry said creatively. He hoped that would be enough to satisfy the man.

"I can assure you, your answers were so pathetic that they made these look truly profound," Snape said archly.

Harry just nodded and got back to work. Buried in the stack of parchment was a note from Snape.

As before, the note said, mark an occasional thing wrong as you read this. The Death Eaters among the students have some definite plan in place now, but I don't know what it is. Be on your guard. Harry marked an X next to this statement, glancing at the answer key to add authenticity. I have no idea what the plan is or who's involved, but the Dark Lord is pleased with it. I do know that Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and some of their friends escaped from Azkaban recently. They may be involved in this plot. I would honestly like to know why you're so happy these days. Something's changed. What? You can write a response here and I'll erase it when I read it.

Harry thought a moment. *Nope, I'm not going to write what happened to me,* he decided. Dipping his quill in the ink bottle, he wrote, "Ask Professor Dumbledore. He can tell you." He went back to grading homework, stifling giggles when something was particularly bad or ridiculous. *Bat entrails are good for warts? What was this kid thinking?* Harry thought as he marked an X by that answer.

When he finished, he carried the parchments to Snape's desk. "All finished," he said, glancing significantly at the bit of parchment sticking out crookedly from behind the answer key. That was Snape's note. He didn't want it to be mixed in with the homework parchments.

"Thank you, Potter. You're dismissed," Snape said as he took the parchments from Harry. "Do try to control yourself in class. You're old enough now to know not to cheek your teachers."

"Yes, sir," Harry said as humbly as he could manage, then picked up his things and left, forcing himself to ignore the eyeballs in the jar by the door that followed his every movement.

"He said to be on your guard? But you're always on your guard!" Ron said huffily. "What's he on about?"

"He's worried about whatever it is," Harry said with a shrug. "He's doing what he can, I suppose. Since he only knows bits and pieces of information, he didn't have any real clues to give me."

The Time of Destiny

"That's not much help," Hermione grumbled huffily. "'Be on your guard,' indeed! That's the second time he's told you that recently! Does he think you've forgotten? Or that you're more careless now than before? I don't understand this at all."

"Me either. Can you imagine Malfoy and his bunch all escaping from jail again? I wonder why it wasn't in the paper?" Harry mused, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Maybe the Ministry got tired of people thinking there's a revolving door in Azkaban," Hermione said darkly.

"Revolving door?" Ron said, confused.

"Like the one in that shop we visited in Surrey?" she reminded him. "Four doors attached together that go round?"

"Oh," Ron said, cottoning on. "In Azkaban?" he added, obviously still confused on the finer points.

"It's an expression, Ronald," Hermione said patiently.

"Ginny's going to have kittens when she finds out Malfoy's free again," Ron said uneasily.

"Then we won't tell her," Hermione replied.

"You think it's smart to keep it from her?" Harry said, shocked.

"Why should she worry any more than she has to? She's not going anywhere alone where she would be in danger," Hermione reasoned.

"Still. . .," Harry frowned, uncertain if Hermione was right or completely wrong. He'd have to think about that a bit.

"They'll catch them soon," Hermione assured him. "There has to be a huge manhunt going on now."

"A ferret hunt would be better," Ron snorted. "We should have killed all of them when we had them trussed up in the hen house after they attacked Ginny."

"Yeah, I was afraid not doing that was going to come back and bite us in the arse," Harry grumbled.

"What absolutely horrible things can we think of to do to Malfoy when we find him?" Ron said with a dreamy look in his eyes. "Moody's bouncing ferret was brilliant, but surely we can come up with some other interesting solutions to the Malfoy problem."

"I heard Ginny mumbling to herself one time about him," Harry said, smiling a bit at the memory. "She said she'd like to find a spell that pulled every single hair off of every part of his body, one hair at a time, s-l-o-w-l-y. Or cursing his wobbly bits off so he pees like a girl for the rest of his life. Or, preferably, both."

The Time of Destiny

Ron grinned. "That Ginny, such a creative mind! What else? Maybe we'll come up with something actually doable!"

"It would be poetic justice to turn him into a squib or a Muggle, wouldn't it?" Harry said, a grin tickling his mouth. "Can't you just see the frustration?" He chuckled darkly. "Too bad we can't manage that one."

"I'd like to find out how to do that Effrondrement Curse properly and let him see how it feels to have your organs decomposing inside you while you're alive!" Hermione growled. Malfoy had cast that spell on her in the battle on the Astronomy Tower the previous spring. If he hadn't cast it badly, Hermione would have died a very painful death. As it was, she was in the hospital for several days recovering from it.

"Oh, that's my bloodthirsty girl!" Ron said approvingly.

"Dobby's pretty good at dealing with bad guys," Harry mused. "I mean, look what he did to Kreacher! We could turn him loose on Malfoy and his gang. He'd take care of the matter and probably even clean up after himself." He snickered at the thought.

"At the very least, taking Malfoy's wand away and hanging a 'hex me' sign on his back, then turning him loose in the middle of a D.A. meeting would be a lot of fun – and good practice for the D.A. members, too," Ron said with a grin. Their ideas were getting sillier, but the very outrageousness of some of them was lightening their moods considerably.

"How about transfiguring him into a mouse and letting Hedwig catch him?" Harry suggested. "No, that would probably give Hedwig indigestion. Forget I said that." By this time, all three of them were grinning. Coming up with horrors they'd like to inflict on Malfoy if they had the chance was a fun pastime.

They went back to working on their homework quietly for a while, then Ron asked, "So did Snape say anything else?"

"No, but I should probably try to avoid smiling in class, as well," Harry said as a grin tickled the corners of his mouth. "I don't think he can stand to be around happy people."

"Snape probably doesn't know what it feels like to smile," Ron sneered. "Git."

"Prat," Harry agreed cheerfully.

"Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall said at dinner that evening. "Could you come to my office when you've finished eating?"

"Sure," Harry replied. "What's up?"

"We can talk about it then," she said mysteriously. Her eyes were twinkling, so Harry knew he wasn't in trouble.

"What's that all about?" Ron asked, his face puzzled.

The Time of Destiny

"Dunno. I guess I'll find out in a little while," Harry said, picking up another chicken leg and biting into it with relish.

When he arrived at McGonagall's office, she was sitting at her desk grading papers.

"Thank you for coming, Harry. Please, sit down," she invited with a smile. "Biscuit?"

"Uh, OK. Thanks," he said, taking a ginger newt from her tartan tin of biscuits. He nibbled on the biscuit as he waited for her to begin.

"I had a most interesting visit from Merlin recently," she said, her eyes sparkling. "He is such a joy to talk to."

"Yeah, he's an interesting guy, isn't he?" Harry agreed with a grin.

"He told me where you were when you were gone," she said, studying him seriously. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Nor had Professor Dumbledore."

"Right. I was wondering if you could write some of the stories you heard from the phoenixes. They would be fascinating reading," she said eagerly.

"Especially Merlin's," Harry said, grinning broadly. "He was a bit of a rascal. He makes Fred and George seem tame by comparison."

"Really? Well, from what I've learned talking to him, I can imagine he had quite some adventures." She smiled, the eager young girl she had been decades ago shining through her eyes. "He's fascinating."

Harry waited to see what else she wanted. He could feel more questions simmering behind her eyes.

"What was it like? Can you tell me?"

"What?"

"Being with all of those phoenixes. Hearing their stories, their songs. Would you mind telling me? I'll keep it secret, but he told me just enough for me to want to know more."

Harry smiled. "I told Professor Dumbledore he should get Merlin or Fawkes to take him there. It would do him a world of good, I think. It's too bad you have to be a phoenix to go there. It's such a beautiful place. I wish I could share it with my friends. You'd love it, Professor!" He launched into the tale of his time with the phoenixes and found his professor a rapt audience. When he finished, she sighed deeply, a smile on her face.

"How fortunate you were to go there," she said simply. "I have noticed the marked change in you, Harry. You seem to be smiling all the time. After what you've been through, it's so good to see you relaxed and happy like this."

The Time of Destiny

"Feels good, too," Harry agreed with a grin.

"Well, I've taken enough of your time. Thank you so much for sharing this with me."

"No problem," Harry said with an easy smile.

As he rose to leave, she added, "Do consider writing down the stories they told you when you have time, Potter. They could be published as fiction, perhaps. I, for one, would love to read them."

"When I have time, Professor," Harry said with a smile.

Chapter 24 – The D.A. Tournament

"What do you want to do for Easter break?" Ron said to Hermione and Harry as they studied together one afternoon in early March. Harry had decided to take the N.E.W.T.s for the three classes he was still attending, so he was studying with his friends. Easter was early this year, coming toward the end of March.

"What do you mean?" Hermione said, her eyes glued to the book she was studying.

"I mean, are you going home? Or do you want to go to the Burrow with us?" he replied. "You and Harry are welcome to come if you want."

Hermione looked up, her eyebrows knit together in an anxious expression. "Leave school? We have N.E.W.T.s to revise for! How can you think of going home for a week?"

Ron shrugged. "I just thought –"

"How could we possibly take time off so close to exams?" she cried. "We have so much to do!"

"I thought it would be fun," he said, with a disappointed sigh.

"*Fun?* With seven years worth of revising to do? What were you *thinking?*" she said, her voice shrill with exasperation. She turned to Harry. "Surely you aren't going with him?"

"We haven't talked about it," Ron admitted before Harry could reply. "I wanted to ask you first."

Hermione's heart softened when she saw how disappointed he looked. "I'm sorry. Thank you for the invitation. I'd really love to go home for the Easter break. My parents are going to remodel a room to be a study for me while I go to college. We need to get started on that, but it will just have to wait for summer. There's just too much to revise to take time off now. You do understand, don't you?" Ron nodded, his expression glum.

"I have an idea," Harry said after several minutes of silent study.

"What?" Ron said, eager to hear any suggestion that would lighten the workload Hermione was setting them.

"Why don't we stay at Hogwarts and revise, but take two hours off per day to play, sleep, hang out – just relax," Harry suggested. "I can flash us to Grimmauld Place for those two hours if you want a change of scene."

"Wicked!" Ron said, then turned to Hermione. "Please agree, 'Mione!"

"Two hours is a lot of time," she began.

"And that doesn't count meals," Harry amended. "Two hours of recreation, naps, relaxing, playing, whatever we want."

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"Yeah!" Ron agreed. "C'mon, 'Mione! It will refresh our minds to have a break like that every day!"

"Oh, all right," she said after keeping them on pins and needles while she thought about the idea. "Two hours, no more."

"Yay!" both boys cheered.

"What's up?" Ginny asked, coming over from the table where she'd been studying with her fellow Sixth Years.

Harry filled her in. "That sounds brilliant!" Ginny enthused. "Two hours a day at Grimmauld Place will be fun! We certainly can't visit Hogsmeade then with Malfoy and his gang on the loose." Harry had decided it was best if Ginny knew the boys who had attacked her had escaped from jail. She'd stayed very close to the castle ever since, and was ready for a break in the routine.

"What about the Order?" Hermione said. "They're meeting there all the time now, aren't they?"

"I'll take care of it," Harry said. "It is my house. I'll set some limits."

"How are you going to do that?" Hermione wondered.

"Dobby and I will come up with something," he assured her.

Two days later, Hedwig landed in front of Harry at breakfast and offered her leg so he could untie his letter. He fed her bits of bacon before opening the letter.

"Who's it from?" Ron asked.

"Dobby," Harry replied, his eyes narrowing as he read.

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, noticing his expression.

"Mundungus is messing about in the bedrooms," Harry replied. "He's been playing with the Quidditch rug and just poking around where he doesn't belong."

"What are you going to do about it?" Hermione asked, recognizing the determined look in his face.

"Set the limits I told you about. I wrote Dobby and asked him how things were going, and if anyone was going where they shouldn't in the house. That's why he wrote. Dung is taking people up to our room and gambling on the games. That's bloody stupid, since you can control the players." He shook his head in disgust.

"Maybe he doesn't tell the other people the players can be controlled," Ginny suggested.

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"Maybe," Harry replied. He glanced up at the head table. "I need to talk to Dumbledore. See you later." He squeezed Ginny's shoulder as he got up and walked up to the front of the Great Hall.

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore said, smiling at his protégé. "How are you?"

"A bit irritated," the young man replied. "May I have a word when you've finished eating?"

"Certainly," Dumbledore replied. "I'm actually finished now. I was merely drawing pictures in my leftover marmalade with my fork." His eyes twinkled and he grinned mischievously as he tilted his plate so Harry could see his creation. He'd drawn little stick figures on brooms which appeared to be playing Quidditch.

Harry chuckled, amused as usual by his headmaster's whimsical personality. "Well done, sir. Who's winning?"

"I really shouldn't take sides, but I'd say Gryffindor has this one sewn up," he said with a smile, indicating one stick figure with messy hair and glasses and a small winged ball in his fist. He waved his hand idly over the plate and the little figure began to move, pumping his Snitch-filled fist in the air, making Harry laugh aloud.

"Looks like a win to me," Harry agreed.

Soon the two of them were walking toward Dumbledore's office, deep in quiet conversation.

"Dobby says Dung's messing about in my room, sir, and poking around other places in the house where he doesn't belong," Harry said. "I'd like to go home for a little while and see what's going on, then set some wards in place to prevent such things from happening. I don't mind the Order using the rooms on the first floor, or the kitchen, but I would like the other rooms left alone so it can be a real home when I'm there. I'd like to think my things aren't being bothered. And Dung doing this stuff is upsetting the house-elves. That's not fair to them."

"Oh dear. I do understand," Dumbledore replied, his brow furrowed in concern. "That is your home, after all. You have every right to be upset about your privacy being violated. I'll have a talk with Mundungus."

"It's *my* house, sir. I can take care of the problem if you'll allow me to leave school for a little while. I'll just flash there, observe what's going on and then set the proper wards in place if it seems to be necessary. It's possible Dobby's overreacting. He is very protective, after all."

"Yes, he is. Normally, I wouldn't give such permission, but we don't do normal things with your schooling anyway. Go ahead and flash there today if you'd like. Try to be back by lunch. We still have some preparations to make for the D.A. Tournament. We also need to work on perfecting those spells you just learned."

"Thanks! I'll be back by lunch," Harry said, turning to go back to Gryffindor Tower. "See you later."

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A short time later, Harry flashed into one of the rooms Dobby hadn't remodelled yet in Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Nobody bothered to go in there since it was still shabby, although Harry's hard-working house-elves did keep it clean.

Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and draped it over himself. Cracking the door open carefully, he listened for movement on the stairs or in the hall. Nothing. He crept out and closed the door carefully behind him, then descended the stairs as quietly as he could. He hadn't gone far before he heard voices cheering on the players on his Quidditch rug. Dung, Ted Tonks and a couple of new Order members Harry had seen a few times but didn't know well were all bent over the rug, cheering and groaning as the game progressed. Harry watched as they added to existing bets or argued over previous ones. His room was a mess, with bits of food scattered on every horizontal surface, old drink bottles and glasses sitting everywhere. Dobby stood in the corner wringing his hands. Occasionally, he'd start to clean up, but the men would yell at him, saying they weren't through with whatever it was he was trying to take away.

Harry had seen enough. He left the room, took off his Cloak and stowed it in his pocket, then stormed back into his room.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

Some of the men had the good grace to look a bit guilty, but Dung just smiled. "This rug is brilliant, Harry," he said happily. "Look – I've been lucky with my wagering today!"

"Did you lot know you can control the players?" Harry asked the others.

"What?" "No!" "Dung, you piece of filth!" "What are you playing at, Dung?" they cried.

"That's not the worst problem you have," Harry said in a dangerously quiet voice. The raucous voices stilled as all the men turned to stare at the angry young man. "This is *my home*. You're in my room. I didn't invite you here. I am putting wards on the house so you won't be able to violate my privacy again. The basement and all of the rooms above the first floor but the loo will be off-limits to everyone but my family and friends. You lot are not in that number. Clean up this mess, get out of my house and don't come back unless you need to be here on Order business."

"We were just having a little fun," Dung protested.

"Not here, you're not," Harry retorted.

"Dobby, come clean this up," one of the men said as he started picking things up and spilled a drink on the floor.

"Stay there, Dobby," Harry ordered, his eyes flashing with angry fire as he turned back to the man. "Dobby is not your servant. And when I'm not here, Dobby's in charge of the house. I'm certain he told you that you weren't supposed to be in here." Dobby nodded so fast, his ears flapped. "That's what I thought. You lot clean up this mess and make sure the room is perfect before you leave it. And hurry up, I have better things to do than stand here supervising you!"

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Finally, amid much grumbling, the room was cleaned and the men were escorted downstairs by Harry and Dobby. "Don't come back unless you are here on Order business," Harry warned. "I will set wards on the house that will let me know if you're here when you aren't supposed to be, or if you go where you don't belong in the house."

"We're sorry," Ted Tonks said. "Dung said it was OK."

"I understand," Harry said. He liked Tonks' father and was sorry he'd been caught in Dung's scheme. "Just take anything Dung tells you with a huge grain of salt, all right?"

"Right you are," Ted assured him.

Harry stared at Dung's robes as the man slunk out of the door. "Hold on," Harry said suddenly.

"What?" Dung said with as good an impression of innocence as he could muster.

"Empty your pockets," Harry ordered, wand at the ready.

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong!" Dung protested.

"Empty. Your. Pockets," Harry repeated, pointing his wand at the man's heart.

Dung started pulling things out of his pockets. Soon there was a pile of silver flatware with the Black family crest on each piece lying on the small table in the foyer, as well as some old jewellery and a few small books Harry recognized from the house's library.

"You've done nothing wrong?" Harry said, scowling at the man.

"Not much," Dung dithered, twisting his fingers together.

"If you steal anything else from me, Azkaban will be the least of your worries," Harry warned him in a low, dangerous voice.

Dung stared at the boy in front of him, suddenly realizing the very serious peril he was in. "I'm, um, I'm sorry, Harry. I won't do it again." He reached inside his robes and pulled out a few more things from a hidden pocket.

"And you'll go and find whatever else you've stolen and return it to me, won't you?" Harry said. When Dung didn't respond, he poked the man with his wand. "Or do you want me to hex you?"

"No, no, I don't want that! I'll get it back, don't worry. I'll. . .I'll find a way," he said.

"If you hadn't been a friend of Sirius's," Harry informed him, "I wouldn't give you another chance. This is your last chance, Dung. Don't mess up again."

"Yes, I mean, no, I mean, I won't," the man stammered.

"Get out of here," Harry growled. Dung turned and ran down the stairs, Disapparating as soon as he got to the street.

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The two house-elves and Harry were all relieved to finally have the house to themselves.

"Dobby, I'm going to set wards on the rooms, just as I told them I would. I want the rooms upstairs and the basement to be off-limits to everyone but my family and friends. That means Remus and Tonks and the Weasleys and Hermione. Oh, Professor Dumbledore, as well, and you two, of course. Nobody else can go in them without permission from one of us, or from you or Winky."

Dobby nodded and Winky smiled. "We is so glad you came home," Dobby said happily. "Dobby and Winky knew Harry Potter sir would not want those men messing about in his room, but we is supposed to treat them as guests of our master, so we couldn't tell them to leave."

"OK. I'm ordering you to not treat Dung as a guest. How's that?" Harry said with a smile. "If he's here on Order business and part of a meeting, you can provide him with food and drink if you're doing so for everyone else, but Dung gets nothing special. And he's not allowed here at all unless he's here on business. Will that work?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said, obviously pleased.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir," Winky said. "Now we can protect your property as proper house-elves should."

"Is there anything else you need from me?" Harry said, glancing at his watch.

"No, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby replied. "Everything else is fine."

"Great. I'll set those wards, then, and get back to school," he replied.

It only took a short time to set spells in place that would block access to the rooms Harry wanted to keep private. Harry decided he should test the wards, since the spells were his own inventions.

He looked at his house-elves, who were watching him with great interest. "I'm going to change how I look and put another spell on myself that masks my identity, so I will seem to be someone else. I'm doing this to test the wards I've put up. They should let Harry Potter in, but they should repel 'James Evans,'" Harry explained. "Just watch while I'm doing this. I want to see how the wards work."

"OK," the elves said quietly. First, Harry walked through the wards as himself, repeating the action several times. "So far, so good. Why don't you two try coming in? It shouldn't feel much different than it did before the wards were put up. You'll feel a slight clinging sensation when you pass through the door, that's all. Let me know if you feel anything else."

"Yes, Harry Potter sir," the elves said together.

Dobby touched Winky's arm and gave her a look that told her to stay put until he called for her. He lifted his eyes trustingly to his master, keeping them locked with Harry's as he strode through the door with determination. When he made it safely through, he smiled with relief, then turned and gestured to his wife, who soon joined them in Harry's room.

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"What did it feel like to you?" Harry asked them.

"As if cobwebs were catching at Winky's skin, but only a little bit," Winky said immediately, staring at the doorway. "Winky wanted to wipe them off, but there's nothing there."

"It's a spell, Winky," Harry explained. "You saw me cast it. If I can work out how to cast it without that cobwebby feeling, I'll change it, but this will do for now, I think. Come back into the hall, and I'll show you what it will do to people who don't have permission to enter the room." The three of them went back into the hall, where the elves watched in amazement as Harry changed into his "James Evans" appearance and put the other spell on himself that would mask his real identity, and then approached his bedroom.

"Harry Potter sir?" Dobby said nervously, staring at the tall, light-haired, freckled man before him.

"It's me, Dobby. This is a disguise I use sometimes. I use the name 'James Evans' when I look like this," Harry said, grinning at his elves.

Dobby tilted his head to study Harry's face. "Harry Potter's eyes is different."

"That's part of the disguise. I have hazel eyes now, right?" Harry said, leaning down to let the elves examine him more closely. Both of them nodded. "Great! That's what I wanted." He turned to face the doorway. "Now let's see how these spells work." He stepped toward the door and grinned when he felt a soft, invisible wall hit him in the face on his first attempt at entering the room. He tried it again, hit the same cushioned wall and heard his own much-magnified voice saying "This is a private area. You do not have permission to enter." He chuckled and tried to enter again, this time being thrown across the hall and landing in a heap on the floor, his body vibrating from the strong Stinging Hex included in the ward. He saw a ghostly image of his "James Evans" face on the invisible barrier for a moment after he landed on the floor.

"Harry Potter sir!" Dobby cried in fright. "Is you all right?"

"Excellent!" Harry said as he struggled to his feet with the help of both of his elves. "I'm fine, really, don't worry," he assured them. "The wards work! Brilliant!" He grinned at his elves. "Now you know what it looks like when someone tries to go where they're not allowed. Did you see the image that showed on the spell for a minute?" Both elves nodded. "Great. That will be stored in the spell until I retrieve it. It will show me who tried to get in." Harry changed back to his normal appearance and grinned at his elves. "That should stop Dung and his buddies from messing about in my things." He glanced at his watch and said, "I'd better get back to school. Thanks for your help. Write me if there are any problems with the wards, or if Dung or anyone else gives you any trouble, OK?"

"Yes, Harry Potter sir," Dobby said, standing at attention. "Dobby and Winky will guard your home with their lives."

Harry was touched by their devotion. "Thanks. Take care of yourselves. I'll see you again soon," he promised, then waved and changed into a phoenix, flashing back to Hogwarts only an hour after he'd left.

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When he returned to school, Harry went to see Dumbledore and explained what he'd done at the house.

"Well done! Thank you for telling me about it," Dumbledore said, pleased with his student's foresight in including a spell that recorded the images of those who challenged the wards. "I trust the Order members a great deal, but some of them – well, you know the kind of people we've recruited for some of the undercover work." There were now several Order members of Dung's ilk, who were much better able to fit in certain unsavoury areas than other Order members were. "I'm sorry you had to go to this trouble, but I think you handled it very well."

"Thank you," Harry replied. He'd come up with the idea for the wards himself, and researched and created the spells on his own, since he couldn't find spells that did exactly what he wanted. Inventing spells this complex was something he would not have been able to do just a few months earlier. He was very excited about his success.

"You *invented* those spells?" Hermione said hours later when Harry finally had time to explain what he'd done.

"Yeah," he said, shrugging as if inventing such sensitive spells was no big deal.

"But Harry! The spell recognizes specific people and repels others! It records images of intruders as well as repelling them! That's amazing!" she said, staring at him in awe.

"I just did a little of this and a little of that until I had it worked out the way I wanted," he said dismissively, but secretly, he was delighted that the smartest student witch at Hogwarts was so impressed with spells he'd created.

"A little of this and a little of that," she said, sighing. "And when do you plan to show us how to do this?"

"When I sort out how to explain it, Hermione," he said patiently. "Honestly, it was a lot of trial and error until I got it right."

"But you set them in place only a short time after Dobby told you about the intrusion," she protested. Ron and Ginny nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, how could you work out such complex spells in that short a time, mate?" Ron asked, frowning as he tried to understand.

"I started working on these wards months ago. I decided before Christmas that I wanted to have some rooms that were private. Remember the spell that I told you would yell at people who tried to enter? The one I put the door when Ginny and I were making up?" His friends all nodded. "These were a – I don't know how to explain it. Erm. They were kind of an 'outgrowth' of that spell, I guess you could say." He shrugged. "I don't have any better explanation."

"So how long did it take you to create the spells, then?" Hermione said, her head tilted as she studied his face.

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"Months to do everything," he replied. "The wall itself is a variation on a Cushioning Charm. Then I just started adding things until I thought I had them right. I tested the spells in the practice room in the Chamber until they worked the way I wanted them to."

"And Dumbledore didn't help you with them?" Hermione said.

"No, I did these by myself," Harry affirmed.

"He didn't teach you how to create such spells?" Hermione pressed.

"No. He's been teaching me very complex spells, and in learning those, I've learned how to think about spells differently. He showed me how to create a simple spell quite a while ago, but these are nothing like that. They kind of 'grew' out of all the things I've been learning, I guess."

"Amazing," Hermione said, shaking her head in wonder.

"Wow," Ron breathed. "That's so cool."

"I want to learn how to do it!" Hermione insisted.

"And as soon as I can *explain* how to do it, I'll teach you," Harry promised.

"OK," she agreed, smiling happily at him.

"I think it's brilliant," Ginny said, grinning at him. "But I think you're brilliant, too, so I expected nothing less."

Harry wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, kissing her temple. "That's my unprejudiced girl," he said with a chuckle.

"Before we settle down to work," Harry suggested the first day of their Easter holiday, "let's decide when we'll take our break so we won't have to think about it, and we'll have something to look forward to."

"Two o'clock," Ginny said promptly.

"Why two o'clock?" Harry asked, amused at her pert expression.

"Why not? It's a break – let's take it in the afternoon," she said reasonably.

"That works for me," Harry agreed. "OK with you?" he added, looking at his two best friends.

"Yeah!" Ron said happily. He immediately set the alarm on his watch for 2:00 PM. "Now we won't be late," he added, grinning. "Wait. Maybe I should set it fifteen minutes early so we can get ready for our break!"

Hermione scowled at him. "Two hours, Ron. That's all. How long do you need to 'prepare' to mess around for two hours?"

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"You never know," he said, teasing her. "C'mon, Hermione," he cajoled her, "it'll be fun."

She smiled. He was so cute when he wheedled her. "Yes, I'm sure it will be."

At one forty-five, Ron's watch alarm went off and he promptly slammed his book shut. "Break time!" he said happily. "What shall we do?"

"Dobby and Winky are making snacks for us," Harry said. "I told them we'd be there to relax for a couple of hours today, and maybe every day this week. They're looking forward to seeing us."

"Great!" Ron said, rubbing his hands in glee.

Hermione looked at her own watch and gave Ron a reproachful gaze before she carefully marked her place and put her things away. "All right. Let's go."

"Yay!" Ginny said gaily.

Soon the four of them were standing in the boys' bedroom of Harry's house, being greeted by two delighted house-elves. They'd flashed directly there rather than to the foyer to avoid any Order members who might be in the house.

"We is so glad you came!" Dobby said, offering them a tray of cakes. "Drinks and snacks is on the table by the window, Harry Potter sir."

"Great, Dobby!" Harry said. "Thanks."

The four friends were soon sitting around the Quidditch rug, cheering on various players while enjoying the snacks the house-elves had provided.

"This is a great study break," Ron said, stretching out on the floor when the game was over.

"Yeah," Hermione said, leaning over him and smiling. "We have an hour left. What would you like to do?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he said, leaping to his feet, grabbing her hand and leading her to the room across the hall.

Harry and Ginny stared after them, chuckling when they heard Ron and Hermione both putting spells on the door.

"I guess Hermione decided she may as well enjoy her study break," Ginny said with a giggle.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Harry said, wiggling his eyebrows and leering at her suggestively. Ginny laughed and aimed her wand at the door, closing it quietly as Harry set other protective spells in place.

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"And to think we can do this every day this week," Ginny sighed as she snuggled with Harry later. "What a brilliant idea."

"Thanks. I try to have a brilliant idea at least once every year or so," he teased.

"You can have this one a lot more often and I won't object a bit," she murmured.

"As you wish, m'lady," he replied.

March slipped into April, and the D.A. Tournament was looming in the near future. Ron, Hermione and Ginny had decided not to participate, since they received so much extra training from Harry. They threw themselves into helping Harry, Remus and Dumbledore plan and organize the Tournament. They all worked hard to get things arranged so everyone would have a good time and be safe while dealing with suitably challenging tasks.

The Tournament would be held on the second weekend in April. Harry had taken a cue from the Quidditch World Cup and gone through Hogsmeade seeking sponsors for other prizes. There would be a variety of special gifts and awards, donated by the merchants in Hogsmeade, all of whom were happy to give prizes to the Tournament as a way of thanking the D.A. members for their help in protecting the wizarding world.

The first day of the Tournament dawned bright and clear, with light wind and small, puffy clouds. The Tournament was to be held on the Quidditch pitch, which was decorated with banners from the merchants of Hogsmeade advertising everything from Honeydukes Sweets to Madam Puddifoot's Tea Room.

"Well, this is it," Harry told the D.A. members who planned to compete as they gathered in the Gryffindor Changing Room, which had been set up as their waiting area. Some of the younger or less experienced students had chosen to watch the Tournament rather than participate but they still had nearly a hundred participants for the first tasks. "You lot know what you're doing. Believe in yourselves. You can do each of these tasks, I promise you. There's nothing here that's beyond your skills. You just have to choose the best way to deal with the challenge that's presented to you. Hermione is handing out your running order. Listen for the whistles. When you're next in line and you hear the whistle, it's your turn. Remember that your time starts when you cross the first purple line, and ends after you cross the purple line after the last task. Good luck! And have fun!" He led them in a cheer, then left to do his duty as a judge.

Harry jogged up to the judges' stand and took his place beside Remus, Tonks, Mad-Eye and Dumbledore. Ron was the announcer, since Dean wanted to participate in the Tournament himself.

Ron looked up at the stands, seeing hundreds of students as well as many parents who had come to watch their children compete. Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie and the twins had come to support Ron and Ginny despite the fact that they weren't competing. Charlie was living in Wales now, having taken a job at the dragon preserve there so he'd be closer when the Order of the Phoenix needed him. Hermione's parents were sitting with the Weasleys, looking rather awestruck at all the magic going on around them.

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Ron grinned at his parents and cleared his throat nervously before pointing his wand at his throat and saying, "*Sonorus*." His rich, deep voice now boomed over the Quidditch pitch.

"Good morning, everyone! Welcome to the first-ever D.A. Tournament!" Cheers met his announcement. "Thank you for coming! We'd like to especially thank the families of the competitors who have come to watch. Welcome! We hope you enjoy the Tournament!"

He waited for the applause to die down, then continued. "D.A. is a Defence Against the Dark Arts club that began two years ago when we had a Defence teacher who wouldn't allow us to use our wands in class at all. We met in secret and worked on the spells we should know for our O.W.L. exams, with the result that all the Fifth Years who were in D.A. earned an O.W.L. in Defence! And that's all down to Harry Potter, who taught us the spells he knew and others we'd need for that exam. Last term, D.A. became a real army, and participated in the Battle of Little Hangleton. This term, we have grown tremendously in number. We hope the D.A. never has to fight again, but if we must, we're ready. The skills that will be tested in this Tournament can be used against real enemies. But today is about having fun! Some interesting challenges have been set to test the skills of the competitors. We hope you'll enjoy watching them work their way through these challenges."

Ron stopped and took a sip of water, then went on with his announcements. "I'd like to thank our sponsors, who have provided gifts, supplies and prizes for our competitors. If you'd like to thank our sponsors yourselves, please go to Hogsmeade and visit their shops! We'd like to thank Honeydukes Sweetshop for donating gift certificates for sweets of their choice for the top three competitors! They've also provided a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and three Chocolate Frogs to each participant in all the levels of competition to help them keep their energy up." A cheer went up for Honeydukes.

He went on. "We'd like to thank Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes and Zonko's Joke Shop for getting into a competition themselves to see who could donate the coolest stuff!" This comment raised a good laugh in the stands. "The top ten competitors will receive gift certificates to each shop!" The crowd whooped their approval. "Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes is also supplying the fireworks that will be set off to celebrate the end of the Tournament when we name our Champion tomorrow evening." This announcement met with excited approval.

"Dervish and Banges has donated a choice of three Dark Detectors to the Champion of the Tournament. The second and third place winners will receive the Dark Detectors not chosen by the Champion. Thank you, Dervish and Banges!" More cheers.

"We'd like to thank Gladrags Wizardwear for donating the numbered robes our competitors are wearing today!" The D.A. competitors were wearing black robes with bright, glittering purple numbers on their backs and the Hogwarts crest on the left side of the front. "Joyero's Jewellery Shop donated the timers worn by each competitor. Thank you, Joyero Jewellery Shop!" Each announcement met with renewed cheers.

"Many thanks to Madam Puddifoot's for donating a free tea for two, to be awarded to the person who shows the best sportsmanship today. This prize will be repeated for the other two phases of the Tournament. Thank you, Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, for donating a very elegant desk set consisting of a pheasant-feather quill and an embossed bronze ink pot, to be awarded to the person who finishes each set of tasks in the fastest time. Thanks to The Three

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Broomsticks for donating butterbeer for a party in the House of the Champion! And thanks to The Hog's Head, for donating funds toward the trophy that will be awarded to the winner and the plaque that will be kept in Hogwarts' Trophy Room. Raise your wands and salute the merchants of Hogsmeade!" Ron led the crowd in a rousing cheer.

"I'd like to introduce our judges. On my right is Professor Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. Next to him is Harry Potter, Tri-Wizard Tournament Champion, trainer of Dumbledore's Army, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and a Seventh Year Gryffindor. Harry's the one who researches and learns new spells first and then teaches them to the rest of us. Next to Harry is Professor Remus Lupin, Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher here at Hogwarts and our D.A. advisor. He and Professor Dumbledore help Harry with new spells when he needs it. Professor Lupin also helps out in D.A. meetings when we need him. Next to him is his wife, Auror Tonks Lupin. And last but certainly not least, retired Auror Alastor Moody. The judges will give points out of ten for each task completed by each competitor. On the field, we have Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape, Sprout, Sinistra and Hagrid. They are there to ensure the safety of the competitors and that each task is reset properly before the next competitor attempts it.

"Today's competition will narrow the field down from the ninety-five who are competing to the ten who will move on to the next level of competition. Tomorrow morning's competition will narrow the field to three, and the final competition tomorrow afternoon will determine the Champion.

"These events are timed. If you look closely at the competitors' robes, you may be able to see the small watches attached to the front. These watches are timers for the tasks. Time begins when the competitor crossed the first purple line, and the time is noted for each task, as well as the overall time taken to do all the tasks. Time ends when the competitor crosses the purple line after the last task. Hermione Granger, that pretty young lady at the far end of the pitch," he said, returning her wave and grinning at her, "will note the times for each task by each competitor, and those times will be factored in along with the judges' scores in determining the winner. Each competitor will be given three attempts to complete each task. If he or she cannot complete it in three tries, they must move on to the next task. Each task is well within the abilities of D.A. members. It's up to them to make the best choice of the spells they know in order to complete each task quickly so they can move on in the best possible time."

Ron stopped, turned to the judges and raised an eyebrow asking if they were ready to begin. They nodded. He turned to Ginny, who was the starter for the competitors and gave her a nod. The first competitor came on the field.

"Our first competitor is Susan Bones of Hufflepuff. She is a Prefect and has been in D.A. since it began. Good luck, Susan!" Ron said as Susan emerged from the Gryffindor Changing Room area and stepped onto the field, looking nervous but waving bravely to the cheering crowd. "And. . .she's off!"

Ron couldn't comment on the actual tasks or he might give clues to other competitors, so he pointed his wand at his throat and said, "*Quietus*." He watched Susan intently. She was a good fighter and clever in her use of spells, but she wasn't as quick as many of the other D.A. members. Since this competition tested speed as well as skill, it would be interesting to see how she did.

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The competition was fascinating to watch. There were sufficiently few obstacles that the competitors moved relatively quickly through their challenges, but each person approached the tasks a bit differently. Their varied approaches and their choices of spells made the Tournament quite interesting to the spectators.

After half of the competitors had completed their tasks, Ron said, "*Sonus*" again and announced, "We're going to take a break for lunch now. Those competitors who have not gone yet will stay in the Changing Rooms so they won't accidentally hear anything about the tasks they have to face. They will have lunch there. For everyone else, lunch is being served in the Great Hall. Family members are welcome to join their children in the Great Hall for lunch. Those whose children are still waiting to compete are also invited to the Great Hall. We will reconvene out here at 1:30 PM. Thank you for your attention." He pointed his wand at his throat again and said, "*Quietus*."

"Ron, you're a natural," Harry commented as he finished tallying up his scores for the morning's competitors. "Well done, mate! You weren't far wrong when you said you could be a TV announcer!" He grinned and playfully poked his friend in the shoulder when Ron, his ears quite pink from the compliment, sat down across the table from him. The judges and officials were remaining in the judging stand for their lunch so no one could speak to and possibly influence them. Moody had insisted on this, and the others had agreed. Soon lunch appeared on the table in front of the judges. Ron, Hermione and Ginny joined the judges for lunch.

"How do you think it's going so far?" Hermione asked excitedly. "I mean, we've got them moving through at a good rate, and nobody's been completely stumped – everyone's managed to get at least a couple of the tasks done."

"Hermione," Ron warned, "remember how Harry and I don't want to talk about tests after we've finished?"

"You're not taking tests here, you're actually giving them!" she protested.

"It's the same thing. Well, sort of, anyway. We can't discuss the Tournament with the judges," he reminded her.

"Oh," she said, suddenly realizing that, in trying to talk with Harry as well as Ron and Ginny, she'd overstepped her bounds. "Sorry," she said, blushing as she looked up at Harry.

"Not a problem," Harry replied with a grin. "I wasn't going to answer you anyway – pretty much the same way Ron and I don't talk about tests with you after we're finished." He and Ron exchanged a glance and laughed. Even when they did well on exams, it was just a matter of course for them to frustrate her constant "need to know" by not discussing them. "I will say you and Ginny are doing a wonderful job of getting them on and off the field in good time. That's great, with so many to judge today."

"How's the judging going?" Ron asked.

"Ron! You can't ask that!" Hermione said repressively.

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Harry snorted with laughter. They'd had so many similar conversations over the seven years they'd all been together. He was going to miss this when the three of them weren't at the same school. "It's going fine, Ron," Harry said, knowing that Ron had been asking a completely different question to Hermione. "The system we worked out seems to be a good one. It makes sense to me, anyway."

"Working well here, too," Moody growled. "Now stop talking shop and eat! They'll all be back out here soon."

Ron leaned across the table toward Harry, rolled his eyes and whispered, "Same old charming Mad-Eye."

"I heard that, laddie," Mad-Eye snapped, his magical eye rolling wildly.

"Just kidding," Ron said placatingly, and began shoving food into his mouth with his usual abandon.

The Weasley family approached the judges' table. "Since we don't have children competing, can we come and chat for a bit?" Molly asked with a smile.

"Of course! Do join us! I'll draw you up some chairs," Dumbledore said genially as he conjured some comfortable chairs for Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie and the twins, as well as the Grangers, who'd followed the Weasleys to the judges' stand. "Hang on, let me give you some plates and so on." Soon they were all settled in and enjoying a fine Hogwarts lunch.

"Ron, you're doing a wonderful job!" his mother said proudly. "Your voice carries so beautifully. And you look so handsome!" She simply couldn't help herself. She reached over and straightened his robes a bit, tucking in a rumpled bit of cloth, smoothing an errant wrinkle, tidying his hair.

"Mum!" Ron protested, his ears pink again. "Give over!"

"Oh, all right," she said, backing off. "And Harry, dear, you're doing an excellent job as a judge!"

"How can you tell?" Harry teased. "We haven't shown any scores yet!"

"I know you. You'll be a fair and unbiased judge, and will make the right choices," she said serenely, reaching over to tidy his hair.

Harry tolerated her attentions much better than Ron did, simply smiling sweetly at her as her hands moved from attempting to smooth his hair to straightening his collar.

"There," she said with a smile, her "mothering" instincts satisfied for the moment. "Much better."

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely. Ginny caught his eye and made a face at him, making him laugh. Molly had moved to the girls by this time, fiddling with Ginny's hair and complimenting both girls on their performance on the field.

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"I'm just starting them, Mum," Ginny protested, but she smiled, enjoying her mother's attention.

"This Tournament is quite impressive," Arthur was telling Dumbledore. "You've done a wonderful job! And everyone seems to be having a good time."

"I think it's important to find ways to have fun in such troubled times," Dumbledore said with a smile, "but the Tournament was Ginny's idea originally, and Harry developed it, then he, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Remus did most of the work. Hogwarts won't be the same when those four leave."

"It's hard to believe it's their last year," Arthur said, looking at the boys. "And Ginny has only one more term left. Where did the time go?" He looked at his daughter, who was busy teasing Harry about something, and suddenly saw the woman she would become. He smiled fondly as he watched her mobile features. Whatever she was telling Harry had him in stitches, which made Ginny's face glow with satisfaction.

Dumbledore followed Arthur's gaze. "They're very good for each other," he commented quietly. "She's quite a wonderful young lady, Arthur. You and Molly have done well with your children."

"Thank you, Albus! That means a lot, coming from you. You probably know them better than anyone else," Arthur replied. Dumbledore nodded in acknowledgement. "Percy's the exception. I don't know what to think about him. He still won't speak to us, and he's not doing well in the Ministry these days. Madam Bones is losing patience with his narrow-mindedness."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Arthur," Dumbledore said sympathetically. "Still, we learn from all our experiences, both the good and the bad. He will learn something from this experience, something that might bring him back to his family."

Arthur looked at him seriously. "I certainly hope so," he said softly. "He's breaking his mother's heart."

"And yours, as well," Dumbledore said with a knowing look. Arthur sighed and nodded.

The Grangers were sitting quietly, trying hard to not stare at Mad-Eye Moody. Hermione went and sat on the arm of her dad's chair.

"Having fun?" she asked her parents.

"It's amazing!" her dad said sincerely. "I mean, we've seen some of what you can do, but the things these students are doing. . . amazing!"

Hermione smiled. Her parents had got past their feeling of the previous summer, when they became frightened by the war news and wanted Hermione to act like a Muggle. They were once again in awe of having a witch in the family, but they rarely had a chance to spend much time with other wizards. Magic still astounded them.

"How's Harry doing?" her mum asked her. "You said he was hurt?"

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"Oh, he's fine, now, Mum," Hermione said dismissively, not even sure which instance of Harry being hurt they were referring to. "You can see that." She smiled at her friend who was busy making Ginny and her family giggle over something. Hermione still tried to keep the awful truths of the wizarding world from her parents as much as possible. Now that her parents were aware of the horrors she and her friends faced at times, though, she was a bit more open with them with her news. They seemed to handle it well for the most part. They always asked about Harry, knowing now that he bore the brunt of whatever evil the wizarding world faced.

"I can't see any scars on his face," her mum said quietly. "Well, except for that one on his forehead," she amended.

"He had some extensive treatment to cure them," Hermione told her mum, "and the one on his forehead is a curse scar. Apparently, it can't be healed or removed."

"Oh, that's too bad. But still, I'm so happy for him! He looks wonderful, especially after being injured so badly." She turned her eyes to her daughter and smiled. "And you – you look beautiful, and so happy, dear! Have you decided which college you're going to attend?"

"I've been accepted at all the ones I applied to," Hermione told her, "but I don't know yet which one I want to attend. I'm still sorting things out, you know," she added with a shrug.

"I understand. Whatever you decide is fine with us. We're so proud of you!" her mum said, pushing a lock of Hermione's bushy hair behind her shoulder. "And you're still thinking of living with us while you go to college?"

"Yes," Hermione replied with a smile.

"That will be lovely," her mother said, sighing contentedly. "You're away so much, and you'll soon be grown and will want to move out on your own. I'm glad we're going to have more time together before then."

"Me, too," Hermione said, smiling happily. "I'm so glad you could come today."

"We are, too. It's wonderful to see firsthand the things you've been working on for so long," her mum replied.

Ron looked at his watch and got to his feet. "Almost time to start again," he said, nodding to Ginny and Hermione, who left to man their posts on the field again.

"I suppose we need to return to our seats," Molly said, rising from her chair. "Thanks for letting us talk to the children, Albus."

"Thank you all for attending our Tournament," Dumbledore said with a warm smile as he Vanished the chairs he'd conjured.

Soon, the spectators were all back in place and the competitors moving through the obstacles again.

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"Our next competitor," Ron said, his voice booming across the pitch, "is Neville Longbottom. Neville is a Seventh Year Gryffindor and an original member of D.A., as well as a member of the Healer Squad. Good luck, Neville!"

Ginny patted Neville on the back and wished him luck as she sent him on to the field. Neville took a deep, calming breath as he stepped onto the pitch and looked up at the stands, soon finding his grandparents by looking for his grandmother's hat with the stuffed vulture on top. He smiled and waved to them before walking determinedly toward the purple line that would start the timer on his robes. He felt a small buzz as the timer began, then ran as fast as he could to the first obstacle, trying to save time. Each obstacle was blocked from the competitors' views by an Occulto Charm, which concealed whatever was behind it. The spectators could see each obstacle clearly, but the competitors could only see the obstacle in front of them once they'd passed the charm's barrier. None of the other obstacles could be seen until their barriers had been passed.

Neville passed through the barrier, then gasped as he found himself dangling upside down, his feet toward the sky, his robes hanging down over his face. He panted in fear for a moment, then thought about his situation. The laws of gravity couldn't be revoked, even by magic. Could they? This had to be an illusion! He crossed his fingers, closed his eyes and jumped, shocked to find himself landing on his feet on the lovely green grass of the pitch. Laughing, he raced on to the second task, cheered on by Professor Flitwick, who was supervising the first task.

The second task loomed before him. Ten Death Eaters were coming for him, their wands all pointed at his heart. Neville reminded himself that Harry had promised nothing in here would actually hurt them, then began aiming Stunning Spells at the Death Eaters, dropping and rolling after firing off each spell in case spells were fired back at him. As each of his spells hit, the Death Eater disappeared. *They're conjured!* he thought happily, then fired off more Stunners, eliminating all ten Death Eaters in rapid succession.

Neville didn't allow himself time to think about what he'd just done. He just raced on to the next obstacle. He found himself facing a solid hedge ten feet high. What to do? He ran to the right trying to get around it, but found the hedge kept getting longer the farther he ran. He stopped and looked up at the hedge. He could levitate himself over it. *What would Harry do?* Neville thought for a moment. *He'd go straight through it!* Without hesitation, Neville did a Reductor Curse to blast a hole in the hedge, then ran through it, hesitating on the far side and looking for other obstacles or opponents. Seeing nothing, he ran on, passing through another Occulto barrier and found himself face to face with shadowy figures that became images of Harry, Ron, Dumbledore, Ginny, Hermione, Death Eaters and Voldemort. The figures were moving, weaving around each other sinuously. Neville aimed for the Death Eaters and Voldemort, doing his best to avoid shooting his friends or headmaster. Finally, the only figures left moving were those of his friends and Dumbledore. He'd only winged Ron and Dumbledore. Two bad shots out of all the spells he'd fired wasn't bad. He raced on and found himself outside the task area and crossing the finish line, where Hermione waited to get his times.

"Neville, you were wonderful!" Hermione said, hugging him when he crossed the finish line.

"You could see?" he panted. He glanced up at the stands and suddenly realized that the great roar of sound reverberating in his ears was people cheering for *him*! His ears turned pink but

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he smiled with pleasure, waving at his grandparents and laughing to see them standing up and clapping their hands above their heads for him. His grandfather sent off bright purple sparks from his wand in celebration of Neville's run. He'd never seen his grandmother look so pleased with him. Neville beamed in response.

"Yes!" Hermione said as she studied his timer. "I'm so proud of you. There, I've got your times. Go on and get a drink and some rest. You've earned it!" she said, pointing him toward the Hufflepuff Changing room, where refreshments were waiting for those who had completed their tasks.

The rest of the competitors had finished the course by late afternoon. Now all the competitors stood on the pitch waiting to hear who had earned a place in the top ten.

The judges were frantically tabulating their results, and then Hermione and her numerology professor factored in the times for each task. Finally, they were finished, and the results handed to Ron to announce.

"What a day, eh?" Ron said with a grin. He was really getting into this announcing thing. "Let's give all our competitors a cheer! Well done, all of you!" he said, his *Sonorus*-enhanced voice nearly lost in the resulting cheer. "I have the results of the judges' marks here. The times have been factored in as well. I will be reading off the names of the Top Ten competitors in alphabetical order, which doesn't imply anything about their scores. When you hear your name, step forward, please!" He looked at the list and began reading. "Euan Abercombie, Gryffindor. Susan Bones, Hufflepuff. Mandy Brocklehurst, Ravenclaw. Colin Creevey, Gryffindor. Dennis Creevey, Gryffindor. Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor. Ernie McMillan, Hufflepuff. Alex McCullough, Ravenclaw. Padma Patil, Ravenclaw. Dean Thomas, Gryffindor." He waited for the ten named students to walk forward and the cheering to die down a bit. "I give you the Top Ten Competitors in the D.A. Tournament! Congratulations, all of you!"

He let the cheering roll on for a few minutes, then said, "Spectators, we hope you will return tomorrow morning at ten A.M. for the second portion of the competition, when these ten competitors will face new tasks. The top three scorers from that competition will go on to the Championship round after lunch! Thank you again for coming, and when you're in Hogsmeade, please visit our sponsors shops to thank them for their support. See you in the morning!"

The stands rocked with cheers again and the ten winners punched fists in the air, hugged each other or burst into tears, depending on their temperament. Neville stood in stunned silence until Dean grabbed him in a hug and whirled him around.

"We did it, we did it, we did it!" Dean chortled gleefully. "Well done, mate!"

"And you, as well!" Neville said, the truth finally sinking in. "We did, didn't we?"

"We did, we did, we did!" Dean cried, doing a triumphant dance and whooping with joy.

Harry watched the celebration on the pitch with interest. The Top Ten competitors were sharing hugs and good wishes across House lines. "Professor?" he said, smiling as he turned to Dumbledore. "Look."

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"That's what you hoped for, isn't it?" Dumbledore said quietly as he joined Harry at the edge of the judges' stand.

"Yes. I just want everyone to be friends with each other. House competition is a good thing at times, but it divides us, as well," Harry said quietly. "Look at them." He smiled proudly as Neville and Dean hugged Ernie and Susan, Colin and Dennis linked arms with Mandy and Padma in a wild dance of joy, Alex and Euan did a triumphant war dance, and everyone switched partners. Soon little Euan was lifted up on Dennis's and Colin's shoulders, laughing as the older boys pranced around with him held securely on their broad shoulders. "That's the way it should be," Harry mused as the rest of the D.A. came forward, giving the winners heartfelt congratulations. "I just wish there had been a way to involve the Slytherins too. Maybe then all the Houses would get along better."

"It was their choice not to join the D.A., Harry," Dumbledore replied. After a moment, he patted the young man on the back and added, "I can't tell you how proud I am of you."

"Me? What for?" Harry said, genuinely surprised.

"You're the one who broke the House boundaries with the D.A. in the first place," Dumbledore replied.

"No, it was Hermione," Harry began.

"She pushed you in the right direction, Harry, but the team spirit and camaraderie they have, the sense of fair play and the support they give each other? That came from you, dear boy. Well done."

"Erm . . . OK," Harry said, confused. When he thought about what Dumbledore was saying, he realized what a tremendous compliment he'd been paid. Pleased warmth suffused his body. "Thanks, Professor."

"That went well!" Ron said to Hermione as she bounded up onto the platform.

"Yes, it was great! But you forgot to announce who had the fastest time and the sportsmanship award! There are prizes to award for those today!" she reminded him, gasping for breath. She'd run all the way across the pitch to remind him of this, having to weave among the celebrants as she ran.

"Oh rats!" Ron did the Sonorus Charm again and announced, "My apologies! I forgot to announce who had the fastest time today. That nice quill set from Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop has been won by. . ." he shuffled through the parchments, stopping when Hermione put a finger on the name he needed. "Neville Longbottom!"

Neville blushed madly as friends pounded him on the back, congratulating him afresh.

"And the Sportsmanship Award, which is a tea for two at Madam Puddifoot's, goes to. . . Colin Creevey!" Ron said. Colin had cost himself time by helping up another competitor who stumbled on his way to the finish line. Colin had finished his last tasks so much more quickly than the boy who'd gone before him that he'd overtaken him. They crossed the finish line together, Colin helping the boy, who had sprained his ankle in his hurry.

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Ron murmured *Quietus* and turned to Hermione. "Is that everything?"

"Yes, that's it," she said.

"Whew, thanks! I would have hated to leave those off! Look at Neville," he said, grinning as the shy boy was surrounded by well-wishers. "He's still in shock!"

"He did an amazing job," Hermione said. "I didn't know he had it in him."

"Nor did I," Ron said. "Nor did he, from the look of him," he added with a grin. Neville and the other Top Ten winners were all being carried into the Great Hall on the shoulders of their fellow D.A. members. Neville's face was still a study in shock, but he was beginning to laugh, enjoying the heady feeling of being a winner for once.

"I hope they don't get cocky and slack off tomorrow," Hermione said, watching the passing parade of celebrants.

"Don't worry about them, Hermione," Harry said with a grin. "Let them have their fun. They all did really well today. I'm proud of them."

"You know, Judge Potter, I'm tired and hungry, and dinner's going to be great fun with everyone in such a good mood!" Ginny said, tugging on his hand. "Let's go!" They joined the mass of people heading for the Great Hall, where a wonderful dinner and an evening of fun awaited them.

"Welcome to the second day of the D.A. Tournament!" Ron's amplified voice rang across the Quidditch pitch. "We'd like to welcome the families of those who are participating. Thank you for coming! And thanks again to our sponsors: The Hog's Head, The Three Broomsticks, Scrivenshaft's, Joyero Jewellery, Dervish and Banges, Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, Zonko's Joke Shop, Gladrags, Madam Puddifoot's and Honeydukes Sweet Shop! Honeydukes has again provided sweets to keep our competitors energy levels up. Scrivenshaft's and Madam Puddifoot's have also provided extra prizes for today's competition. And now, without further ado, our first Top Ten finalist is entering the field!" He looked down at the small figure of Euan Abercombe, suddenly reminded of how small Harry had looked compared to the other Tri-Wizard Champions. "And here's Euan Abercombe of Gryffindor, who plays Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Good luck, Euan!" The boy looked up nervously and waved at Ron, then stepped toward the starting line.

The first obstacle appeared beyond the Occulto Charm barrier. Suddenly, Euan was facing two Dementors. He shivered, taking a step back. His Patronus wasn't very strong. He fought for his happy thought as the Dementors bore down on him, then cast his Patronus Charm. A silvery mist came out of his wand with no shape or power. He tried to cast it twice more, then turned and ran from the Dementors, which were nearly upon him.

Professor McGonagall stepped in, said "*Riddikulus*," then said, "Get moving, Abercrombie," smiling as she did so. "Good luck!"

"Thanks, Professor," Euan said, racing through the next barrier. He skidded to a stop right away. It was dark as night. He stood still, letting his eyes adjust. "Hinkypunks!" Euan

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muttered when he saw the little lights bobbing around over the marsh that spread before him. If he followed those lights, he'd go off the right path. "*Lumos*," he said, lighting his wand and stepping carefully from one tussock of grass barely showing through the murky water to the next. He saw a kelpie swimming nearby. The horse-like beast was trying to lure him into the water. He jumped to a small mound of grass as far from the kelpie as he could manage. When he reached the far edge of the marsh, a wall of flame shot up in front of him. He stepped back, nearly falling in the water, but catching himself just in time. Euan's brain seemed to be locked in place. Fire? What was he supposed to do to fight fire? Shaking his head for his stupidity, Euan shot a geyser of water from his wand at the fire and raced through the hole in the wall of flame that the water created. He stood panting on the other side, absolutely delighted to see another barrier in front of him, which meant he'd be leaving the horrific marsh behind. On the far side of the barrier was a hippogriff, which pawed the ground menacingly when it saw Euan approaching. Euan froze for a moment, then bowed low, staying down but glancing up through his fringe to see how the hippogriff was responding. The hippogriff screamed loudly, flapping its wings in a fury, but Euan held his bow, not moving. Finally, the hippogriff bowed and Euan was able to stand up again. He moved to the hippogriff very slowly, reaching out to pet it. The animal seemed to enjoy the attention, and followed Euan as he made his way past it to the next barrier. He heard Hagrid chuckle and speak kindly to the hippogriff as he left that task area.

Euan was covered in sweat. The marsh had been horrible, the hippogriff a completely different form of terror, but one that he at least had an idea how to handle. What could possibly be next?

What was next was Hermione! Euan stumbled across the finish line, thoroughly relieved to have survived the tasks.

"Well done, Euan!" Hermione said as she noted his times.

"I didn't manage the Patronus," he said with a sigh.

"But you did very well in the marsh and with the hippogriff," she assured him. "Go on to the Hufflepuff Changing Rooms. Get a drink and some rest. You've earned it!"

"Thanks!" the boy said as he walked away. He waved at the cheering crowds, glad they were supportive in spite of his not managing to complete the first task.

"Our Top Ten contestants have all completed their assigned tasks, and the judges have tallied their scores," Ron announced near noon. "Their times have been factored in and I'm pleased to announce the top three finishers, who will compete for the title of 'Champion' after lunch." He glanced at the ten hopeful students clustered in the centre of the pitch and smiled. "I have to say, I'm impressed with how well they did. And now, in alphabetical order, the top three finishers!" He paused for effect. He was beginning to enjoy announcing. "Mandy Brocklehurst, Ravenclaw!" he said, allowing the cheers to roll on for a bit. "Colin Creevey, Gryffindor!" Renewed cheers rolled across the pitch. "And Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor!" Ron said, "*Quietus*," and turned a delighted grin at Harry. "Neville!" he mouthed, and Harry nodded, a huge grin splitting his face.

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Out on the field, Neville was so shocked he'd sat down, hard. Colin was busy punching the air and dancing with Mandy, who was in tears. The other Top Ten contestants were pounding the winners on their backs, congratulating them and being truly happy for their success.

"Ron? The other awards?" Harry reminded him.

"I didn't forget this time," Ron said with a cheeky grin. He pointed his wand at his throat and said, "*Sonorus*," once more. "And the award for Good Sportsmanship goes to Ernie McMillan of Hufflepuff! Ernie has won a tea for two at Madam Puddifoot's. Congratulations, Ernie! The award for fastest time goes to Neville Longbottom again! He's going to be starting a collection of those beautiful desk sets from Scrivenshaft's! Congratulations, Neville!"

Ginny ran across the field to where Neville sat on the ground and placed the box containing the desk set in his lap. "Congratulations, Neville! You really raced through there!"

Neville was still dumbstruck. He finally turned his eyes up to Ginny's. A slow smile spread on his face in response to hers. "I did it, didn't I? I made it through!"

"And in excellent time!" Ginny confirmed, holding her hand out to help him to his feet.

Neville looked up at the stands at last. His grandparents were beside themselves, jumping up and down as they cheered. His Great-Uncle Algie had come today, as well. Algie just sat there looking as stunned as Neville felt. Neville grinned up at his family, and finally raised his hand to wave at them, the wave turning into a fist triumphantly punched in the air over and over as realization swept over him. He'd made it to the top three! How was that possible? But he'd made it! He looked at the judges' stand and gazed at Harry gratefully, then raised his arm and waved to him.

Harry grinned and waved back, as proud of Neville and Colin as he could be. Colin had controlled his impulsive nature and dealt with every obstacle with skill, only being distracted by the kelpie grabbing his foot when he took a wrong step in the marsh. That fall had cost him some time and some points, but he'd managed everything else quite well. Neville. What could anyone say about the boy who had once been timid, round-faced, forgetful Neville? He was a completely different person than he had been just a few years before. Still shy, but now a skilled and fairly confident wizard, whose memory problems were nearly gone. The change in wands had performed a miraculous change in the boy.

Harry was glad to see someone other than a Gryffindor in the third spot. He didn't know Mandy that well, since she was a Ravenclaw and they hadn't shared worktables in any classes, but if the Tournament had ended in a Gryffindor sweep, it simply would not have felt right. Harry almost wished one of the others was a Hufflepuff simply for balance, but both Neville and Colin had earned their places on their own merit.

Ron let the cheers and applause roll on for a while, only interrupting when it was beginning to die down. "Lunch will be served in the Great Hall. Please join our competitors there and enjoy a delicious Hogwarts meal. Since it will take some time to remove these tasks and set up the final ones, we will reconvene at 3:30 in the afternoon for the final competition in the D.A. Tournament. Congratulations, Top Three Winners! And thank you to all the competitors! See you this afternoon!"

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Mandy was the first to go that afternoon. She stood by Ginny, nervous but excited, eager to face the first challenge. When Ginny told her to go, she ran to the first barrier, bursting through it to find herself facing a giant spider. "Oooo, I hate spiders!" she said, cringing back toward the barrier through which she'd just run. She took several steps away as the monster hurried toward her. Finally shaking herself out of her fear, she shot a Stinging Hex at the beast, which only annoyed it. The spider began chasing her around the task enclosure, with Mandy screaming in panic.

Inside the Gryffindor Changing Rooms, Neville and Colin paced nervously. When they heard Mandy's screams, both boys blanched, staring at each other in horror. Nothing had made anyone scream like that, not even the conjured Death Eaters or the Boggart Dementors.

"What do you think that could be?" Neville said, his voice quaking.

"No idea. They said we could handle everything," Colin said, trying to reassure himself as much as Neville. "They said we wouldn't get hurt."

Neville nodded, gulping hard to swallow the bile threatening to overwhelm him. "They did promise," he said. "Harry wouldn't let us get hurt."

"No, he wouldn't. He went through enough dangers in the Tri-Wizard Tournament to want to protect us from such things."

"But. . ." Neville began as a thought popped into his mind. "But what if the test is to see how we deal with a *real* danger? I mean, we're supposed to be training to face real dangers. What if they included one?"

"They wouldn't," Colin said, much more positively than he felt. "No. They wouldn't do that."

"They might," Neville said darkly. Both boys sat lost in bleak thoughts as they listened to Mandy's continued screams. Suddenly, her screams were cut short.

"What happened?" Colin said, startled. "I'm going to ask Ginny."

"You can't, Colin," Neville reminded him. "You'll be disqualified if you go out there before it's time."

"Oh yeah," Colin said nervously. "Thanks." He was next. He wondered what had happened to stop Mandy's screams so suddenly. Was she all right? Would he be? Would they cancel the rest of the tasks, leaving the Tournament unfinished, because Mandy was hurt. . .or dead? He shook himself, doing his best to rid himself of such thoughts.

"Colin? Your turn," Ginny called from the doorway.

"Is Mandy all right?" he asked as he approached the starting line.

"I'm not allowed to tell you," Ginny said regretfully. "Ready?" Colin took a deep breath and blew it out, then nodded. "Go! Good luck, Colin!" she called after his racing back.

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Colin stopped short when he saw the spider. "*That's why she was screaming,*" he thought, then shot a Conjunctivitis Curse at the beast's eyes. He missed, then dropped and rolled out of the way as the monster leaped onto the spot where he'd just been. The chase was on. The spider raced after Colin, who sprinted around the task area trying to think of the best spell to use. He knew the rules only allowed him two more chances to beat this spider. Finally winded, he stood glaring at the monster towering above him. Then he remembered what he'd heard about the Acromantula Harry had fought in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. "*Stupefy!*" he cried as he threw himself to the ground right under the spider, aiming at its belly. He rolled away as fast as he could and pelted for the next barrier, hearing cheers all around him and no clicking noises behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Professor McGonagall standing near the spider, ready to release it from the Stunning Spell. McGonagall waved and smiled at Colin when she saw the boy looking towards her.

Colin waved and ran through the barrier. A horrible smell accosted his nostrils, a combination of ancient smelly socks and a toilet that hadn't been cleaned in many years. He saw two horny grey columns in front of him and tilted his head, wondering what he was supposed to do with them. Then he noticed the columns moved. . .and he looked up. A mountain troll stood in front of him, its club poised to strike him. Colin shrieked and raced between the troll's legs, the only opening he could find. *What the bloody hell are they thinking, giving us a troll to fight?* he thought frantically. He had to fight the monster, he had to beat it to win the Tournament. He turned and faced it, trying a couple of spells on it, but they just bounced off its leathery skin, annoying it rather than hurting it. The troll roared its displeasure and swung its club at Colin, who dropped to the ground and rolled away, leaping to his feet and racing away as he willed his brain to work. What was it you were supposed to do to stop a troll? He couldn't think, his brain was frozen. He stood trembling as the troll approached him again. He aimed a Conjunctivitis Curse at its eyes, barely hitting the edge of one eye. The troll roared in pain, grasping its eye with one hand while swinging its club madly with the other. Colin raced for the barrier, deciding that hitting half of one eye was good enough to get him some points. He didn't really want to stick around to try for the other eye, anyway.

Once through the barrier, he stood facing a hag, who came at him with her sharp teeth showing, her mouth open and slavering as she raced toward him. "*Impedimenta!*" he cried, hitting her right in the chest. She toppled over and he ran toward the finish line, grateful to have survived the experience intact.

"Good job, Colin!" Hermione said as she took down his times.

"I didn't really get the troll, and the spider. . .well. . . ." Colin said uncertainly, still panting from his exertions.

"You did fine," Hermione assured him. "Now go to the Hufflepuff Changing Rooms and relax for a while."

"OK," Colin said, waving at the cheering crowds as he walked tiredly off the field.

Neville sat alone in the Gryffindor Changing Rooms, his nerves so taut that he nearly fell over when Ginny called him to the starting line. He stood trembling next to Ginny, wondering what he was doing, how did he get there? Would he survive? He'd heard roars and screams during Colin's run. Was Colin all right?

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"Neville," Ginny said, putting a gentle hand on his arm, "you can do this. Don't worry."

"Yeah," he squeaked in an abnormally high voice. "I know."

"OK, then, good luck!" she said with a smile.

Neville glanced at her nervously, then took a deep breath and blew it out. He stared at the purple Starting Line glittering on the ground in front of him, and the opaque barrier beyond. He could do this. *He could do this.* "I can DO THIS!" he snarled, and sprinted toward the barrier.

"GO, NEVILLE, GO!" Ginny cried as he raced away. He'd been so nervous, she feared he'd be unable to move, but there he was, charging through the barrier like a champion. She crossed her fingers, hoping he'd be all right. She knew Colin had survived despite some setbacks during his run. Mandy had gotten hysterical and Professor McGonagall had needed to subdue the spider so Mandy could get past it. That experience had cost her a lot of points, as well as time penalties. Colin had done much better. Could Neville possibly beat Colin, who was so quick at everything he did?

Neville burst through the first barrier and found himself directly under the giant spider. He gulped and froze in place, but the spider had already noticed him. Taking a deep breath, he pointed his wand straight up at the monster's belly, cried, "*Impedimenta!*" his voice cracking with nerves, then ran as hard as he could to the opposite side of the task area as the spider staggered and began to fall.

Neville didn't stay to see what happened, but charged through the second barrier. *A troll?* What were they thinking? A sudden memory of a late-night storytelling session with Harry and Ron popped into his mind. As the troll raised its club, Neville cried, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The club levitated neatly above the troll, which looked up at it stupidly. Neville released the spell and the club caught the troll between the eyes just as Neville pelted toward the next barrier.

A hag waited for him just inside the enclosure, snarling with her horrible mouth wide open and drooling. "I eats kids like you!" she cried, launching herself at him. Neville fell under her weight, then grabbed her shoulders and kept rolling, kicking her off of him over his head. He leaped to his feet and faced her, wand at the ready, his brain ticking off spells on his mental list, looking for the best one to use. When she charged again, he shouted, "*Incarcerous!*" and the hag fell to the ground tightly wrapped in magical bonds. Neville shouted with laughter and raced to the finish line, where Hermione was jumping up and down in excitement.

"Excellent time, Neville! Wonderful job! I knew you could do it!" she said excitedly.

The stands were rocking with the cheers, applause and the many stamping feet of the delighted crowd. Neville had managed each task in a short time, and done each spell with style and confidence. He stood there, turning in place, amazed at the thick walls of sound that surrounded him. He hadn't heard anything but his own rasping breath and the sounds of his opponents while he was fighting his way through the tasks. Neville's face glowed. He didn't know if he'd won, but he didn't care. He knew he'd done his very best, and that he'd done as well as he ever could have hoped.

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"Go on in the Hufflepuff Changing Rooms while we total up the scores, Neville," Hermione said, patting him on the back. "You were fantastic! I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Hermione," he said sincerely. "I'm proud of myself. I didn't believe I could do all those things, but they just came easily when I thought about what Harry would have done in my place."

"However you did it, you were wonderful!" she said, standing on tiptoe and kissing his cheek. "Go on, now, I have to take these time sheets to the judges."

A short time later, the various task enclosures and the horrors within them had been removed. Colin, Neville and Mandy stood in the centre of the field, waiting along with the crowd for the judges' decision.

Finally, Ron stood up and amplified his voice again. "I can't tell you how proud I am of every participant in this Tournament," he began. "And these three – you were all amazing. Good job!" The crowd cheered in agreement with him. "All right. The judges have just handed me the list of winners. I'm going to wait until Professor Dumbledore, Professor Lupin and Harry can get to the centre of the field to do the presentations before I read them off. While they're making their way across the field, I'd like to remind you that the trophy and plaque for the Champion were paid for by the Hog's Head. Dark detectors were donated for all three winners by Dervish and Banges. Butterbeer for a party in the House Common Room of the Champion was donated by The Three Broomsticks. Sweets for all three winners were donated by Honeydukes. Scrivenshaft's has donated another beautiful desk set to be given to the person with the best time. Madam Puddifoot's has donated another tea for two for the person displaying the best sportsmanship. Ah, everything's in place now. In ascending order, then, I give you. . . In Third Place, Mandy Brocklehurst of Ravenclaw!" Cheers rang out, for the girl had managed her other two tasks relatively well despite a rough beginning. Being able to continue after being frightened so badly was quite impressive to most spectators. "Our

Second Place winner is Colin Creevey!" Ron's voice broke with excitement as he cried, "and our Champion is NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM!"

The crowd stood up and yelled, screamed, whistled, shot sparks out of their wands – and Luna Lovegood put on her lion hat and had it roaring quite realistically. Neville stood there, white with shock, unable to move, think or speak.

Dumbledore, Remus and Harry went from Mandy to Colin to Neville, congratulating each and handing out the appropriate prizes. When Harry got to Neville, he pulled him into a hug and murmured, "I am so proud of you!" in his roommate's ear.

Neville hugged Harry hard, then lifted him off his feet and spun him around, whooping in celebration as realization finally sank in. He'd won! He was the D.A. Champion! "I couldn't have done any of this without you, Harry. Thanks," he said sincerely as he set his laughing friend back on his feet.

"You did it yourself, mate. I wasn't out there," Harry said, grinning hugely.

"But you were. When I got stuck, I thought, 'what would Harry do?' and then I was able to go on."

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"Whatever you did, it was brilliant," Harry said, not wanting to take any glory away from his friend at all. "You have a choice to make, mate."

"A choice?"

"Yeah, come over here," Harry said, leading him to a table that had been brought in during the celebration after the winners were named. "Dervish and Banges have donated three Dark Detectors. You get first choice, Colin gets second, and Mandy gets what's left. Which do you want?"

Neville looked over the three items on the table. "Which one do you think is best, Harry?" he asked.

"You should choose the one you like best," Harry urged him, then relented when Neville looked at him imploringly. "OK. I'd probably take the Foe-Glass."

"Then that's what I want," Neville said, picking up the mirror that would show approaching enemies and holding it above his head for the crowd to see. "Thank you, Dervish and Banges!" he cried as the crowd cheered.

"Colin, come and make your choice," Harry said as Dumbledore took Neville aside to prepare for the award ceremony.

"I think the Sneak-o-Scope is cool," Colin said, lifting the small item from the table.

"Just don't trust it completely," Harry warned. "It can be fooled."

"OK," Colin said with a happy grin. "Thanks, Harry." He raised it above his head and thanked the donors, as well.

Mandy picked up the Secrecy Sensor and held it over her head. "Thank you!" she cried with a happy smile. She had been afraid she'd be disqualified for running in fear from the spider. Losing points and having time penalties wasn't as bad as being disqualified, and she'd done well with the other obstacles, so she was pleased with her finish.

Ron amplified his voice again. "The desk set for the fastest time goes to Neville Longbottom again! And the Sportsmanship Award goes to Mandy Brocklehurst, who kept going despite a rough beginning. Congratulations, Neville and Mandy!" He waited until the cheers died down, then spoke again. "Professor Dumbledore will now award the D.A. Trophy and Plaque," he announced. The crowd stilled, watching the ceremony evolving below.

Dumbledore stood next to Neville, facing the crowd. He amplified his voice and said, "The Tournament participants exemplify all the best aspects of the D.A. I cannot tell you how proud I am of each and every one of these students. They have worked hard and achieved a great deal. They've learned spells they might never even encounter in school. They have developed physically, emotionally, in self-confidence, skill and generosity of spirit. You have seen them cheering for each other wholeheartedly, no matter which House any of them are in. They have become a truly unified group, and that delights me beyond anything you can imagine. It is my fond hope that such generous feelings toward those in other Houses will only continue to grow, until everyone in the entire school is supportive of each other, no

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matter what House they're in. I think it only appropriate that the person who has brought about all these changes should be the one to award the trophy to the Champion. I give you the founder and trainer of the D.A.: Harry Potter!" Dumbledore led the cheers and applause.

Harry blushed madly, dropping his head in embarrassment. He'd thought Dumbledore was going to do the trophy presentation. He glanced at Neville, who was looking at him with devotion shining in his eyes. Neville had proved time and again that he would try anything Harry asked him to, risking his very life even as a Fifth Year when Harry thought he needed to rescue Sirius at the Ministry of Magic. Now, Harry grinned at his friend and lifted his wand, pointing it at his throat and saying, "*Sonorus*."

"Erm. . .I didn't know I was going to have to do this, so I don't have any speech prepared or anything," Harry began.

"GOOD!" Fred – or was it George? – hollered.

"YOU TELL 'EM, HARRY!" George – or was it Fred – insisted just as loudly as his twin.

Harry laughed. "OK, I'll tell them, and I'll keep it short. Will that do?"

The twins and many others cheered and hooted their approval.

"All right, you lot, let me get on with this, then!" Harry said with a grin. He lifted the big silver trophy which was handsomely engraved with "D.A. Tournament Champion" in curling letters. Various magical symbols decorated the edge of the cup. "Creating the D.A. was actually Hermione Granger's idea," he began. "I thought she just wanted me to teach her and Ron. When she said she'd found a 'few' people who were interested in learning from me as well, I was shocked! And then twenty-five people showed up for the first meeting! Well, all I can say is, it's been an amazing journey from that time to now. I'm glad Hermione had the idea. The inter-House cooperation that has been created due to participation in D.A. is wonderful, and a welcome change. The new friendships that have been formed, the skills learned, the support each person gives all of the others – I'm so proud of all of you." He turned to Neville and handed him the cup. "Neville, you were simply brilliant! Good job! Congratulations!" He pointed his wand at his throat and said, "*Quietus*," relieved that his speech making was over.

As the crowd and the other D.A. members cheered and whistled around them, Neville stared into Harry's eyes for a long moment, then stood there gazing at the cup in his hands, totally stunned.

"It's yours, mate!" Harry said quietly.

"It is, isn't it?" Neville said, his face finally lighting up with joy. "Thank you, Harry!" He raised the cup above his head and looked at the huge crowd standing and cheering all around him. His grandparents and Great-Uncle Algie were jumping up and down, clapping as hard as they could, sparks coming from the ends of their wands. Everywhere he looked, people were cheering – for him! Neville stood up straight and tall, the trophy held firmly in his strong right hand, smiling for all he was worth. For the rest of his life, Neville would remember the huge bubble of joy that filled him in this shining moment.

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The cheering and congratulations went on for quite a while. Finally, the crowd began to make its way to the Great Hall for dinner, after which they would gather on the grounds to watch the Weasley twins' fireworks display. Harry could not have been happier as he walked across the pitch toward its entrance with his arm around Ginny, with Ron, Hermione, Colin, Neville and many other friends all around him. Amid the laughter and fun, he suddenly shivered. He dismissed it, thinking he was just tired, when he shivered again. He stopped and scanned the darkening sky.

"What's up, Harry?" Ron said with a puzzled frown.

Harry was silent, staring hard into the sky. Suddenly he whipped out his wand and pulled his Shrinking Charmed Firebolt out of his pocket. "DEMENTORS!" he cried. "*D.A. on your brooms! GO-GO-GO-GO-GO!*" All around him, D.A. members pulled out their pocketed, miniaturized brooms before he even finished speaking. Soon the D.A. was mounted and circling protectively over the heads of the panicked students and parents now beginning to pour out of the stadium.

"Everyone STOP!" Dumbledore called in an amplified voice, holding up his hands. "Please stay inside the stadium! It will be easier to protect you if you are not spread out across the grounds. The D.A. and the staff will take care of the Dementors, never fear. Please, everyone take a seat and be patient." He looked up and called, "Harry! Come here, please!"

Harry had started to zoom toward the Dementors, planning to stop them before they got to the stadium. He cursed and turned around, pelting back to Dumbledore as fast as he could.

"What?" he snapped impatiently.

"Harry, do not go off by yourself," Dumbledore warned quietly. "Don't get ahead of the rest of the group. Don't be lured into following them. It could very well be a trap. You'd already left everyone but Ginny behind when I called you. She and Ron have the only brooms with a chance to keep up with yours. Be careful, lad."

"You're right," Harry said grimly, kicking himself mentally for taking off so impulsively. "And the D.A. could use real-life practice as well." Already strategies were clicking into place in his head.

"Ask those in D.A. who are unable to do the Patronus Charm to give their brooms to staff members, would you?" Dumbledore added. "I should have the staff carry their brooms in their pockets the way the D.A. members do."

Harry grinned for a moment, appreciating the compliment. "OK. Hang on." He flew over to Ron and talked with him for a moment, then flew off and joined Remus, who was already in the air. Ron called the D.A. to the ground in the centre of the pitch while Harry and Remus circled above, guarding the stadium from the swiftly approaching Dementors.

"Those with strong Patronuses – you know who you are – keep your brooms and get back up there with Harry and Professor Lupin. Do NOT leave the perimeter of the stadium! We are much stronger together than we are individually! Those who can't do Patronus Charms yet, stay on the ground and give your brooms to the staff members who ask for them. You'll be handing out chocolate. Those who can do Patronus Charms but still need to work on them – you fly in the circle next to a more experienced person. We want you to practice on these

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Dementors, but you need someone who can do a serious Patronus next to you in case yours doesn't work. There should be enough of us to make three ranks. Pick an altitude and stay there, following the perimeter of the stands. Don't change altitudes – you'll all have a better chance at a clear shot if you stay in formation. Get to work on your happy thoughts and get up there, because they're nearly on us now!"

With that, Ron jumped on his broom and zoomed upward, trusting his troops to do as they were told. Sure enough, his orders were quickly followed and there were soon moving circles within circles of fighters covering the stadium in serried rows, flying by pairs. Most of the pairs were D.A. members, but some were made up of a staff member and a student, or a student and a parent who could do a Patronus and had nabbed a broom somewhere. All the Weasley men were circling the pitch, leaving Molly to try to keep the Grangers calm. Harry, Remus, Ron and Dumbledore soared over them all, calling down distances as the Dementors approached, each man keeping an eye on one part of the group of fighters below him.

"They're two hundred yards out and closing fast, coming from the northwest," Harry called. "One hundred yards. Get ready!" He forced himself to hold back his Patronus Charm to give the D.A. a chance to practice. If the Dementors got too close, he and the other older D.A. members, staff and parents would take care of them.

Hundreds of Dementors approached the stadium, then split into smaller groups and began to circle the stadium, approaching from several sides.

"Heads up!" Harry called. "They're coming from the west, southwest and east now! Closing fast!" That was the last thing he called, because now they were near enough that everyone could see them. "GO!"

Many voices cried "*Expecto Patronum!*" at once and a wide variety of Patronus Charms raced to meet the oncoming Dementors. When a Patronus faltered, a stronger one quickly took its place. The less experienced D.A. members were getting excellent practice under real battle conditions, while the advanced students, as well as staff members and parents who could do the charm, did their best to allow the students time to try before sending their own Patronus. Those who were casting the Patronus Charms battled fiercely for several minutes, but they began to get discouraged. There were so very many Dementors and they didn't seem to be that rattled by the Patronus Charms coming their way.

Finally, Harry couldn't take it anymore. One side of the stadium was about to be overwhelmed. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" he cried, and a magnificent stag Patronus galloped from his wand to the mass of Dementors bearing down on the defenders below Harry. The stag tossed Dementors left and right, going back and charging them over and over. Dumbledore's phoenix Patronus soon joined it, flying in the Dementors' faces and pecking at them, beating them with its wings. Remus's wolf Patronus ran silently and attacked swiftly. Ron's bear raced across the sky and chased away another group. The large, strong Patronuses above them gave heart to the less experienced people below, and their Patronuses became stronger, following Hermione's otter, Neville's dolphin, Ginny's horse and many others in numerous fierce attacks. Finally, the Dementors were vanquished, and a cheer went up from the stadium below them. Harry waited until he was sure no more Dementors were coming, then zoomed down to see how everyone was as the fighters landed below him. He noticed Molly Weasley patting a sobbing Mrs. Granger on the back, and flew over to their seats.

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"What's wrong? Is she hurt?" he said anxiously.

"No, dear," Molly assured him. "You lot did a wonderful job of keeping them away. But she's quite frightened. She felt them, you see."

"Nasty things, Dementors," he said to Mrs. Granger, hoping he could comfort her a bit. "They're all gone now, though. You need some chocolate. That will fix you right up. Hang on, I'll go bring you some." He flew to the centre of the pitch where D.A. members were helping Mr. Honeyduke pass out chocolate. Hermione and Ginny had just landed nearby and were now organizing the distribution.

"Hermione? Come with me," he said, grabbing some chocolate as he took off. She swung her leg over her broom and followed him slowly. She still hated to fly.

"What is it?" she asked as she brought her broom next to his. He'd waited for her to catch up.

"Your mum. She's quite upset," he said, heading toward their seats.

"Mum!" Hermione said, pushing her school broom to its full speed. Harry stayed with her easily as she approached the stands. "Oh, no. I can't dismount there. How am I going to get down? There's no room for me to land."

"Hover next to me over the empty seats in front of your mum," Harry said. "I'll get you down."

"How?" she said nervously.

"Trust me," he said with a cheeky grin.

She smiled and shook her head, knowing she could trust him absolutely, but could she trust her own shaky flying skills?

They hovered over the empty chairs and Harry held his arm out to her. "Take my arm," he told her, "no, with both hands. I've got you," he said, grasping her forearm securely. He leaned over and held the front of her broom. "Now swing your leg off and I'll get the broom out from under you."

"What's going to hold me up?" she squeaked nervously as she tried to do what he said.

"I will," he assured her. "I've got you, Hermione. You'll be fine." He pulled the broom away from her and leaned over, lowering her very carefully until her feet touched the floor. She finally let go of his arm and stood there shaking. "Thanks, I think," she said with a nervous laugh.

"You're welcome," he said, hopping off of his broom in midair quite casually and leaning both brooms against the seats. "How is she, Mrs. Weasley? We brought chocolate."

"Mum? Dad? Are you all right?" Hermione said worriedly.

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"What happened? Why did it get so cold?" Mrs. Granger said timorously. Mr. Granger had his arms around his wife, trying to comfort her, but his face was as white with fear as his wife's.

Hermione explained about the Dementors while Harry unwrapped the chocolate bar and broke off a big piece for Mrs. Granger. "Eat this, it will help."

"No, thank you, dear, it's bad for your teeth," Mrs. Granger, the dentist, said.

"Right now it's more important to get it in you and get you warm and comfortable again," Harry insisted. "You can brush your teeth later."

"I'm dieting, Harry," Mrs. Granger insisted.

"Mum, this is wizard chocolate. It does more than rot your teeth or make you fat. It has medicinal properties in cases like this," Hermione told her, trying to say things that would make sense to her parents.

"Medicinal properties?" Mr. Granger said.

"Yes, it's the treatment of choice for Dementor encounters," Hermione insisted. "You need to eat some too, Dad. Everyone else here is eating it. Otherwise, some people might feel faint or ill. The chocolate cures that."

"It does?" Mr. Granger said, looking at the wrapper for a list of ingredients.

"It's *wizard* chocolate, Dad," Hermione said firmly. "You won't understand what the label says. Just eat it, a lot of it!" Finally, her parents relented and began to eat the chocolate. Both of their faces regained healthy colour in a short time, and they both looked more alert and refreshed.

"That's wonderful!" Mrs. Granger said. "I feel so much better! What's in that chocolate?"

"Most of the effect is from magic, Mum," Hermione explained patiently.

Meanwhile, Harry had been handing chocolate around to the other people seated nearby. "If you lot don't need me," he began, seeing Hermione's parents looking better.

"Thanks, Harry," Hermione said with a smile.

"Harry?" Mrs. Granger said, looking up at the tall young man. "Was that a deer you made? And what came out of your wand, Hermione? There was a bear in the way and I couldn't quite see yours."

"Those were our Patronus Charms," Hermione said. "Harry's is a stag, mine is an otter, Ron's is a bear, Ginny's a horse, Dumbledore's a phoenix, Remus's a wolf, Neville's a dolphin. Each wizard's Patronus is a bit different. They're the only weapon we have against Dementors. They protect us while also chasing the Dementors away. You saw them at the party at the Weasleys last summer, remember?"

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Her mum nodded vaguely, still a bit in shock. "What are they made of? They looked silvery," her mum said.

"They're made of. . . Harry? What are they made of?" Hermione said, suddenly stumped.

Harry leaned over and rapped his knuckles gently on top of her head, teasing her. "Magic." He laughed and said, "If you don't need me, I'm going to check on the others." He waved, climbed on his broom and leaped over the parapet at the front of the stadium with a shout of joy to be back in the air again.

"That boy does love to fly," Molly said with a fond smile as he soared away.

Nobody was hurt, and everyone was relieved to have the horrible encounter over with. With a good load of chocolate under their belts, they weren't hungry for dinner yet, so Dumbledore asked the Weasley twins to go ahead with their fireworks while everyone was still outside.

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione all sat with the Weasley family in the stands, sitting in front of the elder Weasleys. Harry's seat was right in front of Molly's. As she complimented all of her family on how well they'd done fighting the Dementors, Molly couldn't keep her hands out of Harry's windswept hair.

"Mum, give over! He's fine," Ron said when he noticed.

"What are you doing back there, Mrs. Weasley?" Harry said at the same time.

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear, it was just a bit tousled from flying," Molly said, trying to keep her hands to herself. But Harry was windswept, rumpled, obviously tired and sitting right in front of her, more temptation than she was able to bear.

"I don't mind what you're doing as long as you don't try to cut it," he said, feeling her measuring the length of his hair by gathering it in her hands.

"Mum, you can't cut his hair," Ginny warned her mother.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," she said regretfully.

"He and I both like it that long, Mum," Ginny told her. "You can play with it – he likes that – but don't even think about suggesting he cut it!"

Molly sighed and finger-combed his hair back into place as well as she could. "It is a bit longish, dear," she said.

"Mum!" Ginny warned.

"I know you both like it. And it does look very nice, dear. But he's such a handsome boy. Wouldn't he look nice if. . ."

"Mum!" Ginny and Ron said together. "No!"

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Harry was laughing. "If she doesn't have scissors or a knife or a wand in her hand, leave her alone. She's not bothering me."

"You're such a nice boy, Harry, dear," Molly said fondly, rubbing his shoulders gently and finally sitting back in her seat.

"Aw, gee, you stopped!" Harry whinged, turning around and grinning at her.

"Oh you!" she said, knowing she was being teased, and also knowing he'd be willing to let her keep fussing over him far longer than her own children would be.

The fireworks began and everyone ooooo'd and ahhhh'd appropriately. A huge Chinese Fireball dragon flew from one end of the pitch to the other, breathing fire that sizzled and popped before dissolving into coloured sparkles. Spinning Catherine wheels danced around the stadium. Various words crossed the sky, some funny, some rude, some advertising Weasleys' Wizard Whizbangs. Flying pigs made out of sparkles flapped merrily around. A beautiful firework shaped like a flock of phoenixes was the grand finale. They soared around the pitch, finally flying low to the ground and soaring straight up, with each bird then flying in a different direction, leaving a trail of scarlet and gold sparkles in its wake. Finally, "Congratulations to the D.A. Champion!" glittered in the sky in golden sparks. These words lingered in the sky until the sun came up the next day.

A tired but happy group entered the Great Hall for a late supper. Most of the guests had gone home, but the Weasley twins, Bill and Charlie had decided to stay for the party in Gryffindor celebrating Neville's victory. Neville was surrounded by well-wishers at dinner, on the way to Gryffindor Tower and in the Common Room, as well. Everyone was thrilled at how well he'd done, and grateful for the party they were having as a result of his success. The Weasley twins spent their time at the party demonstrating new products from their joke shop.

Hours later, Harry and Ron followed Neville up the stairs to their room. Dean was already getting changed for bed. Neville set his trophy on his bedside table and kept glancing at the huge silver cup as he changed.

"It's real, Neville, honest," Ron teased.

"Oh, uh, yeah, I know that," Neville said, startled out of his bemused state.

"If it couldn't be me, I'm glad it was you," Dean said supportively. He lifted the trophy and admired it. "They forgot something."

"Huh?" Neville said, startled. "What did they forget?"

"Your name," Dean said with a smile. "I can fix that, if you want."

"You can put my name on it?" Neville said with a pleased smile.

"Sure. Hang on." Dean set the trophy down and picked up his wand. Neville, Harry and Ron gathered behind him to watch the artist at work. In a short time, Dean had added "Neville Longbottom" along with the year and a variety of flourishes to the trophy's engraving. Satisfied with his work, he handed it to Neville. "How's that?"

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"Wow," Neville said in awe. "Thanks!" He stared at the trophy, not really noticing as his friends each clapped him on the back, said good night and climbed into their beds. As the room filled with soft snores, Neville still stood there, the trophy gleaming in the moonlight streaming through the window. He couldn't believe it. He was a winner at last. People had cheered themselves hoarse – for *him*! For the first time in his life, his relatives were proud of him, really *proud* of him! After a lifetime of feeling inadequate and stupid, this was a sweet feeling indeed. With a contentment he'd never felt in his life, Neville put his trophy on his bedside table and got into bed, staring at it until sleep finally took him off to dreams of winning championship trophies.

Chapter 25 – Everlasting Sleep

"Today's lesson is about Plimpies," Hagrid said, leading his class of mixed Gryffindors and Slytherins to several large cauldrons in which small, mottled, spherical fish were walking around on their rubbery legs. "The Plimpy is found in deep lakes and walks along the bottom looking for food. They move around by walking or by swimming with their webbed feet. They're not really dangerous, but they will nibble the toes or clothing of swimmers at times. Merpeople think Plimpies are pests and at times they'll get rid of 'em by tying the Plimpy's legs together. The Plimpy just floats away until it can get its legs unknotted, which can take a couple o' hours. Their legs are rubbery, no real bones ter speak of, so it doesn't really hurt 'em ter knot up their legs."

"What use are these stupid things?" Blaise Zabini sneered.

"They're magical creatures, and this class *is* Care of Magical Creatures, since you seem ter have forgotten," Hagrid snapped irritably. "We're goin' ter learn how ter unknot their legs so you can help 'em if you find any the merpeople have tied up." He glanced around the class. "Can anyone tell me what the Plimpy's favourite food is?" Only one hand went up. "Yes, Hermione?"

"The Plimpy's favourite food is water snails, although they will eat other small crustaceans, fish or bugs if they can find them," she replied, textbook perfect as usual.

"Well done, five points ter Gryffindor," Hagrid said happily. "Now then, I've got a Plimpy for each o' you. I want you ter choose one, tie its legs in a good tight knot, then put it back in the water and watch how it tries to free itself. Don't keep them out o' the water too long, I don't want any of 'em ter die. After a bit, I'll tell you ter untie their legs and then you'll turn 'em loose in yer cauldron and see how quick they recover and walk around normally again."

The class followed Hagrid's instructions and soon were giggling or cursing as they tried to hold the slippery spherical fish long enough to knot their legs. Eventually, all of the fish had knotted legs and were bobbing around in their cauldrons looking discouraged and rather sad.

"Oh, poor things," Lavender Brown said, watching them struggle. "Can't we turn them loose now, Hagrid?"

"Give 'em another few minutes," Hagrid said. "It won't hurt 'em. They're just a bit frustrated right now."

On Hagrid's signal a short time later, the class began the difficult task of untying the legs of their Plimpies.

"Bloody hell, they're slippery!" Ron griped as his Plimpy managed to pop out of his arms and back into the water for the third time.

"This is disgusting," Zabini growled in a voice that carried over the entire clearing.

"Not everythin' ter do with caring for magical creatures is fun, Zabini," Hagrid said, with an obvious effort to remain patient.

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"Nothing to do with caring for magical creatures is fun," Zabini grumbled.

"I heard that," Hagrid snapped. "Five points from Slytherin. Get back to work and quit complaining."

Ron was still having a great deal of difficulty holding on to his fish. "Tuck it under your arm like this, Ron," Hermione told him, demonstrating, "and then it's easier."

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled with a sigh. "Yours is well-behaved. Mine's a right prat!" Harry and Hermione both laughed and Ron managed a sideways grin.

Eventually, all the Plimpies had their legs untied and were once again doing their oddly bobbing waddle across the bottom of the cauldrons.

"Right. Now I want ya ter sketch yer Plimpy and label its body parts," Hagrid said, "and turn those in at the end of class."

The class quieted down as they settled into their task. Finally, class was over and everyone but Harry, Ron and Hermione had gone.

"That was a fun lesson, Hagrid!" Hermione said with a warm smile. "Plimpies are so sweet!"

"Well, they're not dangerous or anythin', but I do have ter untie their legs every so often. I feel sorry for 'em when I see 'em floatin' around with their legs in knots. I thought it would be good ter teach you lot how ter deal with 'em even if they're not really useful or dangerous," Hagrid said, his black beard bristling in what the three friends knew was a smile.

"I wondered what those were when I saw them during the Third Task," Harry said. "I saw these odd things in the distance and thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. It's nice to know they weren't! D'you need help putting them back in the lake?"

"Yeah, that'd be lovely," Hagrid said happily. "We can't just dump 'em in. We need to put 'em in one at a time so they get set on their feet and don't get dizzy. We'll set cauldrons at different places along the shore and you lot can pick a spot and turn 'em loose there, how's that?"

The boys and Hermione helped Hagrid by levitating the heavy cauldrons to various quiet spots around the lake where trees overhung the shore so the Plimpies would be protected from birds and the sun until they got into deeper water. Hagrid, Harry, Ron and Hermione each picked a spot and started releasing the little fish. They were separated from each other by quite a distance – Hagrid didn't want the Plimpies to be competing for food in the same part of the lake.

Harry settled in to his task cheerfully. The Plimpies were placid and funny and seemed quite grateful to be set gently into the lake and given a soft shove to help them get into deeper water quickly.

Harry sensed someone coming and looked up. A young Hufflepuff boy stood uncertainly at the edge of the trees. Harry glanced around and saw nothing unusual. He was close enough to Hagrid and his friends that he felt safe, and he sensed no danger from this boy, just a

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nervousness that people who didn't know Harry often showed when meeting him for the first time. By now, he was used to such reactions. He smiled and said, "Hi. Can I help you?"

"You're Harry Potter, aren't you?" Harry nodded. "I was wondering if I could get into the D.A. next year," the boy said, moving a step closer to Harry, his hands deep in his pockets and his face pale and tense.

"Yeah, sure!" Harry said, sitting back on his heels and grinning at the boy. "I won't be in charge next year, but I'll tell Ginny Weasley that you're interested and she can make sure you know when the meetings are. What's your name?"

"Liam Titmarsh," the boy replied uneasily.

"Well, Liam, it's nice to meet you," Harry said easily. "I'd offer to shake your hand, but I have Plimpy slime on my hands right now. Oops!" Harry's attention was back on the small fish, one of which had slipped out of his hands and was now rolling on the ground. Harry had started to reach for it when he felt a heavy blow to the back of his head and fell over. He wasn't unconscious, but dazed. He tried to reach for his wand, but someone quickly stamped on his hand, smashing several of the small bones in it.

"No, you don't, Potter," a voice snarled. "*Stupefy!*" The spell was inexpertly cast, so Harry wasn't unconscious but couldn't move. He was also perfectly capable of hearing and seeing, as well as feeling what they were doing to him. He gazed up at Liam in confusion. The boy backed away, looking terrified, as three bigger boys in black Hogwarts work robes and hoods surrounded Harry's still form. They started kicking and pummeling him. One of his attackers ran off for a moment and came back brandishing a heavy tree limb and began beating Harry with it, swinging it like a cricket bat. One boy took particular pleasure in jumping on Harry's long, thin hands, mangling them into pulpy, bloody masses.

Harry heard bones cracking in various parts of his body, but was helpless to do anything about it. His mind was screaming in agony and crying out for help, but he couldn't send an *Adfero*, he couldn't fight back – he was helpless.

"Hurry up!" Liam urged. "They could come back any time!"

"That's enough," the first voice declared. "We aren't going to kill him. We're going to let the giant squid take the blame."

"How are we going to do that?" a second voice asked. He sounded young and frightened.

"Just do what you were told to do," the first voice assured him. Three incantations were said simultaneously, and then a Banishing Charm was performed by one of the boys. Suddenly Harry's bloody, broken body was flying across the surface of the lake, heading for the deepest part in the middle, far from the shore. He hit with a quiet splash.

Harry was fighting the Stunning Spell and the others the three boys had put on him, but having no success. He attempted the gill transformation, but he had no control over his body. As he hit the water, he tried to grab a breath and hold it, but it was simply impossible. He was frantic because so many of his bones were broken, he knew he couldn't possibly swim even if he hadn't been partially Stunned. He couldn't cast any spells, either. How was he going to get

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to the surface? How was he going to breathe? His lungs were bursting, burning, searing in agony, demanding a breath – he had to *breathe*! But he couldn't. Sparkles of light flitted across his vision as he began to lose consciousness. He fought to remain alert. He had to stay awake so he could fight, so he could survive! But he hurt so badly in every single part of his body. Sleep would be a blessing, wouldn't it? No, he couldn't sleep, he had to fight! But how could he, when he couldn't move? Harry continued to struggle, but to no avail.

As he sank deeper into the dark water, the sunlight above him receded until it was a small, delicate flicker far above him. He couldn't take his eyes off that point of light.

His mind flashed suddenly to his childhood. When he was very young, his aunt would lock him in the cupboard under the stairs after removing the light bulb so he'd be in the dark. She thought it would keep him quiet, or be a way of punishing him – he never really knew which. The sight of the light from the hallway disappearing around the edges of the door as she shut and locked it had always frightened him, much more so than the dark itself had ever frightened him. Now he was watching the sunlight fade from sight above him and felt even more horror than he'd felt as a small child. He had to get back to the light, he had to have air, he had to survive! Harry fought as hard as he could, but as he sank deeper and deeper into the cold, dark water, everything finally went black and he knew no more.

"What's that racket?" Hermione said as she carried the last of her empty cauldrons to Hagrid's hut.

"Merpeople," Hagrid replied, looking across the lake searching for the source of the noise. "They sound upset."

"Where's Harry?" Ron asked, glancing around. "He hasn't come back yet."

"Dunno," Hagrid said, getting worried now. "Harry? Harry, where are you?"

Ron stood still, listening to the merpeople's screeching. "Hagrid! They *are* upset! Someone's drowned!"

"Drowned?" Hagrid said in shock.

"I think that's what they're saying. It's all jumbled up," Ron said, concentrating on their voices.

"You speak Mermish?" Hagrid said as his eyes scanned the water.

"Harry and I are taking a class. . ." Ron began, then pointed. "There! Look there!" He, Hagrid and Hermione ran as hard as they could to the place where Harry had been releasing Plimpies. The merpeople were just off-shore, holding something very odd-looking above the water and screeching at the top of their lungs.

"What is that?" Hermione said, tilting her head as she stared at the object. Suddenly she gasped. "HARRY!" she screamed, running into the water next to Ron and Hagrid to pull their friend to shore. "He's not. . .is he?" she cried, tears running down her face.

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"What happened?" Hagrid said in great distress. "He was just releasing Plimpies! The water's not deep here. Why's he look so funny? Oh, no, he's all broken up." He lifted the boy's limp body as carefully as he could and laid it gently on the shore.

"Look. There's been a fight here," Hermione told Hagrid as she worked on Harry, doing the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation she'd learned in swim class years ago, her eyes scanning the area frantically for clues. "There's a rock with blood on it. And that branch over there," she gasped out between breaths.

Suddenly, Harry gasped and coughed, a huge stream of water coming out of his mouth as Hagrid helped Hermione roll him onto his side. When he was breathing regularly, they turned him on his back again.

"Oh, Harry! Please, wake up!" Hermione urged, doing her best to help him.

"Why d'ya suppose he's translucent?" Hagrid said, bending over Harry's battered body. "I can see the ground underneath 'im!"

"No idea," Hermione replied, still trying to wake her best friend.

Meanwhile, Ron was still in the water talking to the merpeople. He screeched a final reply and turned to Hagrid and Hermione. "He was attacked. They saw the whole thing, but the blokes who attacked him were hooded. They say we all look alike to them anyway, except for Dumbledore, Hagrid, Harry and me. There was another boy who wasn't hooded. He had some colour on his robes, lighter than the red on ours. The rest didn't."

"Was it green?" Hermione said, suspecting Slytherins of the attack.

"I pointed to the grass and asked if it was like that colour, but they said no. It was more like a dandelion I showed them."

"A *Hufflepuff*?" Hagrid said in shock.

"I'm just saying what they told me," Ron said uneasily.

"We need to get Harry to Madam Pomfrey right away," Hermione said urgently. Harry was still gasping for breath and obviously had numerous broken bones. His shoulders sagged from his broken clavicles. An arm and a leg both poked out at weird angles. His hands were lumpy, swollen pulp.

"The castle is all the way round the lake from here," Hagrid said. "Damned nuisance that I can't make you a Portkey."

"I can make one but. . .MERLIN!" Hermione shouted, holding her wand aloft as she'd seen Harry do to call his phoenix. "HARRY NEEDS YOU!"

"Will he come for you?" Ron asked.

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"It's worth a try. We need to let Remus and Dumbledore know – and Ginny," she replied just as a flash of light burst over them. Merlin, Harry's phoenix, landed next to Harry and looked at him, then gazed up at Hermione expectantly.

"He needs to go to the hospital wing," Hermione told the phoenix. "Can you take him there?" Merlin blinked serenely at her.

"Mione, you should go along so you can tell them what happened," Ron urged her.

"All right," she said, grabbing the phoenix's tail just as Merlin dug his talons into Harry's robes. "He has broken bones. I don't know if this is the best way. . . ."

"It's a smoother ride than a Portkey, it's the fastest and he needs care fast, right?" Ron said. She nodded. "Then go on."

With a flash, Merlin, Harry and Hermione disappeared.

Ron pulled out his Famous Wizard card and told the small Harry on it to tell Dumbledore, Remus and Ginny that Harry was hurt and in the hospital wing.

"Again?" the small image of Harry said in disgust. "What's wrong with him this time?"

"Don't you be cheeky with me," Ron growled. "Get those messages delivered right away!"

"Don't be cheeky with me either!" the tiny Harry retorted saucily.

"Move, or I'll tear this card in two," Ron threatened, which made the little picture of Harry scuttle out the side of his picture frame. "Git."

"Harry's not a git," Hagrid said, shocked Ron would say such a thing about his best mate.

"No, but his card has an attitude," Ron grumbled.

"Well, Harry does too, at times," Hagrid agreed, his voice a sad rumble. He cleared his throat gruffly and added, "Let's gather up this stuff," he said, pointing to the rock and tree branch. "Maybe we can find out who did this."

As Ron carefully released the two Plimpies left in Harry's cauldron, Hagrid bent over and picked up something he'd seen glittering in the long grass nearby. "His glasses," he breathed, then broke down into sobs. Ron patted his arm, trying to comfort him. Hagrid did his best to control himself as he put Harry's glasses in his pocket, then helped Ron wrap up the rock and tree branch in a bed sheet from his cabin. The two of them began striding purposefully toward the castle, their faces taut with worry.

"He has quite a few broken bones," Madam Pomfrey said in concern as she examined Harry. "He's taken a terrible beating. And nearly drowned? Well done, Miss Granger, on getting him breathing. I simply don't understand why he's translucent, though. That's very odd."

"Is he going to be all right?" Hermione asked, tears streaming down her face.

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"I have a great deal of work to do on him," Madam Pomfrey said kindly. "Why don't you go and tell Professor Dumbledore what happened? He's just come in."

Hermione joined Professor Dumbledore and began explaining what she knew. Ginny raced through the doors, slamming them back hard against the walls in her hurry, skidding to a stop by Harry's bed. Remus wasn't far behind her.

"What happened?" Ginny gasped, her face white with fear.

"I'm busy just now. Miss Granger is explaining things to the headmaster," Madam Pomfrey said brusquely. "If you want to help, stay here. I can use you. If you want to listen, go over there."

"What can I do to help?" Ginny and Remus asked at the same time.

"Remus, I need a strong hand to help me set these bones. He has a severe head injury, which probably means a concussion at the very least, multiple breaks in his jaw, two broken clavicles, compound fractures in both arms, a compound fracture in one leg, a simple fracture in the other and most of his ribs are broken as well. His hands are, quite simply, a mess. There are internal injuries as well as the broken bones and external wounds. I'm amazed he survived being transported by phoenix," she said tartly.

From her place near the door, Hermione heard the nurse's comment. "We didn't know how else to get him here quickly! We thought a Portkey would be too hard on him."

"And so it would," the nurse agreed. "He could have been brought on a litter, but you're right, Miss Granger, he did need immediate attention."

"I thought about contacting you to come out to where we were, but I thought the phoenix would be faster," she said miserably.

"You used your best judgement under the circumstances," Remus said kindly. "You have nothing to feel bad about."

"You say the merpeople saw what happened?" Dumbledore asked Hermione.

"Yes. Ron talked to them, but they talked all over each other and it was hard for him to understand them," she replied.

"I'm going out to speak to the merpeople. If Mr. Weasley comes in, please ask him to join me," Dumbledore said, quickly striding out of the door.

Ginny cleaned Harry's wounds so it would be easier to see how to treat them. Merlin healed every wound he could. Remus helped Madam Pomfrey set Harry's bones, many of which were badly aligned and required Remus's great strength to pull them back into place. Many also required casts due to the complexity of the breaks. His jaw was broken in three places, which meant his teeth had to be sealed together magically to support his jaw as it healed.

"It's going to be difficult to get his potions into him with his jaw broken," the nurse worried.

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"Do you think he needs to go to St. Mungo's?" Remus asked quietly.

"Not yet. Let's see how he does," she said, waving her wand to levitate Harry enough that bandages could fly around his body, wrapping around his rib cage to support his broken ribs. "That's all we can do for now," she said at last.

Ginny, Hermione and Remus sat around Harry's bed as they had so many times before, with Merlin nestled in against Harry's side, crooning softly. Finally, Ginny couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"What happened? Nobody can sneak up on Harry! His hair stands up at the back and warns him!" she demanded, her eyes both anxious and furious that such a thing had happened to her boyfriend.

"Maybe it only warns him if he's about to have a spell cast at him," Hermione said sadly. "They apparently threw a big rock at him, or just hit him with it, I'm not sure which. And he was releasing the Plimpies. He enjoyed them a lot, so I imagine he was concentrating on watching them rather than paying attention to his surroundings. And we weren't that far away, so he probably felt safe"

"It had to be other students, didn't it?" Ginny said. "No one has got into the grounds without permission since the dragons have been guarding the gates. Well, except for that battle last year," she said with a distressed shrug. "I guess no place is safe for him anymore." Her shoulders sagged and tears ran down her cheeks.

"Have any students been giving Harry a particularly bad time?" Remus asked.

"Blaise Zabini and some other Slytherins," Hermione answered quickly. "But Blaise is cocky, thinks he's a great wizard. I don't believe he'd attack Harry with a rock and a tree branch rather than using magic on him."

"Did they use magic on him at all?" Ginny said. "Or was it just a physical attack?"

"They had to use magic to make him translucent like that," Hermione said with a sad shake of her head. "It looked to me as if he'd been Stunned, as well, but if he was just Stunned, he'd be awake by now. Remus? Can you tell?"

"Professor Dumbledore is better at this than I am," Remus commented, pulling out his wand. He waved it over Harry's still form, muttering a long incantation. In a moment, a complex grid of golden light surrounded Harry, with spots and patches of various colours here and there, sometimes in gaudy layers.

"Can you tell what they were?" Hermione asked.

"Sometimes," Remus replied, looking at the grid of colours suspended above his godson. "This yellow one is the hex we were practicing in D.A. last evening," he said, pointing with his wand. "Remember, it cast a yellow light?" She nodded. "The colours you see here reflect the colours of the spell you see as its being cast. Where you see a lot of them of the same colour on top of each other is probably class work or a D.A. meeting, where someone's been

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practicing a spell on him repeatedly. This one over here is a Transfiguration colour, but I don't recognize it."

"That's probably the wallaby I turned him into yesterday. He loved it," Hermione said, her voice breaking as she sobbed. "He hopped all around the Common Room. He thought it was great fun. He couldn't wait to do it again."

Remus chuckled softly. "Yes, that sounds like Harry." He continued to examine the colours on the grid before him.

"Ah. This looks intriguing," he commented suddenly, pushing on one particular blob with his wand so it stood out from the rest.

"What?" both girls asked, leaning in to see what had caught his attention.

"This oddly shaped one here, see? It's yellow and orange with a reddish edge on one side, and a kind of muddy colour on the other. It looks to me as if three spells were cast at once, and those not particularly expertly."

Dumbledore hurried into the room just then, followed closely by Ron and Hagrid. They'd gone with him to speak to the merpeople. "Have you learned anything? How is he?"

"I may have found the spells they did on him," Remus said, showing Dumbledore his discovery.

"Well done, Remus. Hold that there, let me study it," the old wizard directed.

"What did you learn from the merpeople, Albus?" Remus asked as the headmaster continued to study the strange spell mark on Harry's grid.

"Three people dressed in black, with hoods over their faces, attacked Harry. The merpeople saw the whole thing. They like Harry quite well since the second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and they noticed him releasing the Plimpies. They thought it was funny that he was so gentle with those little fish that they consider nuisances, so they stayed a distance off-shore to watch.

"There was a fourth boy who had a light colour on his robes. When Mr. Weasley pointed at various things to ask if the colour was anything like that, they agreed that it looked about the colour of a dandelion, so he must be a Hufflepuff. They couldn't describe him except that he was a lot smaller than Harry and didn't have a hood on like those who attacked him.

"One of the attackers threw a rock that hit Harry and knocked him out, most likely. Then they put some spell on him – probably a Stunning Spell – and beat him with their fists and kicked him quite a lot. One used a tree branch to hit him. You were right about that, Miss Granger," he said, turning his eyes to Hermione, then back to Harry's grid again. "They cast several spells on him and then Banished him to the deepest part of the lake.

"The merpeople swam out to try to save him, but he was already deep underwater by the time they got to him. They noticed he didn't have his gills, so they lifted his head above the water and started calling for help as they brought him back to shore. They'd seen Mr. Weasley's

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bright hair and started to take Harry there, but then Mr. Weasley disappeared in the trees, so they turned aside to where Harry had been. They continued to call until Hagrid, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger came and brought Harry to shore.

"They're very angry. If they find out who those boys are, they're liable to harm them," Dumbledore concluded, his face weary and sad.

"Good riddance!" Hermione snapped. Ron nodded his agreement.

"I'll break 'em in two when I find out who they are," Hagrid rumbled furiously.

"I'll help you, Hagrid," Ginny agreed. Her hand rested lightly on top of Harry's heavily bandaged hands. Most of the bones in his hands were broken in numerous places. Ginny's eyes were dark and sad.

Madam Pomfrey came back to Harry's bed. "What have you found, Albus?"

"Three spells badly cast, and interfering with each other. It will take quite some time to sort this out," Dumbledore said unhappily.

"Well, he needs to rest. Get what information you can and then let the boy be," she snapped.

Dumbledore inserted his wand into the odd blob of colour Remus had located. "Hmmm. This dark, muddy-looking edge is a badly cast Body-Bind Curse, I believe," he commented.

"If he has a Body-Bind Curse on him, why is he not hard?" Hermione asked curiously.

"It was cast by someone who hasn't conquered it yet," Dumbledore replied. "He's a little stiff, but not as hard as he would be if he were truly under that particular spell, and Madam Pomfrey has been able to move him enough to set his bones. I think. . . ." he prodded the blob with his wand, "I think I may be able to separate this one and reverse it." He prodded it a bit more, and the muddy coloured portion finally came away from the other two colours. "Ah. *Finite Incantatum*." Harry's body slumped, far more relaxed than it had been, and a deep exhalation of breath escaped him.

"What happened?" Ginny said in fear, watching for Harry to inhale again.

The group all hovered over the bed, watching for Harry to start breathing normally. Finally, he took a deep, shuddering breath and got back to a normal respiration rate for someone in a deep sleep.

"Why did that happen?" Ginny demanded, her heart pounding in her throat, her hands shaking. "What was that?"

Dumbledore sighed in relief as he watched Harry's cheeks starting to pink up a bit. "He was partially petrified. When the spell was removed and his body relaxed, it's possible the weight of these casts was heavy to him and pushed a big breath out of him. I honestly don't know what else could have caused it," he said, shaking his head.

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"He does look better," Remus said, running his fingers lightly through his godson's still-damp hair.

"Yes, he does," Madam Pomfrey said, giving him a quick examination. "Petrification makes the skin a bit grey. He looks much better. His bones should heal more quickly now." She looked up at the headmaster. "Thank you, Albus. That was a great help. Can you do anything about these other spells?"

Dumbledore had already gone back to examining the spell marks on Harry's grid. "The dark mustard colour – I don't know what that is for certain. I have some ideas, but I'll have to do some research. The reddish edge to the mustard colour is some other spell. The three of them hit him at the same time, which means they're interfering with each other. That's why it was so difficult for me to remove the Body-Bind Curse, and it wasn't as involved with the others as these last two are. They've nearly merged – see the orange colour where the red and yellow join? They will be much more difficult to remove because of how they've intermingled." He studied the blob in silence for a while longer, then prodded it with his wand, trying to separate the colours. They swirled around each other, but refused to separate. "Yes. It will be quite difficult to reverse these. I think the reddish one is an Invisibility Charm – I suppose they thought they'd stay out of trouble as long as his body wasn't found. That's probably why he's translucent. This mustard coloured one, though. . .it's some kind of sleeping charm, but I'm not sure which one. I need to go and do some research."

Hermione looked up. "May I help? I need to do something, and I'm good at research."

"Yes, Miss Granger, I would appreciate your help. Remus, would you join us as well? I suspect we'll find the answer in those books of Harry's," Dumbledore said, giving the other man a significant look.

Remus nodded, knowing Dumbledore would want them to investigate both Harry's Dark Arts books and the huge library in the Chamber of Knowledge, neither of which could be mentioned in front of Hagrid and Madam Pomfrey. "Yes, of course," he said, rising to his feet and looking sadly at the too-still form of his godson. He bent down and kissed Harry gently on the forehead. "Get well, lad," he murmured, his voice breaking, before straightening up and striding quickly toward the door.

"I'll help, too," Ron said, giving his sister a quick hug and then following the headmaster, Remus and Hermione out of the hospital wing.

"I wish there was somethin' I could do ter help," Hagrid said sadly.

Madam Pomfrey looked up at him and sighed, understanding how lost Hagrid was feeling just then. "I think fresh air might do Mr. Potter some good, Hagrid," she said suddenly. "The window here is sticking. Could you open it for me, just a few inches?"

Hagrid straightened his massive shoulders and gave her a grateful look. "O' course." He soon had the window opened just enough to let a brisk breeze into the already cool room.

Ginny shivered and looked at Madam Pomfrey curiously. Why had she wanted a window opened?

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A few moments later, Madam Pomfrey said, "That's probably enough for now, Hagrid. Could you close it, please?" He hurried to do her bidding. "Thank you so much," she said warmly.

Ginny suddenly understood. The nurse had simply found some way to make Hagrid feel useful. Ginny wished she could think of something useful for Hagrid to do, but her mind was locked in fear for Harry and just couldn't think creatively at all at the moment.

Madam Pomfrey put her hand on Hagrid's arm. "I think he's stable for now, Hagrid. I'll let you know when he wakes up, how's that?"

"Thank you," he said gruffly, wiping away a tear with the back of his massive hand. "I feel so bad about it. He was helpin' me release the Plimpies. I coulda done it myself, but he and Ron and Hermione all wanted ter help. I shoulda done it myself. He didn't need ter be hurt. I shoulda taken better care o' him –"

"Nonsense! He was doing something perfectly innocent. You didn't put him in danger. Those boys . . ." the nurse shuddered, unable to go on. "I can't believe we have such animals as students here."

"How do you know they're students?" Ginny asked suddenly.

"I don't, quite honestly, but Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin both said the spells were badly cast, so they must be students, probably rather young ones," she said with a shrug.

The three of them were silent for a while. Finally, Madam Pomfrey went back to her office, leaving Hagrid and Ginny alone with Harry. Both of them were crying, but doing their best to be quiet about it. When Ginny noticed Hagrid's tears, she put her small hand over his giant one and rubbed it gently, trying to comfort him. He sat with his head bowed, taking deep, shuddering breaths as he tried to control himself. He glanced at Ginny and saw her trying to put on a brave face, then turned his hand over and squeezed hers gently before standing up.

"I have ter go feed the unicorns," he said, glancing at the position of the sun outside the window. "Will you be all right here?"

"I've done this loads of times now, Hagrid," Ginny said sadly. "I'll be fine."

He smiled down at her. "Yeah, you will. He's lucky he has you, Ginny." He sniffled and rubbed his streaming eyes again, then finally gave up and blew his nose resoundingly into his tablecloth-sized polka-dotted handkerchief. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said, pulling Harry's glasses out of his pocket and setting them carefully on the bedside table. He sighed, hoping he'd see the young man with his cheeky grin and sparkling green eyes healthy and whole again soon. "I'll just go take care of the unicorns, then. You lot let me know how he's doing, all right? I'll check in later."

"OK. Thanks for staying, Hagrid. I'll tell him you were here when he wakes up," Ginny said with a small smile.

"Right. See ya later, then," he rumbled, then left.

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Ginny settled herself more comfortably in her chair, one of her hands gently stroking Harry's fingers where they extended out of his cast. She wanted to hold his hand, to cup her cheek in the heart of his palm, but he had so many injuries, she was almost afraid to touch him. She gazed at the sunbeams moving across the wall as the sun neared the horizon, then watched the shadows lengthen until finally the torches lit themselves as the sun disappeared behind the mountains.

Madam Pomfrey came in to check on Harry from time to time, but he didn't move, nothing changed, and there wasn't anything she could do for him until he either healed a bit more or woke up. She had a dinner tray brought up for Ginny, since she was unable to get the girl to leave Harry's side.

The evening seemed to go on forever and finally faded into night, with Ginny still sitting devotedly next to Harry's still form.

"Wake up, sweetheart. You've been unconscious long enough," she said over and over. "Please wake up, Harry. Please. . . ."

Many hours later, a very weary-looking Dumbledore came into the hospital wing, Ron, Hermione and Remus close behind him. Ginny woke from the light doze she'd fallen into.

"What did you find out?" she asked anxiously.

"It's a sleeping spell, as I thought. Miss Granger found it in one of Harry's Dark Arts books," he told her. He turned toward the nurse's office and called, "Poppy? Could you come here, please?" When Madam Pomfrey joined them, he said, "It's called the Everlasting Slumber Curse."

"Everlasting Slumber?" Ginny said, aghast. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Dumbledore said sadly. "He could be asleep for forty or fifty years or more. There are reports of it lasting over a hundred years before the person awoke."

"A *hundred years*?" Ginny breathed in dismay. She glanced at her brother and best friend. Both looked miserable, Hermione crying softly, Ron with his arm around her trying to comfort her, but looking rather ill himself. Remus didn't look any better. She turned her attention back to Dumbledore, who had begun speaking again.

"Do you remember the story of Sleeping Beauty?" Dumbledore said with a small smile.

"Yes, of course. It's a fairy tale my mum read me when I was little," Ginny replied, totally confused.

"It isn't a fairy tale, Miss Weasley. It's a true story. It's changed a bit over many years of retelling, but a spell does exist that can make someone sleep for a hundred years or more."

"I thought she pricked her finger on a spindle. . ." Ginny began, totally confused.

"She did. This spell isn't exactly like the one that made her sleep a hundred years, but it's similar enough that I thought it an apt comparison," Dumbledore said with a shrug.

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"So how do we reverse this spell?" she asked anxiously.

"There's no reversal spell given in the books," he said sadly. "We'll keep looking, but this is a very rare spell and was inexpertly cast, so the normal reversal spell might not work."

"What about Finite Incantatum?" Hermione said suddenly. "We haven't tried that on the two spells that are still on him."

"Since they're intermingled, a simple Finite won't have the normal effect," Dumbledore explained. "I'll try to separate them again. Since some time has passed, it's possible the effects of the spells may have waned a bit. Keep your fingers crossed." He smiled slightly, then produced the grid effect on Harry once more, showing the spells that had been cast on him. He worked on the mustard-coloured spot again. The red line was narrowing, the orange portion where the two spells connected growing larger. "The yellow one is absorbing the red one," he commented with a frown as he prodded them with his wand.

"What does that mean?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"That the sleeping spell is by far stronger than the invisibility one," he replied. "Hmmm." He touched the red side of the blob and dug at it a bit with his wand, murmuring various incantations as he tugged at the red side of the blob. Finally, he had a larger section of red showing. He pulled at it with his wand as he muttered a long, quiet incantation. Harry's body suddenly disappeared.

Ginny and Hermione gasped and Ron exclaimed, "Bloody hell!"

"What happened?" Hermione said anxiously.

"I managed to get the Invisibility Spell separated, so now it's actually working," he said with a small smile. "*Finite Incantatum*." With that, Harry's body reappeared, looking solid rather than translucent, and none the worse for having been invisible for a few moments.

"So now you just have the sleeping curse to deal with? It should reverse with a Finite, right?" Ginny said, feeling hopeful for the first time in many hours.

"We'll see," he said noncommittally. "*Finite Incantatum*," he said once more, pointing his wand at the mustard-coloured spell. Nothing happened. He sighed, then tried several incantations, waiting to see the results each time. "Nothing," he said sadly. "We need to do more research," he said at last. "You should go to bed. It's quite late," he added, looking at his students.

"I'm not leaving him," Ginny said defiantly.

"Yes, I know that, Miss Weasley," he said kindly. "I understand your devotion to him. Remus? Would you help me with the research? I have a few more books we can look through, and we should probably check those other books again in case we missed something."

"Yes, of course," Remus said. "Ginny, let me know if there's any change."

"I will," she promised.

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"You two need to go back to Gryffindor Tower," Dumbledore told Ron and Hermione.

"We want to help!" Hermione protested.

"We're not tired!" Ron insisted.

"You've both been a wonderful help, but now you need to rest," Dumbledore said firmly. "No arguments."

Hermione's shoulders drooped in defeat. "Can we sit at least with him a bit?" she said, her eyes sad as she gazed at her best friend's still form.

"Yes, for a little while," Dumbledore agreed. "Good night." He and Remus left.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat silently around Harry for several minutes before Ron spoke. "What woke Sleeping Beauty?"

"A kiss from her true love," Ginny answered, her eyes lighting up as she gazed at her brother.

"Couldn't hurt," Ron said with a shrug, smiling at his sister.

With a hopeful look on her face, Ginny leaned over Harry and kissed his lips lightly.

"Nothing," she said sadly. His lips were warm, but hard and unresponsive, quite unlike the soft, tender lips that had kissed her so well for so long now.

"Since the spell was badly cast, maybe it has to be someone he *doesn't* love," Ron mused. "Parvati would do it, and he certainly doesn't love her." Both girls gave him withering looks. "What? It was just an idea."

"I'll keep trying," Ginny said. She kissed him more firmly, still being gentle because of his broken jaw. Still no response. She slid her tongue between his lips and ran it around inside his cheeks, all she could reach with his teeth glued together with a Sticking Charm. She felt his breathing change and sat up suddenly.

"He reacted!" she said excitedly.

"What did he do?" Ron said, leaning over to look at Harry more closely.

"His breathing got faster," she said. "I'm going to try again." She kissed him again, her tongue exploring each of his teeth and tickling the insides of his cheeks and lips. She felt his lips move ever so slightly under hers. Ginny sat up, a laugh of surprise escaping her. "He kissed me back! Just a little, but he kissed me back!" She bent over him and studied his face. "Harry? Harry, it's Ginny. Wake up! I know you're in there! Come out and play! Come on, baby, wake up!" She began kissing him again, calling out to him whenever she stopped to sit up. Ron and Hermione grinned and clapped every time Ginny told them of some minute amount of progress in getting Harry to respond to her.

"What's going on?" Madam Pomfrey wanted to know. "It sounds as if you're having a party in here."

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"He's beginning to respond to me!" Ginny said, her face glowing. "Ron asked how Sleeping Beauty woke up, and I told him it was her true love's kiss that woke her – at least, that's how I remember the story. So I tried it, and he's been responding more and more with each kiss!"

"Responding how?" Madam Pomfrey asked, lifting Harry's eyelids and looking into his eyes. "He's still deeply asleep, Miss Weasley."

"His lips have moved. His breathing has gotten faster. He kissed me back once, a little bit," Ginny said excitedly.

Madam Pomfrey looked sceptical. "I don't know, Miss Weasley. He doesn't seem to have changed much since the last time I examined him." She looked at the three hopeful faces in front of her. Harry and his friends had spent so much time in the hospital wing that the nurse had become quite fond of them. She didn't have the heart to dash their hopes. "I don't suppose you're doing him any harm. Just mind his jaw, it's not completely healed yet."

"I understand," Ginny agreed.

"You two need to go to your dormitories," Madam Pomfrey said, looking at Ron and Hermione. "It's very late."

Ron sighed and stood up. "OK." He helped Hermione get up, and bent over Harry's still form. "Wake up, you lazy git, or I'll use your Firebolt for firewood!" he said suddenly. Nothing happened. "Well, it was worth a try," he said, shrugging. "Night, Gin. Take care of yourself, OK? Try to get some rest." He wrapped his arms around his sister and rested his cheek on her hair for a moment.

"Yeah," she said, appreciating the comfort of her big brother's arms. "Thanks."

Hermione hugged Ginny, then leaned down and kissed Harry lightly on the forehead. "Harry, if you don't wake up from Ginny kissing you, I'll snog you myself!" No response. She turned and saw two Weasleys with identical smirks on their faces. "It was worth a shot, right? Ron threatens him with his Firebolt, I threaten him with kisses – those are the best weapons we have with Harry," she said with a sad chuckle.

"We're all getting punchy," Ron said, his jaw cracking in a huge yawn. "C'mon, 'Mione. Night, Gin."

"Thanks for staying so late," Ginny said. "See you in the morning." She settled into her chair next to Harry's bed, her hand resting lightly on his arm. "I'm so tired," she said with a yawn. "I'll just rest a few minutes, then get back to the very serious business of snogging your socks off, Mr. Potter. You're going to wake up or I'm going to know the reason why!" She smiled sadly at the beloved face lying too still and quiet in the bed, then closed her eyes and dozed off.

Hours later, Madam Pomfrey slipped quietly into the curtained area around Harry's bed and examined him, doing her best not to disturb Ginny. She opened his lips and poured some potion in his mouth, pouring slowly so the potion would slide between his teeth a little at a

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time, using her wand to help him swallow rather than choking. "There. That's the last dose you need to heal your broken bones," she said in satisfaction. "Rest well."

Rest well, she says? Harry thought. I'm locked in here and can't get out and she wants me to rest well? HELP ME! Somebody PLEASE let me out! Ever since Ginny's first kiss, he'd been aware of his surroundings. He could hear, smell, feel everything going on around him. He was fighting the darkness, trying to battle his way through the endless lethargy that filled his body. Every time Ginny kissed him, he could feel the darkness lightening up the tiniest bit, feel his body trying to break free of whatever was wrong with him. He was exhausted, heartsick, in serious pain and more frightened than he'd ever been in his life. What if he stayed this way? Nobody knew he was awake and aware of everything! Madam Pomfrey poking and prodding him, testing his reflexes with needles pricking his feet, legs and arms – he felt all of that. He felt the agonizing pain in his bones as they knitted themselves back together. He heard the conversations around him and was frantic to talk to his friends, to tell them he was here, to please, *please* help him out of this quagmire, help free him from whatever was holding him hostage, *PLEASE!*

When he'd first awakened, he hadn't even been capable of coherent thought. He'd just had an awareness that he was in serious trouble, deep in some dark place with no idea how to get out. Then he'd felt her lips brush his again and again, felt her tongue gently exploring his mouth, and he'd tried, oh, how he'd tried to let her know he was there with her! He heard Ron's comments about his Firebolt and Hermione's about her kissing him and wanted to laugh with his friends, wanted anything but this awful, unending, impenetrable gloom, this horrible feeling of separation from everyone he cared about. Harry lay screaming silently in his dark prison, wondering how he was ever going to escape to the light.

Ginny didn't know what woke her, but she went from a deep sleep to instant, anxious wakefulness. She quickly snatched her wand out of her pocket and looked around. Was there some danger close by? What had disturbed her? She didn't see anything near her but Harry's still form. The hospital wing's torches were dimmed to give minimal light so the inhabitants could sleep peacefully. Ginny didn't hear anyone moving, didn't see anything going on that should have upset her so, yet her nerves were jangling wildly. Something startled her awake, but what?

She tiptoed to the edge of the curtained area and peeped out. Nothing. Nobody moving, nothing going on. Madam Pomfrey's office light was out. She'd apparently gone to bed. Ginny looked at her watch. It was three o'clock in the morning. She'd been very sound asleep. What woke her up? *It must have been a bad dream* or something, she thought as she shook her head in puzzlement. She went back to her cushy armchair, wiggling around trying to find a comfortable position. Her eyes closed and finally relaxed, she was drifting into the first stages of sleep again when she suddenly sat up with her eyes wide in shock. She stared at Harry.

"Harry?" she said, leaning over and looking at him. His eyes were still closed and he seemed to still be in that deep, unnatural sleep. She gently lifted one of his eyelids and moved her lit wand across his field of vision. No response. No flinching, no blinking, no change in the size of his pupil. Ginny sighed, knowing that lack of response was a bad sign.

"I swear, I just heard you calling me," she said, shaking her head. "Baby, please wake up. Please?" She studied that beloved face and bent down to kiss him, tears springing from her

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eyes. "Please wake up, love," she murmured between kisses. Her tears fell onto his eyelids, making him flinch. She stood straight up, startled. "Harry?" She wiped the puddled tears from his eyes and tapped his cheek gently with a finger. "Harry? Are you waking up? Please, baby, wake up!" No response. She tried for several more minutes, talking to him, kissing him, patting his cheeks. She sighed, kissed him once more and settled back in her chair, emotionally and physically exhausted.

GINNY! I'm here! Keep kissing me, it seems to help! HELP ME! I'm HERE! HELP! Harry called from what felt like the bottom of a deep, dark well. He could almost hear his voice echoing around him. It was so dark, so lonely, and he desperately wished he could scratch his nose. His arms and legs were itchy inside their casts, too, but of course, he couldn't move, couldn't ask for help, couldn't tell someone he needed his arms, his legs and his nose scratched soon or he'd go mad from the itching! He tried every spell he could think of, knowing he had to work wandlessly wherever he was, but nothing, not one single damned thing seemed to help at all, except for Ginny's soft kisses. GINNY! WHERE ARE YOU? WHERE'D YOU GO? GINNY! HELP ME!

Ginny sat up, suddenly awake again. "Harry?" She looked at him again. Still no change. It was very early in the morning, still dark.

Madam Pomfrey came into the curtained enclosure, two potion flagons in her hand. "Did you call out, Miss Weasley?"

"I thought I heard Harry calling me," Ginny said, thoroughly confused.

"You were probably dreaming, dear," the nurse said soothingly. "He's looking a bit better, don't you think? His bones should be healed by now, so I can unlock his jaw and take off these casts." She removed the spell that glued his teeth together and heard a gasp from Harry as his mouth relaxed. She looked at him, puzzled by that response, then shook her head and went about removing the casts, showing Ginny how to do it and letting her help. She gave him his doses of potion, using her wand again to help him swallow. Finally, Harry lay in his bed with pyjamas on, still bruised and battered, but with no casts or bandages except on his worst wounds. "I expect that will feel better to him," Madam Pomfrey said in satisfaction as she finished tending him. She looked at Ginny. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Ginny lied. "I'll be better when he's awake, though."

"So will he," Madam Pomfrey agreed. "Try to get some rest."

"Madam Pomfrey? Will it hurt him now if I sit on the bed with him?"

"All the bones are healed, the internal damage is healing well now, so as long as you're careful not to jostle him too much, it should be fine. But honestly, in the state he's in, he probably can't feel anything anyway," she said sadly. "He's very deeply entranced."

"Are you sure he can't feel anything?"

"Fairly sure, yes."

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"Because I think he can feel and hear things. I could swear I've heard him calling me," Ginny said, staring at the nurse earnestly.

"We don't know much about the effects of this curse, so I suppose it's possible he can feel things, but it's more likely that you were dreaming," Madam Pomfrey said as kindly as she could. "Try to get some rest, dear. Good night."

"Good night," Ginny said, then sat on the side of Harry's bed, running her fingers lightly over his face. "Are you in there, baby? Can you hear me? Can you feel what I'm doing?" She continued to caress his face gently. "I know you like this," she said, raking her fingers through his hair and then smoothing out the mess she'd made of it. "I know what else you like, too," she murmured, then bent over him and kissed him, sliding her tongue between his slack lips. His teeth had separated a bit once the Sticking Spell was lifted. She pushed her tongue past his teeth, seeking his. His tongue lay slack in his mouth. She circled it with hers, doing her best to stimulate him to wakefulness.

Ginny! Oh, baby, thank you! Yes, of course, I'm in here! Please, don't stop! Keep kissing me! I can feel that! I can feel THAT! YES! Please don't give up on me!

Ginny sighed and sat up, sad that her efforts didn't appear to be having any effect at all. She settled back in her chair again, not wanting to take a chance of hurting him if she dozed off on the bed.

GINNY! NO! Don't stop, please don't stop, I was so close! PLEASE! GINNY! Harry felt like crying in frustration. He could feel he was nearer to the surface, but still so far below it, somehow. It was still completely dark, and he felt so separate from Ginny and the outside world. *GINNY!* he screamed with all of his might. *GINNY!*

"Harry! Harry, are you calling me?" she said, sitting up again suddenly and staring at him. She could see a tear in the corner of his eye. She hadn't cried on him this time, she knew she hadn't. "HARRY! Come on, sweetheart, wake up, you can do it! Come on!" She sat on the edge of the bed again, cupping his cheek in her hand, noticing the stubble beginning on his cheeks. It would soon be the time of morning when he "reset" his beard to keep him clean-shaven, a much simpler process than shaving. But if he wasn't awake to do it, he'd soon have black stubble. His cheeks were already getting scratchy. Ginny scratched his beard a little, then his nose for good measure, playing with him a bit as she did when he was awake.

THERE! Yes, please, keep scratching there! No, don't stop! Ginny, please! Don't stop!

Ginny leaned down and kissed him softly again, then allowed the kiss to deepen. As her tongue tickled his, he moved a little in response, trying valiantly to curl around hers. She laughed and began crying as she continued the kiss. He didn't repeat the movement, and she sat back, disappointed. But when she looked at his face, his eyes were open.

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"Harry! MADAM POMFREY! He's AWAKE!" Ginny called, still laughing and crying at the same time. "Hi, sweetheart! I've missed you so much!" Her smile faded as Harry's eyes wandered aimlessly around, not focusing on her at all.

Madam Pomfrey hurried into Harry's curtained enclosure. "He's awake?"

"I thought he was. His eyes are open, but he's not looking at me," Ginny said in confusion.

"Let me see," Madam Pomfrey said, lighting her wand with a quiet *Lumos* and moving it side to side in front of Harry's eyes. His eyes caught light and followed it jerkily but then wandered off on their own. "I'm afraid he's still under the enchantment. Sometimes people seem to come out of such spells, but they're still not really awake." She watched the disappointment wash over Ginny. "But he looks better, and he is closer to being awake than he has been. Give him time, he'll come round."

Ginny nodded, sighing heavily. She'd been so excited to see those beautiful green eyes open again, but when she looked in them, she could see they were blank and expressionless, even the green of them cloudy and distant-looking. She watched now as his eyes roved aimlessly around the room, flitting from her face to the ceiling, to the window, to her face, to the wall, to some unknown point behind her, to her face, to the ceiling, to her face. . .her face. . .his eyes had stopped on her face. He was looking at her. Her heart leapt and she leaned toward him, then remembered his glasses. She picked them up from the bedside table and put them on his face, watching his eyes jerkily follow her movements.

"You are in there, aren't you?" she said quietly as she gazed into his eyes. They still weren't focusing on her, but they rested on her face for a long moment before roving around the room again. Every so often, they'd find her face and linger there for some length of time. She kept talking to him, encouraging him to keep trying, to keep fighting his way out of that spell.

When his eyes first opened, Harry felt dizzy, nauseated by the riot of colours before him. His eyes moved about aimlessly on their own. He couldn't seem to control them, and the way they were flitting around, unfocused and restless, was making him even dizzier. Finally, his eyes found Ginny. Her image was blurry. He supposed he wasn't wearing his glasses. He tried to get his eyes to stay on her face but they still seemed to have a mind of their own, moving restlessly around, but coming back to Ginny's face more and more often.

Hi, baby, he thought tenderly. It's so good to see you again. Please keep trying to get me out of here. I can't find my way out. Help me, I know you can do it!

When Madam Pomfrey lighted her wand and moved it in front of his eyes, Harry did his best to follow the light, to let the nurse know he was there, he was fine, he just needed to find his way out of this lethargy. He prayed he wasn't paralyzed, a fear that was growing in him as time dragged on and he couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't get out of this prison he was in.

Ron and Hermione came to see Harry some time later. Ginny had spent a lot of time talking to him as she rubbed soothing potions on his skin where he'd had casts and his skin had dried a bit. His eyes still wandered aimlessly, flitting here and there.

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"Wow, he's awake! Hi, Harry!" Ron called cheerfully when he saw his best mate was wearing his glasses.

"He's not really awake, Ron," Ginny said sadly. "He looks at me from time to time, but mostly his eyes just roll around like that."

"So he's still under the enchantment, then?" Hermione said unhappily.

"Apparently. But he's come out of it somewhat," Ginny said, giving Harry an encouraging smile. "You'll be fine soon, sweetheart, I'm sure of it."

"You look knackered," Ron said, studying his sister's weary face.

"I am," she admitted, a rare enough thing to make both Ron and Hermione stare at her.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked worriedly.

Ginny looked up at them, unshed tears sparkling in her eyes. "It's just. . .hard."

"You need a break," Hermione said, all business. "I'll stay with him while you go to the dorm and take a bath, a nap, change clothes, and all that. Ron can go with you and bring Harry's books back. We can read his lessons to him so he can keep up with his classes."

Ginny gave her a tired smile. "That sounds like a good idea." She looked down at Harry. "Would you mind if I go take a bath and change clothes, sweetie?" She watched for his eyes to stop roving and land on her, and finally they did. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Ginny, honestly, take your time. I can watch him," Hermione said.

"The kissing seems to be helping. I don't want to leave off for too long," Ginny said, a frown of worry crossing her face.

Hermione looked from Ginny to Ron. "Do you mind?" she asked her boyfriend.

"Huh? Oh. Uh, no, sure, that's fine, if it will help him," Ron said when he realized what she was asking.

"And do you mind?" she asked Ginny.

"Password?" Ginny asked with half a smile.

"Norbert."

"And do you have any funny potions on you anywhere?"

"Nope," Hermione assured her.

"Then OK. Thanks," Ginny replied after a moment's hesitation. "Ron, could you do your shaving spell on him? He's getting too stubbly to wash easily."

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"Sure, no problem," he said, taking out his wand and performing the simple charm most wizards used to remove their beards each day.

"Thanks, that's a lot better," Ginny said, rubbing her fingers gently across Harry's smooth cheek. She bent down and kissed him, then whispered in his ear, "I'm going to take a little break, sweetheart. Hermione's going to keep the kissing thing going, but she's fine, no potions or anything, and I got her password. Just don't enjoy her kisses too much, OK? You're mine and I'll fight her for you if I have to!" She knew Harry would grin at her for such a statement, if he could. She sat up and searched his face, looking for any expression that would show he understood her. Nothing. But his eyes locked with hers for a moment and she thought the cloudiness in front of the green lifted for a heartbeat – or maybe it was wishful thinking on her part. She kissed him again and followed her brother out of the hospital wing.

"Well, it's just you and me, Harry," Hermione said brightly. "I have some of my books with me. I'll start reading the lessons you've missed, how's that?" She settled into Ginny's chair and began reading the chapters to him, explaining what the teachers had said in class about each topic. When her voice began getting hoarse, she looked over at him and saw him watching her, if only for a few seconds.

"Are you awake now?" she said, her heart lifting hopefully. Her heart sank again as his eyes wandered away. "I guess I should do what I promised," she said, setting the books aside and sitting on the edge of his bed. She cupped his face in her hands, trying to look into his restless eyes, but they flitted quickly away every time they momentarily caught hers. "Harry, I don't know if this kissing thing really works or if it has to be your true love who does it, but I do love you dearly, and I'm going to give this a try, OK? If it helps, great! If it doesn't, well, at least I tried." With that, she brushed her lips lightly across his, hoping for a reaction. Nothing. She pressed her lips warmly to his and kissed him more seriously, then deepened the kiss. When his tongue moved slightly in response to hers, she sat up in shock. "Harry! Are you awake?" His eyes still wandered around with no real purpose. Disappointed, she kissed him again, realizing at last what an overwhelmingly heartbreaking time Ginny had been having up here, doing her best to bring him back and having to celebrate the tiniest movement as if it were a huge victory.

"You're a wonderful kisser, Harry, I do remember that much from my Black Widow episode. I wouldn't mind one of those lovely kisses of yours again, you know." She smiled at him hopefully. His eyes came to rest on her face and she thought he might actually be looking at her, but then they slid away again.

"Oh, Harry, how long is this going to go on?" she cried in sudden despair. "I don't know how Ginny stays so strong. I'm sorry, this is just breaking my heart. I'll go back to reading to you, is that all right with you?" she asked, gazing down into his suddenly still eyes. He was looking at her again, a slight frown between his eyebrows as if he was trying to focus his eyes. "Can you see me? Can you hear me? Blink if you can," she said with sudden inspiration. Very slowly and deliberately, Harry blinked. "Blink once for yes, twice for no, OK? Are you in pain?" One blink. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Have I hurt you?" Two blinks, and then his eyes slid away from her and he gasped, as if he'd been working hard and run out of breath. "This is real progress, Harry!" she said excitedly. "You can communicate now! Ginny will be ecstatic!" With one more very intentional blink in response to her comment, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

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"How did you think to have him blink for yes and no?" Ginny said a couple of hours later, very excited over Hermione's news.

"It just occurred to me," she said dismissively. "I thought it was worth trying."

"Do you have any other ideas?" Ginny said hopefully.

"No, not really," Hermione replied sadly. "I wish I did."

"But that's brilliant, 'Mione," Ron said encouragingly. "At least he can communicate now!"

"Yeah. Madam Pomfrey gave him some more potion when I told her he was in pain. She didn't believe me at first, but then he answered her questions with blinks and she knew he understood her," Hermione said.

"We've got to go," Ron told Hermione reluctantly. With N.E.W.T.'s coming this year, they couldn't afford to miss any classes. "Will you be all right, Gin?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I hope he wakes up soon. Professor McGonagall told me I can't stay with him all the time. She's going to make me go to class if this takes more than a few days. She said they'd find different people to take turns watching him."

"Well, that's good then," Hermione said encouragingly. "You need to keep your grades up."

Ginny exploded. "I don't care about grades! I don't care about school! I'll quit school like Fred and George and marry Harry as soon as he'll have me. He just has to get well first!"

"I know he's talked about it, but has he asked you?" Hermione said in surprise. She thought she and Ron would have known about it if Harry had made such a momentous decision.

"Not yet," Ginny said sadly, running her fingers lightly through his hair and cupping his cheek. "I don't want to rush him, but when he says the word, I'm ready."

"Gin, you're sixteen," Ron began uneasily.

"I know how old I am, Ron," she snapped.

"What about Healer School?" he asked carefully.

"I don't care anymore! I just want to be with Harry. I want to live in peace, in the country, and just be happy with Harry." Her voice broke toward the end of her speech, and her eyes filled with tears that she brushed angrily away.

"He's getting better, Ginny," Hermione said comfortingly.

"I know. It's just so *hard*!" Her body began shaking with sobs she was trying desperately to suppress.

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Hermione wrapped her arms around her friend and just held her for a few moments, until Ginny finally relaxed. "You all right now?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, thanks. Sorry I yelled at you," Ginny said quietly.

"You're tired and upset. We understand," Hermione replied. She looked up at Ron and sighed. "I guess we should go. Will you be OK?"

"Yeah, we'll be fine," Ginny said with a brave smile, holding Harry's hand and wishing his eyes would settle on her face again and finally light up in recognition.

"See you later, then," Ron said as he and Hermione turned to go.

"Yeah, see you," Ginny said quietly. She sat looking quietly at Harry for a while, then leaned down and rubbed noses with him. Her nose wrinkled and she sat back up and smiled at him. "You know what? You still smell like the lake, and I know you'd hate that. I'm going to try to clean you up a bit." She went and got a basin of warm water, soap and a flannel, then poured herself a goblet of cold water to drink. She set the goblet and basin on the bedside table and opened his pyjama top.

"Oof! Getting a bit gamey here, Potter," she teased. He'd been sweating off and on, probably due to pain, according to Madam Pomfrey. She dipped the flannel into the warm water and soaped it up, then began washing him. As she took a break from scrubbing his side, she reached for her goblet of water and tipped it up to drink from it, too tired to pay close attention to what she was doing. The water sloshed out of the goblet, getting her face and blouse wet and splashing onto Harry's side as well. He grunted and flinched at the sudden touch of cold water.

"*Harry!* Are you awake?" Ginny asked hopefully. His eyes were open and wandering around aimlessly. "Maybe not now, but you will be soon," she said, then poured the cold water on her flannel and applied it mercilessly to his sides, making him flinch hard and gasp. "I'm sorry, baby, but if it helps you wake up," she said, applying the cold cloth to his armpits. He gasped again and clenched his arm on her hand, the first time he'd moved either arm voluntarily since he'd been hurt.

Ginny stared at his face, willing his eyes to look at her. "Wake up, or I'll do it again!" she warned him. His eyes flashed to her face and suddenly, for a long moment, they cleared.

"Harry! You're back!" she said excitedly, then slumped as his eyes drifted off again. She cupped his face in her hands. "Harry, look at me. LOOK at me!" His eyes found hers again and rested, the cloudy, unfocused look clearing for a longer moment and the corners of his eyes crinkling as he tried to smile at her.

"Come on, sweetheart, you're nearly here! Come on, keep fighting!" she encouraged him. He began panting as if he had been running a race.

"Easy, easy," she soothed him. "Don't exhaust yourself. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be pushing you so hard."

Please, please, baby, keep pushing, he thought excitedly. I'm so close!

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Ginny was so worried about him that she didn't hear him calling her this time. She went back to washing his face, chest and arms with the warm water, dried him and buttoned his pyjamas again. She could see he was exhausted. His whole body was drooping, along with his eyelids. "You should rest now. I've tired you too much. I'm sorry. But you made so much progress this time! Next time you're awake, you'll be fine! I'll bet you on it! What shall we bet?" She looked at him, doing her best to be playful, a smile on her face. He was looking back at her, his eyes clear and focused, which lifted her heart tremendously. "Hmm. What's a good bet? Not your Firebolt, mine's newer," she teased. "Um. . .how about if you're fine, which is my bet, since I'll be the winner, you can kiss me. And if you're not fine, I'll kiss you and make you better. How's that?" She smiled as his eyes crinkled a bit at the corners. He'd heard and understood her, she was sure of it. She leaned down and kissed him. "You rest now. You look knackered." She ran her fingers through his hair lightly and smiled at him, watching him drift off to sleep.

"How's he doing?" Madam Pomfrey asked a while later. Ginny told her about the progress he'd made.

"Excellent," Madam Pomfrey said with a smile. "Keep up the good work, Miss Weasley." Ginny just smiled, then sat back in her chair and fell into an exhausted sleep.

"Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter, sir! Oh, where is my master?" came a worried voice from somewhere near the entrance to the darkened hospital wing. The voice got closer and closer to Harry's bed, eventually waking Ginny.

"Hi, Dobby! What time is it?" Ginny said as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She glanced at her watch. Midnight. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"Professor Dumbledore just told Dobby and Winky that Harry Potter sir was hurt. Dobby is here to make his pumpkin soup for Harry Potter sir to make him feel better," the elf explained, coming to the side of the bed and peering into Harry's sleeping face closely. "What is wrong with Dobby's master?"

"Some bad people hurt him, but he's better," Ginny assured him kindly. "He's under a sleeping spell, but he's beginning to wake up. It may take him a while to be fully awake, but when he is, I'm sure he'd love some of your soup."

"Who were the bad people? Have they been caught? Have they been punished?" Dobby asked, his voice both anxious and fierce.

"Not yet. We don't know who they are. When Harry wakes up, he'll tell us," Ginny said with more assurance than she felt.

Dobby tilted his head until his face was nose to nose with Harry's. "Harry Potter sir? Dobby is here. Dobby will take good care of Harry Potter sir," the elf said softly. He moved away from Harry a little and turned to Ginny. "Does Ginny Wheezy need anything? Dobby will take care of Ginny Wheezy. Harry Potter sir would want him to."

"No, Dobby, I'm fine, thank you," Ginny said with a sad smile.

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"Then Dobby will go to the kitchens and prepare the soup and keep it perfect for Harry Potter sir. Ginny Wheezy will let Dobby know when Harry Potter sir wakes up?"

"Absolutely," Ginny promised.

"Thank you, miss," Dobby replied. He stood wringing his long-fingered hands for a moment. "Dobby wants to help find the bad people. What can Dobby do?"

"All we know about them is that they're probably students and were wearing black work robes and hoods," Ginny replied. "The merpeople told us that much."

"Dobby will help find the bad people," the house-elf said ardently, then snapped his fingers and vanished.

Ginny looked at Harry's still form. "I hope Dobby does find them, and does something absolutely awful to them," she murmured. She sighed, settled back in her chair and went to sleep.

The next morning, a cramp in her neck woke Ginny up. She sat up and rubbed the sore spot, glancing at Harry as she did so. He was awake and watching her.

"Harry! How are you?" she said eagerly, hoping he was truly awake and aware this time.

His eyes didn't leave hers. They were clear and bright and crinkling in the corners as the hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"You're much better! That's wonderful!" she said eagerly. "Are you hungry? Dobby was here a few hours ago. He came to make his pumpkin soup for you. Do you want some?"

Harry's eyes crinkled in a smile again and he blinked once. After a moment, he blinked twice.

"Yes? No? What?" Ginny said, confused. She watched him closely and noticed he was having difficulty trying to swallow. "OK, we'll wait for the soup. You should be able to have it soon." She thought a moment. This was the first time he'd been lucid for more than a moment or two at a stretch. "Professor Dumbledore would probably like to see you, maybe use Legilimency on you to try to find out who hurt you. Are you up to that?" One blink, but then his eyes wandered away aimlessly again. "It's OK, sweetheart," she assured him, wishing his eyes would focus on her again. She sighed, forcing herself to be grateful for any signs of progress at all.

"I'll call Professor Dumbledore," she said after a moment's thought, pulling out her Famous Wizard card. She tapped on it to wake the sleeping portrait of Harry. "Tell Professor Dumbledore Harry's awake. He can't speak yet, but his eyes are staying focused for several moments at a time. He might be able to use Legilimency on him now to see what happened. Go on, hurry!" she urged the picture. The small Harry zoomed out of his frame and quickly returned.

"He's on his way," little Harry announced.

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"Thanks," Ginny said with satisfaction. She turned back to the real Harry. His eyes were still wandering. She cupped his cheeks in her hands and leaned down until they were nearly nose to nose. Finally, his eyes stopped roving and stayed on hers, clearing after a moment's stillness.

"Harry, can you answer some questions for me?" One blink. "OK. The merpeople said there was another boy there, with a light colour on his robes. Was he a Hufflepuff?" One blink. "Do you know him?" Two blinks, a moment of rest, then one blink. "I'm confused. Do you know who he is?" One blink. "Wonderful! Let's see, um. . .OK, I'll say the letters of the alphabet and you blink once when I get to the right one. That way, you can spell out his name. OK?" One blink. She began the process and had gotten the boy's first name by the time Dumbledore arrived in the hospital wing.

"Professor! Harry's told me the other boy was a Hufflepuff named Liam!" Ginny said eagerly when he neared Harry's bed.

"He's speaking now? Wonderful!" Dumbledore said with delight.

"No, we did it with the eye blinks," Ginny said, and then went on to explain how she'd worked out the boy's name.

"Well done, Miss Weasley, very clever," Dumbledore said approvingly. He turned to Harry. "And how are you this fine morning, dear boy? Feeling better?" Harry's eyes were back to wandering aimlessly.

"You have to get his attention, I think," Ginny said, sitting on the side of the bed and putting her hands on his cheeks again. "Harry? Look at me. Look at me, baby, come on, you can do it." His eyes wandered past her face, nearly stopped but slid off to the side. "Come on, Harry, you can do this!" she insisted. His eyes fell on her face and stayed there, the unfocused expression clearing and his eyes crinkling a bit. "Professor Dumbledore is here. Try to keep your eyes on him so you can talk to him, OK?" He blinked once. Ginny smiled at him and got up, allowing the headmaster to sit in her place.

"Harry, look at me," Dumbledore said, following Ginny's example. "Ah, there you are, lad," he said with a smile as Harry's eyes stilled and focused on his face. "Are you feeling better?" Harry blinked once, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he tried to smile. "You're much closer to being free of that spell. Excellent. May I try to see if I can tell who attacked you? I don't want to tire you, nor do I want you to dwell on that awful memory. But I do need to see it, if you can manage it. All right?" One blink. Dumbledore went still, staring into the green depths of Harry's eyes. His face grew taut as the scene progressed, his mouth becoming a thin line. Finally, he patted Harry's cheeks gently and thanked him, then stood up again.

"What did you see?" Ginny said. She, Ron and Hermione were learning Legilimency and Occlumency from Harry, but hadn't progressed very far yet.

Dumbledore's eyes fell on Harry, who was panting and looked exhausted now. "Please don't try to do this yourself, Miss Weasley. He doesn't need to go through that again. This was quite hard on him," he said, looking sadly at his protégé. He sighed and glanced back at Ginny. "I saw a Hufflepuff boy watching while three other boys beat Harry horribly, then Banished him to the middle of the lake. None of the spells were properly cast. The Stunner only made him

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unable to move, rather than truly stunning him. The Everlasting Sleep Curse didn't take effect right away, so Harry was awake and aware for the whole thing, including when he fell into the water. He didn't lose consciousness for quite a while underwater. He was fighting to survive with everything he had, bless him." The old wizard shivered. "It was awful. You don't need to see that, nor does he need to relive it. All right?"

"Yes, professor," Ginny agreed, her face ashen from what she'd heard. Ron and Hermione entered just then.

"What's going on?" Ron asked.

"How is he?" Hermione said at the same time.

"I've just done Legilimency on Harry and the merpeople were right. There was a Hufflepuff boy watching while the others were attacking Harry. Miss Weasley managed to get his name from Harry with that ingenious eye-blink method you came up with, Miss Granger." He gave Hermione a small smile and she blushed at the praise. "The boy's name is Liam. There are only two Liams in Hufflepuff, and one of them has fair hair. This was the dark haired boy. Mr. Weasley, I'd like you to go to Professor Flitwick's class and bring me Liam Titmarsh. Bring him here, so Harry can identify him as the witness, all right?"

Ron's face was grim. "Yes, sir."

"And Mr. Weasley, please try not to damage him on the way here," Dumbledore said with a slight smile.

"If you insist," Ron replied grimly, his face stony. "I'll be right back."

"Professor Dumbledore! Professor Dumbledore!" Dobby cried as he popped into the hospital wing. "Dobby has found something!"

"What is it?" Dumbledore said.

"Dobby was talking to the house-elves in the kitchen. . .ah, my master is awake! Does Harry Potter want soup now?"

"Not just now, Dobby," Ginny told him kindly. "I'll let you know."

Dobby bent close to Harry's face. "Dobby is so happy to see Harry Potter sir awake!" Harry blinked once, his eyes smiling a little.

"He said 'hi,' Dobby," Ginny explained. "He can only talk by blinking his eyes right now."

Dobby looked up at her in surprise, then looked back at his master and blinked his huge green eyes once, very deliberately, which made Harry crinkle the corners of his eyes again in an attempt to smile.

"Dobby, what did you find out?" Dumbledore prompted him.

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"OH! Dobby is talking with the house-elves and they is most upset! They all likes Harry Potter sir very much. The elves who do the housekeeping for Hufflepuff and Slytherin is finding something, sir, when they is doing the weekly cleaning out of the wardrobes of the bad students who won't put their dirty robes in the laundry bin." He shuddered, apparently with horror at having dirty laundry stuffed in the back of a wardrobe.

"What did they find?" Dumbledore said patiently.

"Something *awful*!" Dobby gasped, his eyes huge. "They is finding work robes with blood all over the bottom edges and spattered up the fronts! And shoes with blood on them, as well!"

Dumbledore's eyes sharpened. "Whose things are they?"

"The house-elves is getting them now, sir. They put them aside. They is afraid to clean them, but doesn't know what to do. They will have them waiting for Professor Dumbledore when he gets there."

"The laundry room or the kitchens?" Dumbledore said, already striding toward the door.

"The laundry room, sir," Dobby called.

"Well done, Dobby!" Dumbledore said, throwing open the door and hurrying out into the corridor. He paused and called back, "Tell Mr. Weasley to keep Mr. Titmarsh out of Harry's sight and to keep him quiet until I return. I don't want Harry disturbed any more than necessary."

"Yes, Professor," Ginny replied. "Wow, baby, we're going to get to the bottom of this!" she said smiling down at him. His eyes settled on hers and he tried his best to smile before his eyes drifted closed as he fell asleep again. Ginny sighed and sat back in her chair. Dobby was hovering around Harry, looking for something to do for him.

"Dobby," Ginny said, "thanks for finding out about those robes."

"Dobby sees so many wounds on Harry Potter sir, Dobby is thinking the bad people who hurt Harry Potter sir must have blood on their robes," the house-elf said wisely, "so Dobby is asking about robes that is hidden somewhere, or has blood on them. These robes is both hidden and bloody." His ears were erect, his posture rigid, his eyes flashing fiercely. "Bad wizards hurt my master. Bad wizards must be punished!"

"You're right, Dobby, and thanks to you, they'll be caught," Ginny said with a smile. "Well done!"

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Chapter 26 – Consequences

Ron knocked on the door to Professor Flitwick's classroom, then opened it and stepped inside. "I'm sorry to disrupt your class, Professor," he said through clenched teeth, his eyes hard and cold, "but I need Liam Titmarsh." His anger had increased exponentially as he'd rushed from the hospital wing to this classroom.

"What for?" Flitwick asked, noticing the tension in the young man's eyes.

"Professor Dumbledore wants to see him," Ron replied, doing his best to control his temper. "Bring your bag, Titmarsh. You won't be coming back to class."

Liam Titmarsh sat trembling in his seat. "No. I don't want to."

"I'm Head Boy, or have you forgotten?" Ron snapped in his most authoritative voice. "Get up. Now."

"Go with Mr. Weasley, Mr. Titmarsh," Flitwick urged the boy uneasily. Liam finally got up and trudged slowly out of the door, closely followed by Ron and Professor Flitwick. The professor turned back to his stunned class. They were gaping at Ron. Few people had ever seen him throw his weight around as Head Boy, much less in such an incandescent rage.

"Keep practicing, class," Flitwick said. "I'll be right back." He closed the door behind him and said, "Mr. Weasley, wait a moment." He put an Imperturbable Charm on the door so his students couldn't overhear their conversation. Extendable Ears were in use all over the castle these days, so Imperturbing doors had become a common practice.

"Yes, Professor?" Ron said as politely as he could manage given the extent of his anger.

"What's this all about?"

"Have you heard about what happened to Harry?" Ron said, his eyes flashing with suppressed rage.

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore told me he was injured by the lake," Flitwick said sadly. "I thought it was supposed to be a secret," he added, glancing at the young boy next to Ron.

"This *git*," Ron spat, shoving the smaller boy roughly, "stood by and watched while three others beat Harry nearly to death, then put spells on him and Banished him to the middle of the lake, where he would have drowned if the merpeople hadn't saved him. This little *prat* was the one who set him up so they could attack him. And then he *stood by and watched*, not doing a thing to get help or stop them or anything!"

Flitwick was aghast. "Did you do this, Mr. Titmarsh?"

"They can't prove anything!" Liam said defiantly, then started to run. Ron reached out a long arm and grabbed a handful of the boy's robes, nearly lifting him off his feet as he stopped him.

"I wouldn't bet on that," Ron said, menace in his voice. "Harry identified you." The smaller boy gasped. "You didn't expect him to survive, did you, much less be able to tell us who you

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were," he growled. He shoved the boy ahead of him, but kept a tight hold on his robes. "Move. Professor Dumbledore wants a word with you." He looked back at Flitwick. "If you'll excuse us, Professor?"

"Yes, go on, Mr. Weasley," Flitwick replied. He eyed the struggling younger boy uneasily. If Liam gave Ron much trouble, the redhead might do something reckless, given how angry he was already. He couldn't blame Ron for his feelings. Flitwick was quite fond of Harry as well. He sighed, and decided to do what he could to keep Ron out of trouble. "Would you like me to put a Restraint Charm on him so he's easier for you to deal with?"

A cold smile crossed Ron's face. "Thanks, but it will be my pleasure to do that if it's necessary."

"Be careful with him, Mr. Weasley," Flitwick warned. "Don't do anything rash. Mr. Potter wouldn't want you to get in trouble."

"I'll be careful, sir," Ron said grimly, then turned to the trembling boy in front of him. "Move!" he ordered, pulling out his wand and pointing it at the boy, before letting go of his robes. "And don't do anything stupid. I know loads of hexes I've been itching to try out and you look like an excellent guinea pig to me."

As they walked down the hall, they passed Professor McGonagall. She noticed the unusually grim look on Ron's usually cheerful features, and his wand held steadily on the younger boy. "Mr. Weasley, what's going on?"

"This git is the one who stood by and watched Harry being beaten and tossed in the lake," Ron said tersely.

"Indeed?" she said, glaring at the younger boy. "Mr. Titmarsh, is this true?"

"I didn't do anything!" Liam cried defiantly.

"*Liar!*" Ron snarled.

McGonagall could see Ron was teetering on the edge of rage. "Where are you taking him?"

"Professor Dumbledore told me to bring him to the hospital wing so Harry can identify him."

"Well, then, let's go," she said, turning and walking along with Ron. "How did you know who it was?"

"Harry named him."

"He's talking again?" she said in delight.

"Not exactly," Ron replied, "but he identified Liam plainly enough."

"I see," McGonagall said quietly, although she didn't really see at all.

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When they reached a cross-corridor, Liam tried to take off. Ron pointed his wand at the boy's retreating back and snapped, "*Incarcerous*." The boy was swiftly wrapped up in ropes and fell to the floor with a thud.

"How do you like it?" Ron sneered as he loomed over his captive. "It isn't much fun, is it? How do you think Harry felt when he was spelled so he couldn't move? *Git!*" He stopped speaking, breathing heavily as he fought to control his temper, his wand trembling in his clenched fist. After a moment, he went on. "I could have Stunned you, but I want you to be aware of what's going on. *Wingardium Leviosa*," he said, and the boy's body began to float in front of Ron, who allowed him to bump into corners and suits of armour on occasion. Liam was crying and pleading with Ron, which annoyed him. "*Silencio!*" Ron snapped. "Tell it to Professor Dumbledore. I don't want to hear your excuses or your whining." Just then, he remembered he had a professor with him. He turned and looked at her, his face reddening. "Sorry, Professor. I should have let you handle it."

"Not at all. You did an excellent job, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall said with a small smile. "I believe you'll make a fine Auror. You controlled both the suspect and your temper. Well done." She'd kept a careful eye on Ron but had seen no reason to interfere in what he was doing. She was sorely tempted to hex the boy herself.

Ron blushed even more. "Erm. . . thanks, Professor," he said, then started moving the levitating boy down the hall.

When they entered the hospital wing, Ron removed the Levitation Charm and Liam's body hit the floor with a thud again. "*Oops*," Ron said with obvious insincerity. "Stay there and be quiet."

Liam lay on the floor, trussed up like a Christmas goose, his eyes huge and frightened. They widened further when he saw Dumbledore come in looking absolutely furious. Dumbledore glared angrily at the boy on the floor and stalked past him, moving to Harry's bedside.

"How is he?" he asked Ginny as he approached.

"He's awake," she said nervously. She'd rarely seen Dumbledore in such a rage. It was truly frightening. Waves of power similar to those that Harry's anger created were coming off him. She listened for tinkling glass or rattling windows, which were sometimes the result of Harry's temper, but didn't hear any. She breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently Dumbledore's years of practice made him better at keeping his temper at a safe level than Harry was.

Dumbledore sat on the side of Harry's bed and took some deep breaths, trying to calm himself. "I need to take a page from your book, lad," he said with a crooked smile. "My anger nearly got the best of me just now." He put his hands on Harry's cheeks, trying to get him to focus. "Look at me, Harry. Can you hear me?" One blink. "Liam is here. I want you to look at him and let me know if he's the right boy or not." Harry blinked again. "Thank you, dear boy." Dumbledore smiled fondly at Harry. Keeping his eyes on Harry's, he raised his voice a bit and said, "Bring him here, Mr. Weasley."

Ron got the boy to his feet and removed his bonds. "Behave or I'll truss you tighter next time," he growled as he shoved the reluctant boy toward Harry's bed. "Is this him, Harry?"

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"I'm going to turn your head so you can see him, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly. "Try to focus straight ahead, all right?" One blink. Dumbledore turned Harry's face toward Liam. Harry's eyes settled on the boy's face and a look of sadness and anger came into his eyes. He blinked once, very deliberately. "Thank you, lad," Dumbledore said, patting Harry's cheek gently as he released his face. Harry gasped a bit as his head rolled back into his pillow. "Are you all right?" Dumbledore asked in concern. Harry blinked once, then his eyes began their incessant wandering again.

"Well, he told us what we need to know," Dumbledore said, getting to his feet. "This is the right boy."

"I didn't do anything!" Liam cried, struggling against Ron's large hand, which held a fistful of his robes again.

"That's exactly what you did wrong, young man," Dumbledore said sternly. "You didn't do anything, which means you will be charged as an Accessory to Attempted Murder. The Aurors are on the way here for you now." The boy blanched. "I know who the other boys were. We found their bloody robes, which conveniently had their name tags sewn inside them. I'll deal with those boys shortly. But I want to hear the story from you first. Tell me what happened, who was involved, and who put them up to it, and things may go easier for you."

"I didn't . . ."

"If you lie to me, I will know it," Dumbledore interrupted, his blue eyes flashing with fury. "If you don't tell me the whole truth, I will know it. And if you don't cooperate, we'll use Veritaserum. I will not tolerate people standing by while another person is hurt. You were part of a plot to kill another student. The consequences will be dire for you and your friends. Start talking, and you may get a lesser sentence."

"Sentence?" the boy croaked.

"If found guilty, you will be sentenced to detention for life in Azkaban Prison, which is the automatic sentence for those between the ages of 10 and 18 who commit such crimes. Do you really want to face that? Tell me what you know."

Once the boy finally started talking, the story spilled out quickly.

"I'd like to know why you boys thought you needed to attack Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said when the boy's recitation ended.

"He killed our dads," Liam said, his eyes aching with loss.

"Where? When?"

"At the Battle of Little Hangleton."

Dumbledore frowned. "Do you know where their bodies were found?"

"In the west end of the cemetery."

The Time of Destiny

"Harry was never in the west end," Ron said, puzzled.

"Harry didn't kill your father, or the other boys' fathers either, Mr. Titmarsh," Dumbledore said sadly. "They were killed by other people who were helping us fight. You blamed the wrong person."

"Draco Malfoy said—" the boy began, before realizing his mistake.

"*Malfoy*? What did he say?" Ron snarled. Ginny and Hermione both gasped. Hermione wrapped her arm around Ginny's shoulders comfortingly. Malfoy had done so much harm to Hermione the previous spring, to Ginny the previous summer, and now he'd engineered this attack on Harry! Both girls trembled with barely-suppressed rage.

"Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore warned, "please calm down." He turned back to the young boy. "What did Mr. Malfoy say? Where and when did you see him?"

"We met him regularly on Hogsmeade weekends," Liam replied. "He taught us the spells and told us what to do. He told us Potter killed our dads."

"He lied," Dumbledore said simply. "Harry simply wasn't in that area, never once during the battle, even before we arrived there. Where is Mr. Malfoy now?"

"I don't know. Nigel was the one who stayed in touch with him," Liam said.

"I see. We'll ask Mr. Gedgrave about Mr. Malfoy when we bring him in," Dumbledore said, looking at McGonagall for a long moment. He turned back to the trembling boy before him. "Thank you for your help. Do you have anything else to say?" The boy shook his head. "If you think of something, please let me know."

Dumbledore studied Ron's face for a moment, then turned to Professor McGonagall. "Would you and Mr. Weasley go and get the other boys from their classes and bring them here? I will take Mr. Titmarsh to the dungeons."

"Yes, of course," McGonagall said, and she and Ron left to get two Hufflepuff boys and one Slytherin.

Dumbledore turned to look at Harry before he left. "Harry? Are you all right?" he asked in sudden concern. Harry was pale, his eyes huge and uneasy. "Lad? What's wrong?" He sat down on the bed again, taking Harry's face in his hands and waiting for Harry's eyes to lock on his. "I'm sorry you had to hear all that." Dumbledore thought for a long moment. He'd intended to give Harry a choice about listening to the other boys being interrogated, but Harry just didn't seem to be strong enough, and he couldn't identify them anyway. The evidence would convict those boys, not any testimony Harry could give. His decision made, he patted the boy gently on the cheek. "You get some rest. I'll check on you again shortly."

"Mr. Weasley, can I trust you to control your temper?" McGonagall said, studying the rigid face of the tall young man beside her as they hurried down the hall.

"Yes, Professor. I didn't rip Liam's head off, but I certainly wanted to," he growled.

The Time of Destiny

"I know you did, and I don't blame you. I feel that way myself, actually," she said tersely, which made Ron look at her quickly and give her a small surprised smile. "Yes, even professors have their moments, Mr. Weasley," she added tartly. "If you can continue to control yourself as you've already done so admirably, then in the interest of time, we can split up. You get the Slytherin boy, and I'll get the two from Hufflepuff. Your boy should be in Professor Snape's class now."

"Yes, Professor," Ron said grimly, then hurried off toward the dungeons.

The giant squid was sunning itself near the shore when Professor McGonagall began her trek around the lake to retrieve the Hufflepuff boys suspected of attacking Harry from Hagrid's class. The squid followed her, a tentacle waving above the water entreatingly ever so often.

"Hufflepuffs," McGonagall muttered darkly as she marched along the lake's edge. "*Hufflepuffs!* I ask you, what is the world coming to when *Hufflepuffs* will attack someone this way? If Harry had died. . . ." She shuddered at the thought. "I never thought I'd see the day when Hufflepuffs would beat someone nearly to death and then try to *drown* him!" She muttered other imprecations against the boys as she hurried on her way.

"Oh, what is it?" she snapped, turning to the squid when its mute pleas finally registered in her mind. "What do you want?"

The squid waved its tentacles above the water in some kind of pattern, but McGonagall didn't understand. "I'm sorry, I don't have any treats for you just now." She started to hurry on, but the squid's odd movements continued. "Are you trying to tell me something?" The gestures continued. McGonagall could see the squid's movements formed some kind of pattern that it was repeating over and over, but she couldn't understand it. "I'm very sorry, but I don't know what you're saying," she said finally. "You'll need to tell Hagrid. I have an errand to do. I'll tell him you want something when I see him," she said, turning back to the path and walking quickly along it.

Hagrid had his class assembled on the lakeshore, telling them about ways to keep water pure so the beings in the lake would stay healthy, and how to purify it if it became contaminated. He looked up when he saw McGonagall coming. "Good morning, Professor!" he called warmly. "And to what do we owe this honour?"

"I need Owen and Mycroft Chisswick," she said tersely, her glasses flashing furiously. "Oh, and the squid was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand it," she added as an afterthought. "Get your things, boys," she said when she saw the twin boys in the group. "You won't be returning to class."

"Why?" Mycroft said uneasily.

"Professor Dumbledore wants to speak with you," she snapped. "Let's go." The boys joined her reluctantly, dragging their feet as they crossed the clearing.

The squid was waving its tentacles more urgently, and was very close to shore now. "What's wrong, Sebastian?" Hagrid said, his face furrowed in concern.

"Sebastian?" a student said with a snort of laughter.

The Time of Destiny

"Well, everythin' needs a name," Hagrid explained casually. "What is it, Sebastian?"

The squid pushed itself right up on the sandy ledge, just barely keeping its body in the water. It reached out with its tentacles and captured the Chiswick boys as they neared McGonagall, lifting them with a rather triumphant flourish and swiftly carrying them out to the centre of the lake where it began dunking them repeatedly.

"Sebastian!" Hagrid roared. "Bring those boys back right now!"

The squid ignored Hagrid's calls, continuing to dunk the boys. The merpeople rose up out of the water around the squid, talking to it in their screeching language. It responded by waving its tentacles in the same pattern it had used with McGonagall and Hagrid. The merpeople pulled at the boys' hair, limbs and robes, trying to tug the boys out of the squid's grasp, but it wouldn't let go of them. The merpeople then resorted to beating the boys with their hideous grey fists whenever they could reach them, their green hair flying, screeching in their horrible language all the while.

Hagrid turned to Professor McGonagall, who was staring at the scene in mute shock. "What's going on? Why is Sebastian punishing those boys? And what are the merpeople up to?"

Professor McGonagall just mouthed wordlessly for a moment, then swallowed hard and cleared her throat. "Those boys are the ones who tried to kill Harry," she said quietly when she could find her voice again.

"They are?" Hagrid said with a gasp. His face turned red with fury. "I'll break every bone in their ruddy bodies," he snarled.

"There, there, Hagrid," McGonagall said soothingly. "We don't need you to get in trouble. However, I don't mind letting Sebastian deal with them for a bit," she said, her face grim. "He does seem to be protecting them, at least a little, from the merpeople. Nice name, Sebastian," she added with a small smile at Hagrid.

"Oh, well," he began, blushing at the compliment. Then he looked across the lake again. A memory of his Ministry hearing over Buckbeak's supposedly unprovoked attack on Draco Malfoy flashed through his mind. Hagrid wouldn't allow any more of his creatures to be sentenced to death by the Ministry. "*Sebastian!* That's enough! Stop it! Bring 'em back now, or the Ministry might send someone ter deal with ya! I don't want that, Sebastian! Come on, be a good lad! Bring 'em back!" He sighed in disgust, turning to his class. "Pratt, Montrose, go behind me hut and bring out the dinghy," Hagrid said tersely. "Hurry!" The two boys raced off to find the boat.

"Can you do anything, Professor?" Hagrid said anxiously. "I don't want Sebastian to be condemned to death for misbehaving."

"I'll try," McGonagall replied. She'd been wondering what kind of spell it would take to get the boys away from the squid safely. She tried using a Summoning Charm on the boys, which drew them toward shore a bit, but the squid wasn't going to let them go, pulling against the spell strongly and swimming further away from shore. "Oh, for Merlin's sake," McGonagall sighed disgustedly. "*Accio, squid!*" She glanced up at Hagrid as the squid's body raced toward shore. "Will a Stinging Hex injure it, Hagrid?"

The Time of Destiny

"I don't think so," he said uncertainly. "We do need to get those boys away from it."

"If it was going to do them permanent harm, it would have already eaten them as it did the Death Eaters when they attacked last term," McGonagall said tartly. "It's only punishing the boys."

"You know, I think you're right," Hagrid said, his face clearing. "I don' mind tellin' ya, it had me worried there," he added in a low voice so his students wouldn't hear him. It would have been hard for anyone to hear him anyway, what with the boys in the squid's tentacles screaming their lungs out, the girls in the class squealing, and the merpeople still screeching curses in their ghastly, loud voices.

McGonagall stopped her Summoning Charm so the squid's body stayed in deep enough water for its safety, then did a Stinging Hex on the tentacles holding the boys. The boys shrieked as the stings also reached them, but were immediately silenced when they fell into the lake.

Hagrid splashed out into the water and patted the squid gently. "Well done, Sebastian," he murmured, then hauled the boys sputtering and kicking out of the water and carried them to dry land, one under each of his massive arms.

"D'you want me ter carry this rubbish up to the castle for ya?" he offered, shaking both boys roughly as he spoke.

"No, but thank you, Hagrid. I can deal with them. Go ahead and finish your class. And do give Sebastian some treats for me. I'll remember to give him some toast after dinner, as well," she said with a small smile.

Hagrid chuckled. "I'll do that," he promised, then dropped both boys very deliberately on the ground from his full height. They lay there groaning.

"Get up and start moving before I really hex you," McGonagall said darkly. The two boys struggled to their feet and began trudging up the path, their heads bowed and their shoulders slumped. "Oh, and boys?" she said sweetly. They turned back to look at her. "Please, please try to escape or do something else rash. I'd just love to add to what the squid did." They glanced at each other briefly, then faced forward and walked on obediently enough.

Ron reached Snape's classroom and knocked on the door. "Professor?" he said as he entered the room. "I'm sorry to disrupt your class, but Professor Dumbledore needs to see Nigel Gedgrave."

"Gedgrave," Snape said, barely glancing at the boy, "go with Weasley."

"No!" the boy retorted, gazing at Ron's stern face uneasily. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Don't even start with me," Ron growled, his eyes flashing dangerously. "I've already been through the same scene with your little accomplice. He isn't at all happy. I'll be happy to truss you up the same way I did him, if you cheek me at all."

"Mr. Weasley!" Snape said, shocked out of his normal reserve. "What is the meaning of this?"

The Time of Destiny

"Come outside and I'll tell you, Professor," Ron said, glaring around at the class full of wide-eyed Fourth Year Gryffindors and Slytherins. "Gedgrave, MOVE! And bring your bag. You're not returning to class."

"Let's go, Gedgrave," Snape said quietly. "I'll find out what's going on and we'll deal with it."

Gedgrave looked at his Head of House hopefully. Snape should be on his side – he was a Death Eater, after all. But there was no way anyone would know what he'd done – was there? He was certain he'd kept his identity secret when they'd killed Potter. His hood hadn't slipped, and they'd been careful not to call each other by their names. How could anyone know? There had been no mention of Potter's absence since the attack. Most people thought he was just staying with Dumbledore again. Gedgrave had wondered why Potter's death hadn't been mentioned, but had taken the lack of news as a sign that his body hadn't been found. As he slowly packed up his bag, his brain was churning, going over every detail of the attack. *Maybe the squid really did eat him! That would be the best thing, Nigel thought. Potter's body should be invisible – I put that spell on him myself! But I could still see Potter's body as it flew across the lake, so maybe the Invisibility Spell didn't work properly. . .but still, there hasn't been any news about a body being found. Surely everything's OK? Yeah, it has to be.* He breathed a bit more easily now.

Having reassured himself that he couldn't be blamed for Potter's death, Nigel assumed Dumbledore wanted him for some other reason and Weasley was just in a bad mood. Maybe he'd had a fight with that bushy-haired girlfriend of his. Nearly smiling at the thought of the huge redheaded Head Boy being henpecked by that mouthy little know-it-all Mudblood Granger, Nigel picked up his bag and followed Ron out of the classroom, Snape right on their heels.

"What's going on, Weasley?" Snape demanded when he'd closed his classroom door and put an Imperturbable Charm on it.

"Thanks for that," Ron said, nodding toward the charmed door. "I don't want any trouble between Gryffindors and Slytherins over this. Very few people know what happened so far, and that may be for the best in the long run."

"So what happened?" Snape prompted him irritably.

"This git and two others tried to beat Harry to death, then Banished him to the middle of the lake to drown him," Ron snarled.

"*What?*" Snape said, truly shocked. "Is Potter. . .dead?" His face had paled considerably, which was remarkable given his normal pallor.

"No, he's not dead, no thanks to this gormless git and his friends. He's recovering," Ron snarled, watching Gedgrave's face closely. When he saw the boy's eyes widen in surprise, he snarled, "You thought he was dead, didn't you, you sod!" Ron grabbed the boy's shoulder and shook him fiercely. "Lucky for you he isn't, because then nothing would stop me from killing you where you stand."

"*Mr. Weasley!*" Snape warned sharply.

The Time of Destiny

"If Harry had died, I wouldn't be the only one after their skins," Ron growled. "I'm telling the truth, sir. You can check with Professor Dumbledore. Harry's in the hospital wing. Evidence has been found that proves Gedgrave and two others attacked Harry."

"They can't prove anything!" Gedgrave snarled.

Snape studied Gedgrave's face in silence, then took a step back, allowing Ron to do his job.

"Oh, yes, they can," Ron said smoothly. "Come on, let's go. There are Aurors waiting to take you away."

"*What?*" the boy gasped.

"You're in for a lifetime in Azkaban, you wanker," Ron sneered. "That's too little punishment, in my opinion. Let's go." He shoved the boy ahead of him. "I have my wand on you. Any funny business and it will be my great pleasure to hex you."

Dumbledore met Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt at the door to the hospital wing. "Thank you for coming so quickly," he said. "I've kept Harry's condition a secret for many reasons, not the least of which was that we hoped his attackers would slip up somehow so we could catch them. Fortunately, Harry was able to identify one of them, and that boy identified the others. Dobby also found evidence that proves their guilt."

"What kind of evidence?" Tonks asked seriously. Remus had told her about Harry's condition right away, but she hadn't been allowed to visit him. Since Dumbledore was keeping the attack on Harry a secret, it might have attracted attention if Lupin's pretty young wife was seen spending a lot of time in the hospital wing. It had taken every ounce of strength she had not to rush there and help look after him. Knowing Ginny would be doing an admirable job of caring for Harry, Tonks had spent the time doing what she did best, examining the evidence and the site of the attack and trying to find out who was involved, with little luck so far. Since she'd married Remus, Harry had become a little brother or a son to her, she wasn't sure which, not that it mattered. He was *family*, and she was fiercely protective of her loved ones.

"The house-elves found blood-spattered robes and shoes," Dumbledore replied tersely. "The robes have the boys' names inside them, the same names their accomplice gave us."

"Before we go further," Kingsley said in his slow, deep voice, "let us see the robes. There's a charm we can do on them to see who wore them last."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said. "They're in my office for safekeeping."

"We're right here at the hospital wing," Tonks protested. "Can we go and see Harry for a minute?"

"Let's look at the evidence first," Dumbledore said. "I'd like to get these matters resolved quickly so we can get those boys away from Hogwarts with as little fuss as possible. The longer it takes to remove them, the more chance we'll have for problems from their friends." Tonks and Kingsley nodded and followed Dumbledore down the many corridors to his office.

The Time of Destiny

Once in Dumbledore's office, Kingsley used his wand to levitate one robe from the pile so it could be thoroughly examined. At the sight of the massive amount of blood on them, Tonks paled, then turned green.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore said in concern.

"I've seen things like this before, but . . . that's *H-harry's* blood," she said, tears springing to her eyes, "and there's s-so much of it."

"If this is too difficult for you, we can call someone else," Dumbledore said kindly. "And Harry is much better now. You can see him in a little while, since his condition won't be a secret much longer."

"Thanks. I'll be fine. I need to do this for Harry," she said, forcing down the bile that kept rising in her throat.

Kingsley was rotating the robes slowly, studying the blood spatter patterns on the front, the larger blood stains at the bottom of the robes, and the fact that there was no blood on the back of the robes at all. "It appears that whoever wore these robes attacked someone, rather than being attacked himself," he murmured. A small crystal box in his hand was recording his findings, which would be used in court when this case came to trial. "From the spatter patterns, the victim was lying down or was close to the ground during the entire attack. He was never in a standing position." He cast a charm on the robes and a ghostly image of a boy filled them. "Do you recognize him, Albus?"

"Yes, that's Nigel Gedgrave," he said, his face grim. "I've already sent someone to fetch him."

"This charm reveals the last person to wear the robes, so he was one of those who attacked Harry," Kingsley concluded. "We'll need to check the blood against a sample of Harry's to present as evidence."

"Madam Pomfrey may be able to help you out there," Dumbledore said. "She has many bandages that are soaked with his blood. She may have disposed of them by now, but it would be wise to ask her. I'd prefer it if you could manage without taking blood from him. He's been through enough."

"We'll do our best to get what we need without bothering him," Kingsley replied. He set those robes aside and lifted the next set. He went through the same process with the other robes and concluded that the Chiswick twins were, in fact, Harry's other attackers, just as their robe labels indicated.

"We're done here," Kingsley said as he and Tonks put Shrinking Charms on the robes and put them in small bags which they labelled and put in their pockets. "Let's go see Harry."

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks said brightly as she entered the hospital wing and saw he was awake. "How are you doing?"

His eyes roved around aimlessly. Tonks looked at Ginny in confusion.

The Time of Destiny

"He can't speak yet," Ginny said quietly. "He's under an Enchanted Sleep spell that wasn't cast correctly. He's fighting his way out of it little by little." She leaned over Harry and gave him a cheeky grin. "But you're doing brilliantly, sweetheart!" She looked up at Tonks. "Come sit on the side of the bed and put your hands on his face, then lean over him. That usually helps him focus his eyes on you. He can answer yes or no questions with eye blinks, one blink for yes, two for no, once you have his attention."

Tonks sat carefully on the edge of Harry's bed. She put her hands gently on his face and bent over him. "Wotcher, Harry," she said softly. "It's Tonks. Can you hear me?"

His eyes came to rest on her face, crinkling at the corners a bit as he recognized her.

"He's smiling at you," Ginny said quietly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come before. Dumbledore thought too many people would notice and ask questions if I came to the hospital wing. He's been keeping all this a secret, y'see. I'll be able to come more often now that we've caught the boys who did this to you. The evidence is strong, Harry. They're going to spend the rest of their lives in Azkaban," she assured him. "Are you feeling better?"

Harry blinked once, then crinkled his eyes at her again. His body felt so heavy, it was difficult for him to move at all. Not being able to talk was driving him mad, and he was tired all the time. He closed his eyes wearily for a long moment, then sighed and glanced back at Tonks, whose suddenly unguarded face revealed the depth of her emotion. As soon as she saw him looking at her, she put on her happy face again.

"I don't want to tire you. Kingsley and I just wanted to stop in and say hello before we question those boys." She glanced over her shoulder at Kingsley, who moved closer to Harry. Tonks moved aside so Harry could see him.

"Hello, Harry," the man said kindly. "I'm sorry you had to go through this. They tell me you'll be up and around in no time."

Harry crinkled his eyes at the man.

"You get well quickly, lad. We'll take care of those boys. Don't you worry about a thing," Kingsley said, smiling and then backing away so Tonks could talk to Harry again.

"All right, we need to take those boys into custody," Tonks said. "I'll come back and see you again soon, all right?"

Harry did his best to smile at her a bit, then blinked slowly one time.

"He says 'thanks,'" Ginny said, looking from him to Tonks.

"How do you know?" Tonks said in confusion.

"Because he didn't argue with me. If I interpret his blinks wrong, he lets me know," Ginny said with a smile at her boyfriend.

The Time of Destiny

"How are you holding up so well?" Tonks said seriously, gazing at the exhausted-looking girl. "How can you be so cheerful?"

"He's so much better than he was, Tonks, you have no idea," Ginny said, equally serious. "I can see progress every time he wakes up now. He'll be back to his old form in no time."

"Well, his old form was pretty hot, so it will be good to have that back!" Tonks teased, giving Harry a cheeky grin. She was rewarded with a blush and smiling eyes from Harry. "That's better," she said, bending over him and kissing his cheek. "You get well! I'll come back and see you later." She pulled Ginny into a hug. "You hang in there, sweetie. If you need anything, let me know, all right?"

"Thanks," Ginny said sincerely. "We'll be fine."

"I know you will," Tonks said fondly. "Harry, behave yourself!" she said as she followed Kingsley out of the hospital wing, turning at the last minute to give Harry and Ginny a breezy wave. When she closed the hospital wing door behind her, she leaned against the wall, her face in her hands.

Kingsley was immediately concerned. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Tonks struggled with her emotions for a long moment before muttering, "I never knew love could hurt so much." She rubbed her eyes and forced herself to get back into her professional frame of mind. "I'm fine now. Let's go." An unusually grim-faced Tonks walked with Kingsley to the dungeons, where they would confine and transport the prisoners. She hoped they'd act up. She'd really like to damage them just a little bit on the way to Azkaban.

Ginny tried to study as she sat by Harry's bedside, but exhaustion overtook her. Afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows woke her a few hours later. She stretched and yawned, then ran her fingers through her sleep-tousled hair.

"Hi," a soft voice whispered.

Ginny's head whipped around. "Harry!" She sat on the side of the bed and cupped his face in her hand, rubbing his cheek lightly with her thumb. "Oh, baby, it's so good to hear your voice again! And you're back! You're really back now, aren't you?"

"I've . . . been . . . right here," he breathed, a teasing glint in his eye.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Ever since you . . . first kissed me . . ., I think," he replied, his voice gaining strength as he used it. "But it was . . . hard. I couldn't . . . get out." His face looked confused and his eyes roved aimlessly around the room again.

"Oh no, you don't, Potter," she said, holding his face with both hands and looking seriously into his eyes. "Don't you go wandering off again!"

"Tired," he sighed, and closed his eyes.

The Time of Destiny

"Harry, WAKE UP!" Ginny cried. "Wake up! Come on, sweetheart, you can do it!"

"K," he muttered, opening his eyes again and trying to focus on her.

"How do you feel?"

"Hurts," he moaned. "Thirsty."

"OK, I'll get Madam Pomfrey and we'll fix you up straightaway," Ginny promised. "Stay awake!"

"K," he whispered, and his eyes drifted shut again.

"MADAM POMFREY!" Ginny shouted. "HE'S AWAKE!"

Madam Pomfrey came at a run. "Are you certain? How is he? Has he said anything?"

"He says he hurts," Ginny replied. "C'mon, baby, open those beautiful eyes again."

Harry's head rocked back and forth as he fought his way to wakefulness. He opened his eyes, better able to focus now because Ginny had put his glasses on his face. "Thanks," he said with a weary smile.

"Miss Weasley said you're in pain, Mr. Potter," the nurse said kindly. "Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere."

"That's to be expected. You're still healing, but you'll be fine very soon. I'll give you the non-drowsy pain potion. You've slept long enough to be going on with," she said with a smile. "I'll be right back." She hurried back toward her supply room.

"It's so good to have you back, baby!" Ginny said, her face lit with joy.

"I kept . . . yelling for you," he said quietly. "I was . . . so close to the surface . . . but I couldn't quite make it. Every time, I'd be a little closer. It was scary." He moved his arms and legs experimentally. "I'm not paralyzed, am I?"

"No, baby, you're not," Ginny assured him.

"I thought for a long time that was what was wrong with me. What happened?"

"What do you remember?"

"Erm. . . Plimpies. I remember releasing Plimpies. . ." His voice trailed off and he frowned as he tried to remember. "Are they all right? I didn't finish."

"They're fine. Ron released the rest of them."

The Time of Destiny

"You're awake!" Professor Dumbledore said, striding toward Harry's bed. "Madam Pomfrey sent me a message that you were finally released from that spell. How are you feeling, Harry?"

"I'm fine," he lied, doing his best to smile at his headmaster.

"You're not fine. I know that much. Are you in pain?"

"He won't be for long," Madam Pomfrey said. "My password's scar on your bum, Mr. Potter. Stick out your tongue. Three drops should take care of you nicely." She gave him his potion then passed her wand over his body, checking his condition. "I think you'll do for a while. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he said with an eager smile. "Thirsty too."

"What would you like to eat and drink?"

"Dobby's pumpkin soup. . .and butterbeer," he said with a beatific smile.

"That sounds delicious," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "Miss Weasley anticipated what you would want, so Dobby has your soup waiting for you in the kitchens. I'll send for him. And I'm sure we can find some butterbeer in the castle somewhere."

Harry's eyes were tired, but he was smiling happily. "Thanks."

"In the meantime, I have water and pumpkin juice here in the hospital wing. I'll bring some out for you," Madam Pomfrey said, then left to fetch the drinks.

Dumbledore looked at the phoenix perched over the young man's bed. "May I borrow Merlin for a moment? He can bring you some butterbeer." Harry nodded. Dumbledore wrote a short note and handed it to the phoenix, who disappeared in a flash of light.

Harry soon had a bottle of butterbeer on his bedside table, from which Ginny helped him sip from time to time. Dobby arrived with the pumpkin soup and Harry ate every bite, if slowly, and said he wanted more, but he fell asleep before the second bowl arrived. Every time he woke up, he was more alert and stayed awake for a longer time.

When he awoke from his next long nap, he stretched and was delighted to be able to move his arms and legs fairly normally after such a long time of thinking he was paralyzed. "Ginny!" he said excitedly. "Everything works!"

"I know that's a relief for you," she said with a smile.

"Come here," he said quietly, holding his arms open wide. Ginny climbed on the bed and relaxed into his embrace, sighing happily as his arms came around her in a tight hug.

"I've missed this," she murmured.

"Mmm, me too," he said, resting his cheek on her hair. He soon fell asleep again, Ginny still in his arms. She dozed off as well.

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Late that evening, when Harry had grown strong enough to carry on a lengthy conversation, Dumbledore talked to him about the attack.

"What do you remember, lad?"

"I was putting Plimpies in the water and that boy – Liam – came up and asked if he could be in D.A. next year. I was telling him I'd give his name to Ginny when a Plimpy slipped out of my hands and fell on the ground. While I was reaching for it, something hit my head. Three boys in plain black robes did a bad Stunning Spell on me, beat me up, then did some other spells and Banished me into the lake."

"What do you mean by a bad Stunning Spell?"

"I couldn't move, but I could hear, see and feel everything," Harry replied with a shiver. "I tried to grow gills, I tried to do spells, but I couldn't do anything but fall deeper in the water, and then everything went black. How did I get out of the lake?"

"The merpeople brought you to the surface and called until your friends could pull you to shore. Miss Granger did that Muggle revival technique you used on Miss Weasley in France to get you breathing again. I'll tell you the rest when you're stronger," Dumbledore said. Seeing Harry's frightened look, he hastened to reassure him. "It's nothing to worry about, just the details of the spells you were under and how we removed them, that's all. You might call it 'technical stuff.'"

"Oh," Harry said, looking relieved.

"You're going to be fine, Harry, and very soon now," Dumbledore assured him.

"Professor, Harry heard and felt everything that happened after I kissed him the first time," Ginny told her headmaster. "Is that normal with such charms?"

"As you know, the sleeping spell was badly cast. I doubt such things are normal with the charm when it's properly cast."

Ron and Hermione came in, racing to Harry's bedside when they saw him grinning at them.

"You're awake! You're really awake!" Hermione said, giving him a huge hug.

"Welcome back, mate," Ron said with a fond smile.

"I'll leave you to visit with your friends," Dumbledore said, rising to go. "Take care of yourself, Harry. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye, Professor. Thanks for catching those blokes so quickly," Harry said sincerely.

"Rest well. Good evening, all," Dumbledore said, and left.

Hermione had pulled back from her hug, but Harry held on to her hand. "What is it, Harry?"

"I owe you something," he said, his eyes twinkling with a hint of his normal mischief.

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"Oh, you don't owe me anything," she began.

"Don't be difficult," Harry said, tugging on her hand until she sat on the bed. "I owe you my life. Thank you, Hermione," he said sincerely.

"Oh, erm, well, um," she said, not certain how to respond to the deep emotion in his eyes.

"And I owe you something else, as well," Harry said with an impish gleam in his eye. He looked up at Ginny and Ron. "You two turn around or something, all right?"

"Why?" Ron said, confused.

"Just cooperate with your poor hospitalized friend, OK?" he whinged dramatically. Ron and Ginny turned around, but glanced over their shoulders. "Now you," he said to Hermione, "said you missed something."

She blushed madly. "You heard that?"

"Yes. I'm going to take care of it, too," he said with a soft chuckle, then pulled her to him and gave her a lovely warm kiss. "Thank you for trying. I enjoyed it even if I couldn't participate."

"Did it help?" she asked earnestly.

"It helped pass the time, quite pleasantly, too, but no, it didn't pull me out of the spell," he answered truthfully.

"I guess that just proves it had to be your true love's kiss that would wake you," she said with a smile.

"I do love you, Hermione," Harry said, pulling her to him again. "If I could choose a sister, it would be you." He kissed her on the cheek, then released her.

Hermione giggled, still blushing. She glanced up and saw Ron and Ginny both watching over their shoulders. "You two don't follow directions very well, you know," she said tartly.

"We're Weasleys," Ron said easily. "It's in the blood or something." He pulled Hermione to him and murmured, "Do I need to remind you who owns those lips?" She laughed and nodded, getting a serious kiss from her boyfriend in response. Ginny was busy giving Harry a similar reminder.

Ron and Hermione settled into the chair Ginny had used for her vigil while Ginny cuddled with Harry on the bed.

"You know," Hermione began, studying Ginny and Harry seriously for a moment, "this removes all doubt."

"Huh?" Harry said intelligently.

"She really is your true love," Hermione said with a smile.

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"I never doubted that," Harry said, tightening his arms around Ginny. She nestled her head against his shoulder and promptly fell asleep. "I guess we're not exciting enough company for her," he murmured with a smile.

"She's been exhausting herself trying to take care of you," Hermione said.

"I know. I was aware of everything that happened. I could feel, hear, smell – even see, when my eyes could focus. But I just couldn't get out, not for the longest time," Harry said with a slight shudder. His movement made Ginny murmur in her sleep for a moment. He tenderly smoothed her hair out of her face and behind her shoulder, then rested his cheek on top of her head. "What's going to happen to those boys?" he asked quietly.

"Life in Azkaban," Ron replied.

"It's not enough," Hermione said stoutly.

"You're right," Harry murmured, "but at least they'll be locked up where they can't do any more harm."

"Until they break out of jail," Ron said darkly.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, his face grim.

Harry was delighted to be at the Gryffindor table for breakfast the next morning. His friends all greeted him gladly. Harry noticed some of the younger Gryffindors looking at Ron warily.

"What's up with them?" Harry asked

"They were in Potions when I took the Slytherin boy away," Ron replied tersely. "He didn't go quietly, and I wasn't very quiet about it either."

Luna Lovegood wandered by their table. "Hello, Ronald," she said airily. "Hello, Harry," she said with more warmth. "How are you? I haven't seen you around for a while."

"I've been busy," Harry said vaguely, hoping she wouldn't pry. "What have you been up to lately?"

"I'm going to write an article on the giant squid," she said, her eyes brightening. "It's been acting rather oddly lately."

"Really?" Harry said, glancing at his friends. Hermione, Ron and Ginny didn't seem to know what she was talking about either.

"Oh, yes. Did you hear what happened in Hagrid's class?" Harry and his friends all shook their heads. Luna brightened, glad to be the bearer of interesting news. "The squid grabbed two boys Professor McGonagall went there to get and it dunked them in the lake! And the merpeople were attacking them, too!"

"Why?" Harry asked, confused.

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"Dunno! It was the Fourth Year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw class. The boys were Hufflepuffs. McGonagall took them away and nobody's seen them since. Maybe they *died*," Luna said, her oversized eyes huge as she relished the possibilities.

"No, they didn't die," Hermione said tartly, finally understanding what Luna was talking about.

"How do you know?" Luna said, actually looking at Hermione for once.

"We would have heard if they'd died, wouldn't we?" Hermione said reasonably, hoping that would get Luna enough off-track to drop the subject.

Luna looked disappointed. "I suppose." She sat quietly a moment, lost in thought. "Still. . .the squid was behaving oddly. It could make a good article." Without waiting for a response, she wandered back to the Ravenclaw table.

"How did she ever get sorted into Ravenclaw?" Ron wondered, shaking his head.

"Who knows?" Hermione said, exasperated. "What a ridiculous story, though. The squid dunking those boys. I mean, really!"

"It's true," Colin Creevey said, leaning across the table to talk quietly. "I heard it from the Hufflepuff Keeper. He got it from his little brother, who was in the class."

Hermione frowned. "I find that very hard to believe, Colin. Maybe the Keeper misunderstood what his brother said or something."

Colin shrugged. "Dunno. I'm just saying that's what I was told."

They were nearly through with breakfast when Dumbledore stood up and tapped on his goblet to get their attention.

"I have a few things I need to share with you all in order to relieve some confusion," he said, glancing over the gathered students. "I suppose it will be easiest to tell things in order. Please remain quiet until I've finished. Thank you. Now then. A few days ago, four boys put a dastardly plan into action."

Harry blanched and turned to look at his friends. "What's he doing?" he whispered urgently.

"Dunno," Ron said, looking as troubled as Harry.

"Just listen and see what he says," Hermione urged.

Ginny took Harry's hand and held it tightly. She could see he was upset about what Dumbledore was saying.

". . . and they erroneously believed their fathers were killed in battle by Harry Potter," Dumbledore was saying. Harry slumped lower in his seat, wishing he could disappear.

"Of course, once we questioned these boys and learned where their fathers died, we were able to tell them that Mr. Potter was nowhere near that area at any time during the battle. He didn't

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kill their fathers. Even if he had, those men were enemies who attacked with no provocation, which means their deaths were their own fault. They were the aggressors and lost. But these boys weren't interested in finding out the facts. They listened to lies told to them by Draco Malfoy and some other boys who have become Death Eaters." Dumbledore's voice crackled with fury. "They attacked Harry Potter and did their best to kill him. As you can see, they didn't succeed," he said, looking toward the Gryffindor table. The Gryffindors cheered suddenly, startling everyone, then quieted when they saw the stern look on their headmaster's face. "I don't blame the Gryffindors for cheering Mr. Potter's return to their midst, but I do have more to say, so please, hold all comments, cheers and so on until I've finished. Thank you."

He took a sip from his goblet and continued. "Evidence was found pointing to these boys and the Head Boy and the Deputy Headmistress went to fetch them for the Aurors who came to investigate this crime. Apparently, either the merpeople or the squid understood, somehow, what was going on, because when the boys stepped up to Professor McGonagall to be brought in for questioning, the squid captured them and took them into the lake, where it proceeded to submerge them repeatedly. No real harm came to the boys from the squid's behaviour. All of the boys involved have been taken into Ministry custody. Three of the boys are being charged with attempted murder, which carries a mandatory life sentence in Azkaban." He paused as hundreds of students gasped as one. "Yes, it's a harsh punishment, but it's what our laws require for those who commit such a crime. Their accomplice will receive a lighter sentence, since he didn't actually injure Mr. Potter himself and assisted us willingly in our investigation of the crime. However, since he stood by and did nothing while Harry was being attacked, he will spend the majority of his life in Azkaban as well. Remember that if you think you want to take the law into your own hands. Those who stand by and watch are as guilty as those who commit the crime. Such behaviour will not be tolerated.

"As for the squid, whose name is Sebastian, by the way," he said with a slight smile, "he is not dangerous to you as long as you treat him kindly. The merpeople are rather fond of Mr. Potter since the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and I suppose the squid has been influenced by their opinion of him. The squid was doing what it could to help out Mr. Potter, or so the merpeople told me when I spoke to them about this incident. There will be no reprisals against the squid or the merpeople for what they did. They have been spoken to and now have a clearer understanding of how we deal with problems. Do feel free to give the squid bits of toast from time to time as you have in the past. He is one of the protections we have here at Hogwarts, as he showed us during the Battle of Hogwarts. Treat him with respect, and he will do the same toward you.

"As for Mr. Potter – it would be kindest if you didn't ask him a lot of questions. Let him get back to his routine. He has a lot of homework to catch up on." Dumbledore stared at the Slytherin table. "There will be no reprisals against anyone – not your fellow wizards, the squid or the merpeople – for what happened here. Is that clear? Such actions will not be tolerated." He stared at the Slytherin table a moment longer, then gave the Hufflepuff table an equally intimidating glare. Finally, he said, "Thank you for your attention. You're dismissed. Have a good day."

Harry was still slumped in his seat and wouldn't meet anyone's eye. He sighed heavily, wishing Dumbledore hadn't made everything public. He looked up, startled, when he felt people patting his back as they left to go to class. Numerous Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were making their way to his seat, just touching him briefly before going on. The

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only words exchanged were quiet: "Welcome back," "Good to see you," "Sorry that happened," and such things. Harry managed to smile at most of the well-wishers and was inordinately glad when the procession stopped and he could leave the Great Hall himself.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said, coming up behind him and his friends. "May I have a word?" Ron, Hermione and Ginny took a few steps away and waited for Harry.

Harry dropped his head and took a deep breath, calming himself before facing his headmaster. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, but the rumours were horrible and getting worse, and there have already been attempts to hurt the squid. I couldn't let that go on. The squid – Sebastian," he said with a small smile, "was trying to help you. Apparently it likes you, or so the merpeople told me."

"I feed it toast, and swim with it sometimes when I have my gills," Harry said shrugging. "It likes to be rubbed between its eyes."

"I didn't know that," Dumbledore said with a smile. "No wonder it likes you. I doubt anyone's ever rubbed it between its eyes before."

"How did the squid know who those boys were, or what they'd done?" Harry asked curiously.

"Professor McGonagall was speaking aloud on her way to Hagrid's class," Dumbledore explained, "and the squid heard her. When it began following her, the merpeople followed as well. Some of them know a bit of English, and they told the squid what she was talking about. And the rest, you know." He put a warm hand on the young man's shoulder. "I am sorry about all of this. If I could have found a way to deal with it without involving you . . . "

"I understand," Harry said with a sigh. "Do you want me to work with you today, or go to class?"

"Whichever pleases you, lad. You have a great deal to catch up on in both areas."

Harry glanced at his friends, and at the hallway outside which was teeming with students hurrying to class. "I think I'd rather work with you than face classes full of curious people today," he said finally.

"Then come up to my office when you're ready to work," Dumbledore said. "I'll be waiting for you."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, then rejoined his friends.

A few days later, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were in the spell-proof room in Gryffindor's Chamber of Knowledge, checking Ron, Hermione and Ginny's progress on the Sphere Shield Charm.

"Let's see, then," Harry said encouragingly. He'd started teaching them this charm months ago, but it was a very difficult one to master. The basic spell was tricky enough, but Harry had changed the spell a great deal, making the sphere more dense, more impervious to spells and a more powerful barrier in general – and also much more challenging for anyone but him to cast.

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Hermione had learned the basic spell relatively quickly, but Ginny and Ron found it much more difficult to do. With the changes Harry had made in it now, even Hermione was having trouble.

"This is the best I can do, mate," Ron said in frustration as a shimmering sheer sphere hovered between his wand and his outstretched hand, its walls undulating and fragile. Ron's sphere was the palest possible shade of gold. Harry guessed that the shade of the spheres varied with the strength of the spell that cast it. Harry's was a translucent but rich, deep gold, Hermione's a few shades darker than Ron's, and Ginny's somewhere in between Hermione's and Ron's in colour, when she was able to cast it correctly at all.

"Keep trying. Concentrate, Ron. Soft focus. Feel your magic—"

"Flowing like water, yeah, I know," Ron said with a sigh. "Understanding the concepts and making the bloody thing work are two entirely different things, you know."

"Take it easy, Ron," Hermione said as she held her sphere in front of her. "You'll get it eventually." Her sphere was much more stable, but still shimmered with fragility.

"It's pretty. I wish it was stronger," Ginny said, experimenting with moving her sphere around a bit.

"OK, you lot, dissolve those and cast your spheres around yourselves," Harry directed. "Then try to condense them until what you see outside them looks a bit foggy. Don't hold that for long, because you'll be losing air inside the sphere once it's condensed."

Three spheres disappeared and three more emerged in fits and starts, each one enveloping the person who cast it.

"Ron, that's good!" Harry said encouragingly. "The colour is much stronger, and the walls are more stable. Dissolve it and cast it again so you'll remember what you did."

"I don't know what I did differently," Ron whinged when he emerged from his sphere. "I just did this," he said, creating a new sphere around himself.

"And that's right!" Harry laughed. "That's really good! Try working with it now, condense it a bit, then dissolve it." He turned to Hermione, whose sphere wasn't as stable as it had been. "You and Ron have the same problem, only in reverse," he teased. "Yours is stronger when you project it outward, his is stronger when he projects it around himself. Dissolve it and do another outward one, then try to do exactly the same thing when you create the one around yourself." Hermione complied with his directions just as Harry looked back at Ron, who was staggering, still inside his sphere. "RON! Dissolve it right now!" Harry warned.

Ron gasped as he emerged from his sphere. "I . . . I think. . . I got it that time, Harry," he said with a grin, then sat down hard, fighting to get his breath back.

"Yes, you did! Now do it again, and try not to stay in there so long this time!" Harry moved over to where Ginny was working. "Dissolve yours and let's start again." He heard her sigh in annoyance as the sphere disappeared. "Don't let it frustrate you. This is very difficult magic. You'll get it," he assured her as she struggled to make her sphere work properly. "Let me

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show you something." He got behind her and took her hands in his. "Try this," he suggested, moving her left hand one way and her wand hand the other, and tilting them at a slightly different angle than she'd been doing. "I think your position is off a bit. Stay there," he said as he let go of her hands and backed away. "Now try it." Her sphere appeared around her, this time much more stable and resilient.

"I did it!" she cried in delight. "That's the first time it hasn't shimmered at all!"

"Good for you!" Harry said encouragingly. "Now dissolve it, move around a bit, and try it again."

His friends kept working on their spheres for a long time, finally collapsing to the thickly cushioned floor in exhaustion. "That's hard work!" Ron moaned.

"But they're so much better than they were!" Hermione enthused. "I wonder if we can cast them around ourselves when we're on brooms?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Harry warned. "They take too much concentration. You wouldn't be able to fly, supervise the battle, and maintain the shield all at the same time. And as Ron demonstrated so clearly, the air inside them doesn't last long." He smirked at his best mate, getting a good-humoured but disgusted look in return.

"Oh, too bad. It seemed like such a good idea," she sighed. "You've spent all this time teaching it to us, and now we find we can't use it in battle? What *can* we use them for?"

"You can use it in battle, just not as a shield while you're flying," Harry said, sprawling on the floor beside them. "I have a plan for how to defeat Voldemort. I think I can manage it by myself, but if I need help – that's where you come in."

"What do you mean?" Ron said, suddenly pale. "You want *us* to fight Voldemort? You always said that was your job!" He'd finally gotten over his phobia about saying Voldemort's name, which pleased Harry greatly.

"Not to fight him, no. To contain him," Harry explained. "Here's the thing. I can contain Peeves with the simpler form of this sphere. Lucius Malfoy killed himself inside one of my spheres, because his spells kept bouncing around and he couldn't dodge them. I don't expect Voldemort to be that stupid, and his spells are much more powerful than Malfoy's were. I have to believe he's intelligent enough to realize, after the first spell bounces in there, that he can't shoot spells while encased in my sphere."

"If he won't die from a spell hitting him, how are you going to kill him?" Hermione asked, her eyebrows knit together in concentration.

"You'll put your spheres over mine and hold them there, helping me hold the sphere in place. Then I'll put a spell inside the sphere with my wand that will take care of Voldemort."

"A Killing Curse?" Ron said, his eyebrows raised as he considered Harry's plan.

"No, something else. I'm still working on it, but I need your help to hold the sphere while I do this other thing."

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"What's the other thing?" Ginny asked suspiciously. "You're not telling us something."

"I'm not telling because I haven't finished working it out yet," he said. "I know what I want the spell to do. I've been researching spells to find one that comes closest to what I need. I'm in the process of modifying several spells I've found to see which one will be the best to use for what I need it to do."

"And what, exactly, is that?" Hermione said. "I know you have a plan, Harry. What is it?"

Harry sighed. "It sounds crazy," he said hesitantly, "but it makes sense to me."

"Have you talked it over with Dumbledore?" Ginny said.

"Yes. He thinks I'm on to something. He helped me look for the right kind of spells. I've found one in particular that I think will do the trick, but I need to experiment with it a bit first to see if I'm right."

"Harry," Hermione said patiently. "You haven't answered my question. What's your plan? What's this spell supposed to do?"

Harry leaned forward and replied, "It's a refining spell. I can't just kill him. I have to destroy him. If I kill him, part of him can escape and start again, as he's done before. But if I refine the evil out of him, he'll be destroyed. D'you see?" he said hopefully.

His friends stared open-mouthed at him. "Refine . . . huh?" Hermione said in confusion after a long silence.

"It's an idea I had, and Merlin and I have discussed it at length. I've found a spell that will refine gold," Harry said quickly. "I need to get some gold ore and see how it works. Once I understand the process, I can change it to . . . well, it's complicated, I can't really explain it well yet. I'm still sorting it out," he said finally. "Does it make any sense to you at all?"

After staring at him in silence for several long moments, Ron and Ginny shook their heads. Hermione was frowning in concentration again. Finally, she said, "I think I get the basic idea. But I don't know how you'll go from refining gold to refining *evil*," she said carefully.

"It has to do with my having gone through the Refiner's Fire," Harry said. "There are things I can do now that would blow your minds if you saw them, things Dumbledore and Merlin have taught me, and things I've developed myself based on what I've learned from them. It also has to do with this wand," he said, lifting the beautiful wand Mr. Ollivander had made for him the previous summer. "It works differently than my other wand in ways I can't explain. I think this idea will work. So does Merlin. Dumbledore is still sceptical, but he doesn't have any better ideas. All I need you three to do is to come when I call for you – *if* I call for you – and put your spheres over mine, then hold them there, no matter what happens. Can you do that?"

"We'll do our best," Ginny said instantly.

"Yeah, mate. If you want us to hold these spheres, we'll hold them," Ron said stoutly.

"We should practice putting them over yours, then, Harry," Hermione said.

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"Not yet. Yours aren't stable enough. You need to keep working on them." They all looked disappointed. "You've come a long way, all of you. This spell is well beyond N.E.W.T. standard. Don't get discouraged. I had a lot of trouble with it at first, and then it just sort of 'popped' into place in my head and has worked well ever since. I think it will do the same for you."

"But we don't have your special wand nor your Refiner's Fire power," Hermione said seriously. "And what is it about that wand that's different? You've never said much about it."

Harry looked at his wand, trying to sort out how to explain the differences between it and his old wand. "Erm. . .with my old wand, no matter how powerful the spell I cast, the wand feels the same. It does its job and doesn't act up or . . ."

"Your wand acts up?" Hermione said in shock. "What do you mean?"

He sighed. "If I'm doing normal school-type spells, class work practice or D.A. stuff, and hold the new wand too tightly, it sort of . . .," he cast around for the right word, "bucks, and I have trouble controlling the spell. It wants to send too much power into the spell, sometimes sending huge surges of power when they aren't necessary. If I don't control it in time, someone could get hurt. That's not a problem now, but when I first started working with it, it scared me. I was afraid I'd hurt someone by accident. Anyway, I've learned to hold it very lightly for those spells. For a powerful spell, the kind where you have to really push your magic and say the incantation strongly, I can grip it more tightly and it behaves well now. For the kind of spell where you give it all the power you've got and actually yell the incantation, this wand, erm. . ." He stopped, apparently at a loss for words.

"What?" Ron prompted. All of them were leaning toward him, fascinated. He'd never talked about the new wand this way before, and they'd never heard of a wand that behaved differently for different spells.

"You know the phoenixes and griffins carved around the handle?" he said, holding the handle out so they could see it well. They all nodded. "When I do the biggest spells, they. . .um. . .I can feel them, um . . . it's as if their feet are pattering around inside my hand," he said, shaking his head. "It sounds crazy, I know, but I can feel all these tapping things inside my hand when I grip it really hard to do the big spells."

"Why would they tap your hand?" Ginny said, completely puzzled.

"Dumbledore said Mr. Ollivander added them to give the wand more power, because phoenixes and griffins are talismans that are important to me," he said, holding his hand open and gazing at the beautifully carved animals spiralling up the handle.

"How could they add power?" Hermione said, shaking her head. "They're just carvings in wood. That doesn't make sense to me."

Harry snorted. "I don't get it, either. But that's the way it works."

"Have you ever asked Ollivander about that tapping thing? Or Dumbledore? Maybe it's malfunctioning," Hermione said worriedly.

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"When I asked Ollivander about it, he just smiled. Dumbledore finds it fascinating and has never heard of that tapping feeling, but he did say the carvings would add power to the wand. Merlin agrees with him."

"Wicked!" Ron said with a grin.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "That's part of the reason it took me so long to get used to working with this wand. The carvings, erm, 'activated' at inconvenient times when I was first learning to use it. I wound up dropping it when that happened, and messed up a lot of spells. Some of those explosions you've heard at the far end of the grounds were me making mistakes like that. Of course, some of those explosions were deliberate, too," he added with a cheeky grin. "I've got a good feel for it now, though."

"So your own magic, which we have no prayer of matching, and your wand, same problem. . . ." Hermione said, obviously trying to sort something out. She stopped, apparently flummoxed. She tilted her head and studied Harry with an odd expression on her face.

"What?" Harry said, shifting uncomfortably under her gaze. "I'm a freak. I know it."

"You're not a freak," she said slowly. "I just don't see how we're supposed to be able to help you. If you can't manage the spell with all of your powers and your special wand, how are we supposed to manage, when we're just normal wizards?"

Ron looked at her seriously for a moment, then turned to Harry. "She's got a point, mate."

Ginny was livid. "Are you *quitting*?" she snarled at her brother and best friend.

"No! No, it's just that," Ron swallowed hard, "we're no match for Harry. He's so powerful, and he's the only one who can defeat Voldemort, and yet he thinks he needs our help to do it! So how can our puny little spheres be any help? I mean, I'm willing to help, but I'm confused."

"Me, too," Hermione said, gazing at Harry hopefully. "I want to help. I'll do anything you ask me to do, Harry, you know that. I believe in you. But I just don't understand how our spheres, which are puny, as Ron said, are going to help."

"Your spheres will get better with practice," Harry said, hoping he was right.

"This isn't your only plan, is it, mate?" Ron said warily.

"No, but it's the best one I've got. I do have other things I'm working on, but if I can get enough clear space to use this spell, I believe it has the best chance of really defeating Voldemort. D'you see? If I just kill him, he can come back, as he's done before. He has to be *destroyed*. That's why I think refining the evil out of him is the best plan, and this is the only way I can see to do it. He needs to be confined so I'm safe from his spells while I do this refining spell on him. That's what the spheres are for." He looked around at his friends. They looked worried and confused, but they were loyal and would do what he asked. Was it fair for him to ask them to help with this plan? They could be seriously hurt, even killed, if they helped him. No, it didn't seem fair to involve them at all, but he couldn't see how to do the spell without their help.

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"I don't want you hurt. I won't ask for your help unless I absolutely need it," he assured them. "I know it's my job to destroy him, not yours. If I can think of any other way to do that, I won't do this spell at all. This is the best thing I've come up with so far, but I'm still looking for other possibilities. You don't have to do it. I do appreciate your trying to learn this spell, though." He started to get to his feet.

"Wait," Hermione said. "I didn't say I was quitting."

"Nor did I," Ron agreed.

"Sit down, Harry. We all need to rest a bit before we try this again anyway," Hermione encouraged him. She glanced at Ginny, who was sitting with her arms crossed, her expression stormy. At least she wasn't yelling at anyone. Things were confusing enough as it was. When Harry sat back down, Hermione decided a change of subject might lighten things up, so she said, "You told us this wand has your own hair as its core. It's a long wand – how many hairs did it take to fill it?"

"Just one," he said with a shrug.

"How does one of your hairs," she said, nodding at his hair, which still curled down to his shoulders, "fill a wand like that?"

He laughed. "I grew it out for Mr. Ollivander. He thought it was cool that I could do that."

"How long did you grow it?" Hermione asked.

He looked at Ginny, whose hair was past her waist. "About half as long as Gin's. Somewhere past my shoulder blades."

"What did it look like?" Hermione said. "I mean, is it wavy or straight or what when it's that long? I know we saw your hair longer when you were disguised as James Evans, but that wasn't your own hair."

"Yes, it was!" Harry protested. "It was just a different colour! Well, and longer, too. Ron said I looked like a really tall girl with wavy hair when I grew it out for Ollivander."

Ron snorted with laughter at the memory. "Actually, what I said was that Harry better not let the twins see him like that or they'd think he was an Amazon and would want to date him." Everyone laughed.

"Let's see, then," Hermione prompted. "How long can you grow it, anyway?"

"Dunno. I've never tried to find out," Harry said with a shrug.

"Try now," Hermione said eagerly. "I want to see."

Harry looked at her oddly, a crooked grin on his face. "Why?"

"Because I do, that's all," she said with a sassy toss of her curls.

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Harry shrugged again. "OK. Blimey, the things I do to keep you happy," he said as his hair began growing at a rapid rate. In a short time, it was well down past his belt and starting to puddle on the floor.

"It's gorgeous! Wavy and so thick and glossy. Wow, I wish my hair was like that instead of bushy," Hermione sighed. "Is that as long as you can get it?"

"It's touching the floor now, isn't it? What more do you want?" Harry said, chuckling.

Meanwhile, Ginny was busy running her hands through his long mane. "I love it!"

"Ginny, I love you dearly, but I will not wear my hair this long to keep you happy," Harry said with a longsuffering look.

"Dumbledore does. His hair's about that long," Hermione said reasonably.

"That's because he never cuts it," Harry said, beginning to shorten his hair again.

"Wait! I want a lock of it for a keepsake!" Ginny said, reaching for her wand.

"No!" Harry said, flinching away from her suddenly.

"What?" she said, startled and a bit hurt.

"You can't have a lock of my hair, sweetheart. I'm sorry."

"Why not?"

"For the same reason Professor Dumbledore and I don't let people have feathers from our phoenixes," Harry explained, shortening his hair even more rapidly. "It's a magical substance and needs to be protected. I know you wouldn't do anything wrong with it, but if someone stole it from you, they'd have a very powerful magical tool to work with. That's why Dumbledore doesn't cut his hair or beard. He can't control the length of it the way I can so he protects it by letting it grow so there are never clippings lying around anywhere for someone to take."

"Harry, that's ridiculous," Hermione said dismissively. "You shed hair in the shower, in your comb, on your pillow when you sleep. Everyone does."

Harry just looked at her. "I don't."

"What do you mean, you don't?"

"I haven't shed hair the way you say since the Refiner's Fire, and I shed very little hair before that," he said seriously.

"Well, your aunt cut your hair when you were little," Hermione said, trying to make some kind of point. "You told us that."

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"Yes, and when my hair was all grown back the next morning, the clippings were missing from the bin," he said, still quite serious.

"You're kidding. Where did they go?" she said, looking sceptical. Harry merely pointed at his hair. "You're saying the clippings went back on your head?"

"I suppose. We never did find them, and I didn't do anything with them," he replied. "And Dudley never put the rubbish out in his life, so it's not as if he did it. It was my job to put out the rubbish. Uncle Vernon wouldn't have done it either, nor would Aunt Petunia. So where else could those clippings have gone?" He just shrugged, knowing there was no real answer to his question.

"You gave me a phoenix feather, Harry," Ginny said, puzzled.

"That was from my chest, sweetheart. It wasn't a tail feather," he explained. "It's not as magical as a tail feather."

"So it's safe for me to keep it?"

"Yes. Dumbledore uses some of Fawkes's breast feathers as quills."

"I won't make it into a quill," Ginny said. "It's a keepsake."

"There are plenty more where that came from if you do want to use one as a quill," he said, smiling at her fondly.

"If it came from your chest, Harry," Hermione said, a puzzled look on her face, "what part of you . . . I mean, where did it come from?"

"A chest hair, Hermione," he explained patiently, grinning at her blush. "And yes, it hurt to pull it out, but it was important to me to do it."

She tilted her head and stared at him, then finally nodded in understanding.

"You just took probably three or more feet off the length of your hair, mate," Ron said suddenly. "Where did it go?"

Harry snorted. "Dumbledore thinks my skull must have big spools inside where the hair is stored, since I can grow it or shorten it at will." His friends laughed. "Seriously, though, it's *magic*. I can't explain where it goes anymore than I can explain how I can grow it or shorten it whenever I want to."

"You shortened it too much, sweetie," Ginny said softly, frowning slightly. "Are you tired of wearing it longer?"

"No, baby, not at all," he said with a warm smile, reaching for her hand and squeezing it gently. He put his other hand on the back of his neck. "Oh, okay," he muttered, and his hair suddenly grew out to the length he'd had it before, curling just down to his shoulders like Ron's. "Better?" She beamed at him in reply.

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"So what do you want to do now?" Harry said, looking at his friends.

"Get back to practicing our spheres," Ron said, helping Hermione to her feet. "If we're going to help you, we need to get better control of this spell."

Harry grinned, relieved, and they all got back to work.

The next Hogsmeade weekend, Harry and Ginny entered the jewellery shop. "Hello, Mr. Joyero!" Harry said brightly. "How are you today?"

"I'm spiffing, just spiffing, Mr. Potter! Hello, Miss Weasley! How are you both?" The jeweller cast a practiced eye at Ginny's left hand. She still wore her promise ring. Harry hadn't proposed yet. Mr. Joyero smiled, glad he'd looked before saying anything that would give away Harry's secret.

"We're fine. I was wondering if you could help me with a school project?" Harry said with a smile.

"If there's something I can do to help out, I'd be happy to do so," Mr. Joyero said sincerely.

"I need some raw gold ore for some experiments," Harry said seriously. "Where can I get some?"

"Raw gold? Not refined?"

"Exactly! Do I need to order it from London, or where?" Harry asked.

"Let me get out my catalogues," Joyero said. "Back in a sec."

Ginny wandered through the shop admiring various things while they were waiting. "Why aren't any of your frames in here? I thought you made some for the shop."

"I managed to get three made before we had to come back to school, but they've all sold," Harry said. "I haven't had time to make any more." She smiled at him and nodded, then went back to browsing. He watched her mobile features as various things caught her eye. "You're a magpie, aren't you?" he said suddenly.

"What?" she said, startled.

"You just love jewellery, don't you? Sparkly stuff? Like a magpie," he said with a fond smile. "Or a niffler."

"It's just fun to look," she said with a smile. "I have plenty of jewellery, Harry."

"I was teasing you," he said with a grin, tugging gently on a lock of her hair. "He has beautiful things in here, doesn't he?"

"Yes," she said with a smile. "I think it would be such fun to be able to make things like these."

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"Maybe you should be a jeweller instead of a healer," Harry suggested.

Ginny smiled at him. "It would certainly save a lot of money to be able to make this kind of thing myself!" she said, touching her pendants.

"Here we go, Mr. Potter," Joyero said as he came back to the counter. "I have a supplier in London who carries raw gold ore. How much do you need?" he asked as he showed Harry the price list.

"That's not as expensive as I thought it would be," Harry mused. He and Joyero discussed details for a while, and came to an agreement. "So you'll send it to me at school? When will they arrive?"

"I should be able to get this to you in a few days. Will that be soon enough?"

"Yes, that will be great," Harry replied. He glanced at Ginny, who was leaning over a showcase studying something closely. He and Joyero smiled at each other and joined her.

"What have you found?" Harry asked her.

Ginny straightened up, looking startled. "Oh, nothing!" she said, flustered.

Harry looked at the wedding rings she'd been examining. "Bit soon for that, isn't it?" he cautioned.

"Oh. . . I. . . I was just looking. They're pretty, aren't they?" she said, blushing madly.

"Yes, they are," Harry said with a grin. "C'mon, let's get out of here before you get me in trouble!"

"I. . .but. . .trouble?" Ginny protested, feeling a bit ill-used. "I've never asked . . ."

"I know. Everything I've given you has been my own idea. You've never asked for a thing, you sweet girl. But it isn't time for *that* kind of thing yet," he said with a tender smile as he steered her out of the door. Her engagement ring was tucked safely in his trunk, but he still wasn't ready to give it to her. "Bye, Mr. Joyero!"

A few days later, with gold ore and other supplies in his bag, Harry led Dumbledore across the grounds to the distant field where the two of them did their experiments that might prove to be volatile. Merlin soared overhead, enjoying the beautiful weather. When they reached the practice field, Harry pulled a small cauldron out of his bag and set it on a low wire stand, then placed a small bit of gold ore inside the cauldron.

"Ready?" he asked Dumbledore.

"When you are, lad," Dumbledore said, standing well back. This was Harry's experiment and the headmaster was just there to observe – and to help, if Harry got in trouble.

"Here goes nothing," Harry said with a glance at Merlin, who was perched on his shoulder and watching with interest. "You sure you want to stay there?" The phoenix crooned serenely.

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Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, then carefully, delicately waved his wand and muttered an incantation. The gold in the cauldron vaporized and the cauldron went flying. "Damn. Too strong," he muttered, then set the cauldron up again, dropped in another piece of gold ore and tried again. Merlin crooned in his ear, giving him instructions that Harry did his best to follow, and finally, after much trial and error, he had a pool of melted gold in his cauldron, with a skim of impurities floating on the top. "We did it! We did it! Look, professor!" He and Dumbledore leaned over the cauldron and admired the beautiful pure gold that was left when Harry skimmed off the impurities.

"That's an excellent start, Harry!" Dumbledore enthused. "Now do it again!"

"Slave driver," Harry chuckled. He kept working until he could refine the gold on the first try, every time. Then he worked on refining the gold and removing the dross with another spell spoken immediately after the refining one. That task took a lot more trial and error to perfect. "I'm not consistent with it yet," Harry grumbled.

"You haven't been working on it long, lad. Don't be so hard on yourself," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"I've been planning it, thinking about it, working it out for months now!" Harry protested. "I just didn't have the gold to work with."

"Nor did you have the spell perfected," Dumbledore reminded him. "You've made tremendous strides today, Harry."

"It's not enough, not nearly enough," Harry muttered distractedly as he set things up for another try. Dumbledore stood back and watched the boy concentrate. Harry had come up with this idea himself, then asked Dumbledore and Merlin for help with it. What he had planned was unlike anything Dumbledore had heard of, and quite different from the refining spells Merlin had known in his day. If it worked, it would be miraculous. If it worked, Harry would be free. Dumbledore prayed that the boy's idea would be successful.

Harry worked with great determination for hours. "That's the last of the gold ore," he said finally.

"And what have you learned from this experiment?" Dumbledore asked with a smile.

"That I should have ordered more gold!" Harry said with a smile. "No, really, it's going quite well now. I have a good feel for it. The last few times, the spells just flowed. They felt right. And they did what I wanted. I think this is going to work. Now I just have to convert the spell," he muttered, speaking more to himself than his mentor as his mind wrestled with the problem. He scratched his head absently, lost in thought. "I'm sure it will work. I just have to. . . ." Harry sat down, pulled out parchment and quill and began making complex notes and diagrams decipherable only to himself.

Dumbledore watched with interest. Harry was becoming quite adept at creating spells, sometimes from scratch, sometimes modifying existing spells. Watching the young man's mind work was endlessly fascinating to the old wizard. Merlin flew over to Dumbledore's shoulder. He and the headmaster sat soaking up the sunshine, watching the light dance in Harry's glossy hair as he bent over the parchment struggling with his plans.

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"Ah, Merlin, there's nothing like watching a young mind grow, is there?" Dumbledore said in satisfaction. "He's good, isn't he?" The bird sang one liquid note of agreement and they settled down to watch proudly as their protégé developed spells no one had ever imagined before.

A mid-spring cold snap came and went, and with the next warm weather, Harry was ready to do something he'd been planning for a while. He and his friends walked around the lake to the spot where Harry had been attacked. When they got there, Harry stripped down to the swim suit he had on under his robes and walked into the water.

"Isn't it a bit cold still for this?" Hermione said, trailing her fingers in the water. "This water is freezing!"

"The lake's always cold," Harry said with a shrug as he walked farther away from shore. "Once I do my gill transformation, it will feel warm to me."

"I'm coming with you!" Ginny cried. She'd been acting nervous all afternoon, but wouldn't tell anyone why. Now she pulled off her robes and stood in a t-shirt and shorts, looking uneasily at the gillyweed she'd pulled from her pocket. It looked like a bunch of ugly grey worms, but she had to eat it if she wanted to grow gills and fins and be able to swim with Harry.

Harry smiled. "You don't have to do that."

"All of you have been in this lake, but I haven't!" she said with determination. "You're all leaving after this year. This may be my only chance to see the merpeople and Plimpies and grindylows and the squid in their natural environment – and to swim like a fish with you, Harry. Please don't leave me behind!"

"You have to eat that stuff, you know," he said, his eyes teasing as he glanced at the nasty mass of gillyweed.

"I know. I'll do it even if you don't wait for me! But please do," she said, stepping into the lake.

"Those clothes will slow you down," he said. "At least let me transform them into a swim suit. OK?" She nodded. He thought a moment, then waved his wand slightly and her t-shirt and shorts became a pretty gold bikini.

Ginny's mouth dropped in shock. Ron gasped and Hermione was startled into laughter. "Harry? Where did you get this idea?" Ginny asked, looking at the skimpy suit that was baring a lot more of her white skin than she'd expected.

"I don't know much about girls' swim suits," he said with a shrug. "I made you one like Casey's – but yours is a different colour. Is it OK?"

Ginny shivered. "Yeah. It's pretty. It's just – there's so little of it, and it's not that warm here!"

"Come into the water and eat your gillyweed. You'll be fine as soon as it takes effect," he told her.

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Ron and Hermione sat down on the shore to wait for Harry's instructions for the things he'd brought with him.

Ginny stepped farther away from the shore, reaching out for Harry's extended hand. She looked up at him, nervous but excited. Taking a deep breath, she held the gillyweed up to her face, but her nose wrinkled at the smell.

"You don't have to do this," Harry reminded her with a smile. "I won't be long."

"I really want to!" she insisted, holding the nasty mess up to her mouth again.

"Then shove it all in at once, don't try to nibble it," Harry suggested.

She did as he instructed, her eyes bugging out and her face twisting in disgust at the horrible texture and flavour. She gulped hard as soon as she could, swallowing the nasty stuff, then looked expectantly at Harry. "Now what?"

"Now you wait. It won't take long," he assured her. "When you feel as if you have a pillow over your face and you can't breathe, that's when you go in the water and start breathing there. I'll set my watch. You'll have an hour, so we'll need to be back here before that. How well do you swim?"

"Not all that well," she admitted.

"Me either, unless I have gills," he said with a cheeky grin. "So we definitely need to—" He stopped, seeing the alarm on her face. "In the water – now!" He waved at Ron and Hermione as he did his own gill transformation and ducked under water with Ginny.

Ginny was trying to hold her breath, afraid to try breathing in the water despite her gills. Her frightened eyes found Harry's amused ones. He opened his mouth and began moving it like a fish, pointing to the gills on his neck, which were opening and closing as he breathed in the water. He put her hand on her gills and showed her that they weren't moving, then he touched her chin and used gestures to urge her to open her mouth and try breathing. Finally, Ginny couldn't stand it any longer and opened her mouth, taking a huge breath in the water. Her face split in a grin and she laughed, making bubbles rise to the surface. She looked at her hands and Harry's, both of which had become webbed, and at her feet, which were now long and flipper-like, like Harry's. Suddenly realizing how free she could be in the water as long as she had gills, Ginny kicked off with her flippers and zoomed through the water, Harry at her side.

They swam for a while, Harry showing her the sights – grindylows in the grasses along the bottom, Plimpies doing their funny little walk as they browsed for food, various fish coming up to inspect them. They were having a marvellous time. They stopped at one point to sit on the bottom and help some Plimpies that were floating around helplessly after merpeople had tied their rubbery legs together. As the Plimpies stalked away on their long legs, Harry and Ginny grinned at each other, then kicked off from the bottom and swam further out into the lake.

A few minutes later, Harry saw something shiny on the bottom. He signalled Ginny to stay where she was so the nearby grindylows wouldn't be able to grab her long hair while he went to see what it was. Harry swam down and discovered it was only a piece of quartz catching

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the light from the sun shining brightly on the water. He picked it up and looked up, ready to swim back to Ginny when he was caught by the sight of her. She was swimming slowly above him, not moving forward much at all, her pale gold bikini blending with her skin in the shadow cast by her body so she looked nude. Her hair was a fiery cloud around her milk-white body with the dappled sunlight glinting through it, giving it a metallic glow and casting red-gold reflections on her body. Harry thought his heart would burst with love for her. He pocketed the piece of quartz and swam up to her rapidly, pulling her to him and kissing her. His momentum when he reached her made them spin in place, her long hair wrapping around them like a silken scarf. Their kisses became serious and they began to sink gradually toward the sandy bottom, wrapped in each other's loving embrace.

As he kissed her, Harry gently unfastened the bikini top, his heart lurching a bit as he remembered repairing the clip on Casey's bikini. It seemed like a lifetime ago. His finned hands looked weird as they glided over her beautiful breasts, but she didn't seem to mind how they felt. The water buoyed them up, keeping them floating as they made love tenderly, slowly, revelling in the strange new experience. Their hair whirled around them as they moved in the dappled light and shadow many feet below the lake's surface, in a beautiful, slow, sensual dance of love.

Ginny couldn't imagine anything sweeter. Harry's eyes were brilliantly green in this strange underwater light, his hair a glistening black aurora around his handsome face. She revelled in the love they shared, wishing this magical time together could go on forever.

They held each other close for a time, then Harry reluctantly lifted the suits he'd held carefully in one hand and waved them, indicating it was time they dressed and went back to their task – finding the squid and merpeople.

Harry looked at his watch, knowing Ginny didn't have much more time before she would have to go back to shore. He clapped his hands as hard as he could, three times, a difficult feat to accomplish under water. He grinned at Ginny, who looked perplexed, then looked around them, scanning the water carefully. Finally, he saw it. A massive shape came silently toward them, making Ginny tremble and cling to Harry. She'd never seen the entire squid. Sixty feet long and massive in every way, the squid could easily have crushed them, but it approached gently, lightly touching Harry's shoulder with the end of a tentacle. He patted the squid and rubbed it between its eyes, showing Ginny how to pet it where it most appreciated the attention. Ginny was soon laughing and rubbing the squid on top of its head, between its eyes and other places it offered her as it turned over and over in the water. After a while, Harry tapped the squid and moved his hand in a sharp gesture in front of its eyes, then grabbed Ginny's hands and pulled her arms around the top of its mantle behind its fins. Harry grabbed on in the same place, pinning Ginny's arms under his securely. He turned and nodded at the squid and it shot a jet of water out of its funnel, zooming through the water rapidly. Harry laughed, enjoying the speed of the ride, and glanced at Ginny, who was equally happy.

Glancing at his watch again, Harry patted the squid on its mantle and it immediately stopped. He let go of the animal, pushing away from it a bit and gesturing to Ginny to follow him as he headed for the surface. When their heads broke the surface, Harry heard a relieved, "There they are!" from Ron, who he knew had worried about his sister.

Ginny leaned her head back in the water, letting the water pull the hair out of her face. She looked uneasily at Harry, then touched her gills. She shook her head and submerged again. It

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was too soon, she couldn't breathe oxygen yet. Harry submerged with her, then pulled her to him and started them spinning again.

"What the bloody hell are they doing?" Ron said, worried when they submerged again.

"Maybe her gills are still there," Hermione said, watching with equal concern. She climbed up on a big rock nearby so she could see farther across the water, then laughed. "They're kissing!" she told Ron.

"Huh? How can you tell?" he said, getting to his feet and climbing up to stand beside her on the rock.

"You can see her hair and his on the surface of the water. It's spinning round and round, see? They're having a good time in there!" Hermione laughed.

"Oh, well, as long as they're having fun," Ron said with a bit of disgust. He and Hermione had sat there for an hour waiting for Harry and Ginny to surface and now they were snogging, leaving them to worry! He sighed, then grinned. If swimming with gills was that much fun, he just might have to try to talk Hermione into trying it with him.

Ginny's head broke the surface again, and this time, her shoulders followed suit. Harry didn't reappear, but Ginny, who was laughing, was moving rapidly toward shore somehow, without swimming. Ron tilted his head and frowned, trying to work out what was happening. When she reached the shallows, Ginny stopped and stood up, and Harry stood beside her.

"How did you do that?" Ron asked curiously.

"What?" Ginny replied. Harry still had gills. He bent and kissed her, waved at his friends, and swam back out to the deeper water.

"How did you get here without swimming?"

"I was riding Harry's back," she giggled. "It was amazing! He swims ever so well! And he's fast! I don't swim well at all, and once my gills were gone, I couldn't stay in the water." She hurried to the pile of towels they'd brought along and wrapped herself up. "I'm freezing now! But oh, we had such a wonderful time! I want to go again!"

"Here, let's get you warmed up," Hermione said practically, casting a Warming Charm on Ginny and starting a fire with her bluebell flames.

"Thanks! Oh, that's better!" Ginny said, rubbing herself dry and wrapping her hair in a towel. She pulled on her clothes and huddled by the fire, waiting for Harry to finish his task and join them.

"Oy, Ron!" Harry said suddenly. He was standing in the shallows himself now, and had removed the gill transformation. "Chuck me the big bag, all right?"

"Here you go!" Ron said, tossing a filled sack to his friend.

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Harry opened the sack and pulled out bits of toast and scones, giving them to the squid, which he'd ridden closer to shore while he still had his gills.

"I can't thank you enough for what you did, mate," he told the squid. "I wish I could have seen you dunking those boys! Thanks." He fed the squid for a while longer, then turned when he heard merpeople's voices.

"There you are!" he cried happily. He Banished the empty food sack back to shore and called, "Ron! Now the small sack!"

"OK," Ron replied, tossing him a bag small enough to fit in the palm of his hand.

"Thanks, mate!" Harry called, then moved toward the merpeople. He began speaking to them in their squealing, eerie language. After a few minutes, he opened the bag and pulled out small, shiny things and handed one to each of the merpeople in the group, smiling as he did so. After more conversation with them, he and the merpeople waved to each other and parted. Harry made his way back to shore, a grin on his face.

"What was all that about?" Hermione said. "You never did tell us what you were going to do out here today."

Harry picked up a towel and began drying himself off as he spoke. "I wanted to thank the merpeople for saving my life, and the squid for what he did to those boys," he replied. "Today was the first day in a while that it's been warm enough to do it."

"You gave the squid treats. What did you give the merpeople?" Hermione said, laughing at him when he emerged from towelling his hair dry. Despite its length, his hair was sticking up all over the place. Noticing her look, Harry raked his fingers through his hair, doing what he could to calm it down.

"Remember the gold ore I used to work on my refining charm?" he said, glancing around at them just before pulling a shirt over his head. "I made the gold into disks about the size of a sickle, and put a small hole near one edge. I got Dean to draw me a mermaid and I copied the design on the disks, then I carved my initials on the backs. I gave those to the merpeople to use for jewellery or decorations or whatever they wanted," he said with a shrug.

"That's a lovely present, Harry!" Hermione said with a smile. "But wasn't the gold awfully expensive?"

"They saved my life, Hermione," Harry reminded her seriously. "This was the only way I could think of to thank them. They were pleased with the disks. If they're happy, I'm happy," he added, tugging his jeans on over his trunks, on which he'd used a Drying Charm moments before. He glanced at Ginny. "Did you have fun?" he asked, a teasing light in his eyes.

"Oh, yes! When can we go again?" she said eagerly. "And can you teach me that transformation so I won't have to leave after just an hour?"

"It's a difficult one, but since you've used gillyweed now, it may be easier for you. I just tried to reproduce the effect of gillyweed," he explained. "Start with your hands or your feet. Don't

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try to do the gills unless you're near a bathtub full of water and have a friend nearby who can change you back if you get stuck!"

"Voice of experience talking?" she teased.

"Uh. . .yeah," he said, blushing. "When I first tried the transformation, I was alone and got stuck, with no bathtub of water nearby. I nearly drowned in the air before I managed to change back. I won't be so careless again! Ready?" he added, helping Ginny to her feet.

She nodded, and the two of them helped Ron and Hermione gather up the things they'd brought with them – blankets, towels, snacks, the two sacks that had contained Harry's presents for the squid and merpeople. Hermione scooped her bluebell flames into a jar and sealed it, then put it in her pocket.

As the four friends walked back to the castle, each couple walking hand-in-hand, Ginny entertained them by telling them about all the wonderful things she saw while in the lake with Harry. She and Harry exchanged teasing, furtive glances from time to time. There were some lovely, delightful things that happened in the lake that would only be shared between the two of them, memories that would last a lifetime.

Chapter 27 – Quidditch, Anyone?

Time was passing swiftly, and Harry's seventh and final year at Hogwarts was drawing to a close. Late May arrived, and with it, the final Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. The Ravenclaw team had done well this year and was tied with Gryffindor in points. A win in this game would give them the Cup. Harry and his team were determined to keep the trophy on McGonagall's desk.

The professional Quidditch team scouts were already seated with Professor Dumbledore, clipboards in hand. They smiled and shook hands with people around them as the headmaster introduced them to the other staff members seated nearby.

Harry pulled his head back into the Gryffindor Changing Rooms and gulped. This was it. He had to do his very best so they'd want him for a team. His eyes locked with Ron's and he nodded slightly, letting Ron know the scouts were, indeed, in the stands.

"So they're here, are they?" Colin said cheerfully as he passed Harry. "Cool!" He clapped his captain on the shoulder as he moved to the bench and plunked himself down next to his brother.

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling a bit green with nerves. "Cool." He forced a smile on his face. He was a good Quidditch player. So was Ron. All they could do was their best. If the scouts didn't want them, well, he'd . . . he'd . . . he'd be an Auror. After some long talks with Tonks, he was once more seriously interested in being an Auror. But what about Quidditch? Suddenly Harry realized it was bloody convenient to have money. He could start his own team if a professional team didn't scout him! Yeah, that would be amazing! Then the reasonable side of his brain kicked in and reminded him that starting a Quidditch team would probably be more expensive than he could imagine. Why bankrupt himself to play a game he could only play for maybe ten years before having to retire? But for those ten years . . . what fun! Harry shook his head ruefully and brought his mind back to earth. Glancing at Ron, he could see his best mate was going through the same kind of visions, probably without the "start your own team" variation, but still . . . their minds were both caught up in the dream of playing on a professional team – hopefully, the same team!

"Knut for your thoughts, cutie," Ginny teased as she came in from the girls' locker room. She tweaked his bum very lightly as she passed, making him blush and think about the matters at hand again.

"I'm thinking one of our Chasers is a cheeky little witch," he said in mild reproof.

"And you're right!" she said with a bright grin. "Get on with it, Captain. What are your orders?"

"Right. Everyone's here," Harry said, glancing around. "OK. Remember, their Chasers use an arrow formation a lot – watch out for that. Beaters, try to break up that formation as often as you can so they can't pass to each other so easily. Chasers, look sharp. When Colin and Dennis go after that arrow formation, the Quaffle will drop, or else you'll be able to steal it. Ron, watch that girl Chaser, she's sneaky. She feints one way then shoots the other, remember?"

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"Yeah, I remember," Ron said. He and Harry had observed some of the Ravenclaw practices to see what they were up against. The Ravenclaw captain and some players had done the same to the Gryffindors.

"All right, any questions? No? OK! Let's do our best out there! GO, GRYFFINDOR!" he cried, leading their cheer.

Soon both teams were racing around the pitch, trying to outdo each other. Dean Thomas's commentary was often garbled because the play was progressing faster than he could announce it.

"And it's Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle – look at that Firebolt go! And she scores! Now the Ravenclaw Chasers have the Quaffle and have gone into their arrow formation. Gryffindor Beaters Dennis and Colin Creevey seem to have a plan. They've hit their Bludgers at the same time, breaking the arrow formation apart and the Quaffle is dropped! It's saved by Euan Abercrombie of Gryffindor, who reverses and races toward the goal! He's fouled by Ravenclaw Beater Anthony Goldstein for clobbering – that's excessive use of elbows. Euan takes the foul shot and SCORES!"

It was a hard-fought match, but finally, with the score at 80-20 in Gryffindor's favour, Harry saw a flicker of gold near the ground far below him.

"Potter's seen the Snitch! There he goes in one of his trademark dives! He's . . . no, he's going to get ploughed! Pull up, Harry, *pull up!*" Dean called in a panicked voice. The crowd screamed as the Gryffindor Seeker plummeted downward at breakneck speed.

Harry knew exactly what he was doing. He'd pointed his Firebolt straight down and hurtled toward earth at 150 miles per hour, leaving the Ravenclaw chaser far behind him. At the last instant, as the front of his broom handle was about to brush the top fringe of grass, he wrestled his broom to fly mere inches above the grass. He reached for the elusive golden ball, which changed course suddenly and zoomed skyward once again, Harry in hot pursuit. Su Li, the Ravenclaw Seeker, had never caught up with Harry, but the Snitch's change of direction favoured her, and she was much smaller and lighter than Harry. She pelted toward the ball. She and Harry were on a collision course now. When Harry saw her coming, he remembered a game against Ravenclaw years ago when Oliver Wood had yelled at him to stop acting like a gentleman and knock Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker and a girl Harry fancied at the time, off of her broom. He didn't knock Cho off of her broom then, and couldn't see himself knocking little Su Li off of her broom now. He managed to dodge her and the two of them grabbed for the ball at the same time. Her hand skittered across the back of his just before he pumped his fist triumphantly in the air, the Snitch fluttering helplessly within his hand.

Harry's heart was full as he hovered in mid-air, waving his Snitch-filled fist at the screaming crowd. They'd won! They'd won the Quidditch Cup! And he'd just caught the Snitch for the last time as a player on the Gryffindor team. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to savour the joy of the moment and not think about the poignancy of it. Soon he couldn't think at all, surrounded as he was by the milling mass of his team mates who were pounding him on the back, Fiona hugging and kissing him. Harry turned his cheek to the young girl and kissed her cheek in return, then felt someone wrapping arms around his waist and pulling him close. He glanced down and saw laughing brown eyes and beautiful red hair coming loose from its plait.

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Harry lowered his face to Ginny's and kissed her resoundingly, to the cheers of his team and the Gryffindor fans.

They landed in front of Professor Dumbledore, who had come on the field to present the Quidditch Cup. The headmaster held the huge, beautiful trophy up and turned around so all those in the stands could see it clearly.

"It is my great pleasure," the old wizard said as Harry stepped confidently up to him, "to present the Quidditch Cup to the victorious Gryffindor team. Team captain Harry Potter will be accepting the trophy on behalf of the team." He handed the gorgeous cup to Harry and shook the young man's hand. "Well done!" he said as he clasped Harry's hand.

"Thank you, sir," Harry responded with a grin. He took a step back, looked up into the stands and held the cup aloft as the cheering crowd cried, "Well done, Gryffindor! Well done, Gryffindor!" Harry laughed and turned to his team, holding the Cup out so they could all touch it as the cheering continued.

The Gryffindor fans spilled onto the field and lifted the team members onto their shoulders. With Harry and Ron holding the cup between them, the team was carried toward the castle for a party that would probably last the rest of the day and well into the night.

As the happy throng passed Professor McGonagall, she called, "Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, a moment, if you please?"

Harry and Ron managed to get to the ground without being dropped and made their way through the celebrating crowd to their Head of House. "I believe this is yours. . . again," Harry said with a huge grin as he handed her the Cup.

"Thank you!" she said with a huge smile. "I cannot tell you how I enjoy having this on my desk." She gazed at the Cup in satisfaction for a moment, then said, "You have guests," gesturing behind her where the Quidditch scouts stood applauding along with the rest of the still-excited crowd.

"Well done, lads!" Mr. Terwilliger said enthusiastically. "What we saw today confirmed our judgement. I'm happy to tell you that there's already a bidding war going on over you two. Each of us have several teams who want you."

"Really? Wow!" Harry said with an ear-to-ear grin.

"Me, too?" Ron said in disbelief.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, you too," Terwilliger assured him.

"I think you'll find several offers to your liking," Mr. Washburn said with a smile.

"How do we decide which one to take, then?" Ron asked in confusion.

"You compare the benefits involved, as well as the salaries," Mr. Thornton said, handing each boy some envelopes. The other two men followed suit.

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"You boys look these over. Contact us if you have any questions," Terwilliger said warmly.

"Erm . . .," Harry said nervously, "are any of these offers for both of us?"

"One of mine is," Terwilliger replied. "The London Lions want both of you."

"All of my offers are for one or the other of you," Thornton said.

"Mine, too," Washburn agreed.

"Are you especially interested in staying together?" Terwilliger asked.

"We'd like to. We're best mates, and we can share my house in London," Harry began, then glanced at Ron, who was gazing in awe at the orange-emblazoned Chudley Cannons envelope in his hand. "But it's not a requirement." As he finished speaking, Harry wondered if Ron would take the Cannons offer even if it wasn't the best one.

"Things can change, too, lads, so we may have more offers to bring you," Thornton said with a smile. "If a player sustains an injury and needs to be replaced, another team might express an interest in you, or another position on one of these teams might open up."

"Take your time looking through the offers, boys," Washburn said. "This decision will affect your lives for some time to come, so choose wisely!"

"We'll do our best," Harry said with a broad grin. Ron nodded mutely, still stunned to be holding an offer from the Chudley Cannons in his hands.

"Right then. Off you go! I suspect you have a wonderful party to attend!" Terwilliger said jovially. "We'll be in touch!"

"Thanks for coming!" Harry said sincerely, clutching the envelopes to his chest with his left hand so he'd be able to shake hands with the three men.

Ron gulped and finally found his voice, which came out sounding squeaky and strange. "Yeah! Thanks!"

The three men laughed good-naturedly and shook hands with both boys. "Our pleasure. Talk to you soon," Terwilliger said. Washburn and Thornton also said goodbye and moved off with Professor Dumbledore, and were soon deep in conversation with him.

"Harry?" Ron said, his voice crackling as it hadn't for years. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Looks like an offer from the Cannons to me, mate," Harry said with a grin, happy for his friend, but feeling a serious twinge at the idea that they would no longer be playing Quidditch together.

"Wow!" Ron breathed. "Did you get one too?"

"Not from the Cannons," Harry replied, riffling through his envelopes as they walked slowly toward the castle.

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"Not from the Cannons?" Ron repeated, aghast. "How could they not recruit you?"

"They must not need a Seeker," Harry said reasonably. "You're a great Keeper, Ron. They must need a new one."

"Yeah, O'Banyon hasn't done too well this year," Ron agreed. "Out of fourteen teams, I got five offers, and you got how many, six? Seven?"

"Six – and there are only thirteen teams we could be on, since the Harpies is an all-witches team," Harry reminded him with a grin.

"Yeah," Ron commented. "Six offers, Harry! That's great! I can't wait to look these over!"

"Yeah, me too!" Harry enthused, glad Ron seemed to be open to at least looking at the other offers. They started walking toward the castle, shuffling envelopes in their hands and looking in awe at the team names and logos emblazoned on each one.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"D'you mind being late for the party?"

"No."

"Let's go to the Changing Room and look at these, OK?" Ron said eagerly. "I can't wait, and we can't look at them properly with everyone around us partying."

Harry grinned. "Right! Let's go!"

A few minutes later, each of them had their offers spread across separate benches. Harry walked the length of his bench, trying to work out how to make good comparisons between offers. He glanced up at Ron, who held the opened Chudley Cannons offer in both hands, staring at it with a shocked face.

"What is it, Ron?"

"S-s-s-s-..." he gasped.

"S-s-s what?" Harry said, walking over to him and looking over his shoulder at the letter. "Starting Keeper? They want you to be on the starting line-up?"

Ron nodded mutely. The best either of them had hoped for was a position in the reserve squad to begin with. Harry had some offers in starting positions as Seeker, but none from a team he'd followed with devotion his whole life, as Ron had the Cannons. Harry's heart sank. No way was Ron going to look at any other offers now. He swallowed the pain in his heart and clapped his best mate on the shoulder. "Wow!" he said as sincerely as he could. He hoped his voice didn't sound as strained to Ron as it did in his own ear. "Congratulations, Ron. I guess we'll be seeing you in orange robes soon."

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"Or . . . or . . . orange robes," Ron stammered. "C-c-c-c-cannons . . . they want ME!" he said, finally catching his breath and becoming somewhat coherent.

"That's great! I'm happy for you," Harry said, meaning it this time. He really was happy for Ron. His best mate's dream had come true – the Chudley Cannons wanted him on their team, and not just as a reserve player, but as Starting Keeper! Could Ron hope for anything better? Harry thought not. They'd just have to enjoy their time together in Auror School and get past the odd feeling of playing Quidditch against each other.

"What . . . what . . ." Ron gulped and tore his eyes away from his letter, looking at the long row of letters on Harry's bench. "You got a lot of offers! What teams? What did they offer? Anything good?"

"Yeah," Harry said with satisfaction. "Several good ones." He watched Ron walk over and look at Harry's offers.

"Starter Seeker. Starter Seeker. Reserve Chaser. Starter Seeker. Reserve Seeker," Ron read as he walked down the line. "Reserve Beater." He looked up at Harry and shook his head, a sarcastic sneer on his face. "Beater? Nah. That's a waste of your talents, mate. Wow, look at all these offers, Harry! Congratulations!"

Harry had turned from watching Ron to look at Ron's other offers. "Have you looked at all of these letters? You've got Starting Keeper offers from two more teams! Well done! Reserve Keeper from another – no, from two other teams. Excellent! There are real choices here for both of us!"

"How do we choose, though?" Ron said, looking confused, the Cannons letter still clutched tightly in his hand.

Harry swallowed hard, trying to be careful how he answered, but he just had to say it. "I, erm, thought you'd already decided," he said, nodding toward the Cannons letter.

"This?" Ron said, looking at the letter, his face lighting up again at the sight of it. "Yeah," he breathed in obvious ecstasy. As Harry's heart sank still further, Ron shook his head. "No. I haven't decided yet. I'm just blown away that the Cannons want me."

"You haven't decided?"

"Harry," Ron said patiently, "do you really think I want to play against you?"

"But it's the Cannons . . ."

"And there are four other offers here," Ron said with more maturity than Harry had expected under the circumstances.

Harry laughed, a relieved sound. "Yeah, there are!" He thought a moment. "Remus used to work as a mediwizard for a local Quidditch team, so he knows a bit about how the teams work. Maybe he could help us sort out which offers are best. I mean, there are so many things to consider – location, salary, the days they want us, the team standing – besides which position they're offering. I'm sure there are other considerations besides these that I just can't think of."

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"Yeah, let's ask if he can help us this evening. The party may still be going on then, but we should be able to sneak out!"

"Yeah, OK," Harry agreed. Just then he heard Ginny's voice.

"Harry Potter!"

"Ginny?" He looked around, but she wasn't there. Then he looked at his left hand and saw her translucent face hovering over his ring. He pressed the ruby and said, "Ginny Weasley. Hi, baby!"

"Hi, yourself! Are you and Ron all right? People are asking where you are! Where are you? What happened?"

"Are you somewhere private?" Harry said cautiously. He didn't feel like sharing his and Ron's news with everyone just yet.

"Hang on. Shall I bring Hermione?" Ginny said.

Harry could tell from the way her head moved that she was standing up and looking around for her best friend. "Yes, bring her along."

"Right. Hermione? Could I see you a minute?" Ginny said. The motion of her head above the ring showed she was moving again. Finally she said, "OK, what's up?"

"Ron and I got several offers from Quidditch teams," Harry said with a grin. "We couldn't wait to open them, so we came to the Changing Rooms to look them over. They're really good offers, Gin. Tell Hermione that too. We'll come in now and tell you everything. Sorry we worried you. Don't share our news yet, OK? I just want to savour it for a bit before telling." He glanced at Ron, who grinned and nodded. "Yeah, Ron feels the same way."

"OK," she said happily. "Congratulations!" She turned her head and repeated Harry's news to her best friend in a quiet voice, then grinned at Harry's face hovering over her ring.

"Hermione says to tell Ron she's proud of him! I'm proud of both of you!" She hesitated, looked off to the side, then laughed. "Oh, now Hermione says she's proud of both of you too. Just come in and we'll talk, OK?"

"We'll be right there," Harry replied. "Bye."

Gryffindor Tower was rocking with noise, music, laughter and celebration when Harry and Ron climbed through the portrait hole. When the other Gryffindors saw them, cheers went up, adding tremendously to the noise level. Both Harry and Ron grinned broadly, blushing a bit at all the adulation they were receiving. The cheers rolled on and on, and finally, glancing at each other conspiratorially, Harry and Ron both said, "Cheers!" and bowed rather dramatically, making everyone laugh and get back to partying.

"That was fun," Ron said with a chuckle as he and Harry helped themselves to snacks and butterbeer. Ginny and Hermione were standing by the steps to the boys' dormitories, looking

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both excited and expectant. Harry and Ron had to run a gauntlet of well-wishers to get to them, but they finally managed it.

"Well?" Ginny said, her eyes dancing as she looked from her boyfriend to her brother and back again. "Show us!"

"We've been waiting so patiently while you dealt with your adoring fans," Hermione teased, reaching up to push Ron's hair out of his eyes.

"It's a burden, being so popular," Ron joked.

"Yeah, dead awful," Harry agreed, laughing, as he and his friends sat on the stairs so the boys could eat their snacks.

"You know, I've noticed something," Hermione said suddenly, gazing at him.

"What? Dirt on my nose?" Harry teased. She was looking at him rather intently.

"No. It's you. There's something odd about the way you enjoy the attention you get when you win Quidditch games, but you can't stand the attention you get for other things you do."

"Huh?" he said intelligently.

"I mean, you seem to enjoy being the centre of attention and having people congratulate you on a good game. But if people thank you for saving their lives, or for standing up to Voldemort, it bothers you. If people recognize you on the street, that bothers you. If you become a famous Quidditch star, you may be recognized on the street even more," she said reasonably. "Will that bother you, or will you like it? And why the difference?"

"Erm . . ." Harry said, not really wanting to get into any kind of serious discussion in the middle of a party.

"Oh, come on, Harry!" Hermione urged. "I've wanted to ask you this for ages. This is the last Quidditch game of your Hogwarts career. I won't have a chance to ask 'schoolboy Harry Potter' this question again! The next time I have a chance, you'll be 'professional Quidditch star Harry Potter.'"

He looked at her oddly, then across her to Ron. "What's with her?"

"She's got a point, mate," Ron admitted. "You may as well answer her now and get it over with. Otherwise, she'll never give you a minute's peace."

Hermione poked him in the ribs with her elbow for his comment.

"Ow! You've damaged me! No pro team will ever want me now!" Ron wailed, teasing her.

"They'll just have to deal with damaged goods, then," Hermione said pertly, then poked him again, a bit more gently this time. She turned back to Harry after she'd made up with Ron. "Well?"

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"Well what?" he said, being deliberately thick.

"Why—"

"Oh, yeah, I remember the question," Harry interrupted. He sighed, looking around the room at his classmates. This was the last Quidditch Cup celebration he'd attend as a Hogwarts student. The thought made him sad. He sighed again. "I don't know, Hermione. I suppose I don't mind the attention I get when we win games because I'm part of a team effort. And . . . well, what I do on the Quidditch team is my own work, using my own talents, my own efforts. It doesn't involve anyone dying or being threatened with death or torture or anything like that. It doesn't involve people admiring me for my accidental defeat of Voldemort when I was a baby. Quidditch is fun. Being part of a team is cool." He shrugged. "That's all I can think of. Satisfied?"

She thought a minute. "Yes. Thank you." She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"For answering my question. For winning the Cup. For being my best friend. Just because," she said with a shrug.

Ron wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. "Are you flirting with Harry again?"

"Not yet, but that could be arranged," she teased.

"Don't bother. You need to flirt with me. I'm a potential professional Quidditch star. I need to get used to having girls fawn all over me," Ron said, his eyes sparkling with laughter.

"Yeah, Ginny, you want to help me practice how to deal with fan girls?" Harry said, grinning down at her.

"I'll hex them all, so you won't need to worry about it," she said with tremendous self-assurance.

"OK," Harry said easily as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Just as long as the problem is dealt with."

"No worries," she assured him.

"Hey, Harry, Ron," Neville said as he approached them. "Great game!"

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Thanks!"

Neville sat down near them and noticed the letters sticking out of Ron's pocket. "What's all that? Is that what those men gave you down on the pitch? I saw them talking to you."

"Erm . . . yeah," Ron said, blushing madly.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be nosy," Neville said immediately.

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"No, it's not a problem," Ron replied. He pulled out the envelopes reverently and held them out for Neville to see. "They're . . . they're . . . erm . . ." He cleared his throat and glanced nervously at Harry.

"They're offers from professional Quidditch teams," Harry said, helping Ron out.

"Offers? You mean they want you on their teams?" Neville said, delighted.

"Yeah," Harry said with a huge grin.

"You got some too, right, Harry?" Neville said eagerly.

"Yeah, we both did," Harry agreed.

"From the same team?"

"In one case, yeah, but they told us there may be other offers coming in the next week or two," Ron replied, finally finding his voice. "We'll wait until then to make a final decision."

"Wow! You're both going to be on professional Quidditch teams!" Neville said admiringly. "Congratulations!"

"What's that?" Dean said, overhearing part of the conversation as he passed by. Neville filled him in and Dean announced the news as if he were in the stadium. "QUIET! May I have your attention please? It has come to my attention that two of our own Gryffindor Quidditch team players have – drum roll, please –" he waited while several people pounded on tables in an approximation of a drum roll, "been offered contracts by several PROFESSIONAL QUIDDITCH TEAMS! Lift your wands for *Harry Potter* and *Ron Weasley*!"

The Common Room, already noisy, nearly burst with the cheering that resulted. Many people let off sparks from their wands. Parvati and Lavender released pretty little birds from theirs. Harry and Ron accepted the congratulations, pats on the back, ruffled hair, hugs and other forms of good wishes with bright red faces and huge grins.

"Which teams?" Colin called out.

Ron and Harry looked at each other. Did they really want to reveal everything? At the same time, they shrugged and got out their letters. Ron nudged Harry to go first.

"Erm, OK. I have offers from—" he began.

"Tell us what positions they're offering!" Dean prompted.

"OK," Harry said, pulling the first letter out of its envelope. "Falmouth Falcons, Reserve Chaser." There were cheers as well as groans and protests that Harry was a Seeker, not a Chaser. Harry raised his hands to quieten them. "Let me get through this, all right?" he said, laughing, as he opened the second letter. Ginny had taken his stack of mail from him and was opening them and handing them to him, and stuffing the ones he'd read back into the proper envelopes. He smiled at her gratefully, then read the rest of his offers. "Tutshill Tornados, Reserve Seeker." Huge cheers met this offer. "Wimbourne Wasps, Reserve Beater." This

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announcement was met with groans and boos, which made Harry laugh. "Pride of Portree, Starter Seeker." Loud cheers greeted this announcement. "Appleby Arrows, Starter Seeker. London Lions, Starter Seeker."

When the cheering died down, Colin quipped, "Well, we know which position he's going to take! Pride of Portree Starter Seeker!" He was shouted down by others who were standing up for their own favourite teams.

"HEY! Guys! Quieten down, OK?" Harry said, shaking his head and grinning at their enthusiasm. "I don't know which offer to take yet. There are a lot of things to consider. I'll let you know when I decide. And they said there would probably be a few more offers coming in the next week or two anyway, so we can't make a firm decision until all the offers are in."

"I haven't heard of the London Lions," Lavender said. "Are they new?"

"Yeah, this was their first season. They're really good," Harry said with a grin. "They recruited a bunch of fantastic players and are providing for them quite well. They have a new stadium and they're doing well in competition this year. They're worth a look, even if they are new."

"Ron, which teams contacted you?" Hermione asked.

Ron cleared his throat nervously, going through his envelopes with Hermione's help, as Harry and Ginny had done. "Erm . . . Puddlemere United, Reserve Keeper. Wigtown Wanderers, Starting Keeper. Ballycastle Bats, Reserve Keeper. London Lions, Starting Keeper." He stopped and swallowed hard before continuing. "Ch-ch-chudley Cannons, Starting Keeper."

The Common Room exploded with cheers. Everyone knew how devoted Ron was to his favourite team.

"There's no question there!" Dean said with a grin. "You're taking the Cannons' offer, aren't you?"

"I don't know yet. It wouldn't be smart to just ignore these others," Ron said with a shrug, but he was blushing and grinning madly as he gazed at the Cannons' offer.

"The London Lions wants both of you," Ginny commented. "If you took their offer, you could still play together."

"Yeah, that's something to consider," Harry agreed, glancing at Ron, who was still gazing at the Cannons' letter in awe. He sighed, then lifted his eyes to the crowd pressing in around him and his friends and smiled. "Thanks for being excited about this for us, guys. It means a lot."

The party went on for hours. When he was able to get away from well-wishers, Harry pulled out his communication mirror and contacted Remus, asking if he and Ron could have Remus's help with the decision they needed to make. Remus immediately invited them over, whenever they could get there. Since the game had ended at noon, and the party had gone on since then, Harry and Ron decided to go to Remus's in the late afternoon. After that decision was reached, they joined in the festivities again for a while, then just couldn't stand not looking at their offers. They sat in a corner, pouring over the letters, trying to compare this offer to that one,

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conferring on the good and bad points of each. Ginny, Hermione and other friends stopped by to chat, but the boys were so engrossed, they barely noticed anyone's approach.

Around four, Harry and Ron got up and headed for the portrait hole, their heads still together, talking quietly as they walked. The girls trailed behind them.

"Aren't you going to invite us?" Ginny asked, looking a bit hurt.

Harry turned around and smiled at her, looking a bit startled to see her there. "I'm sorry, Gin," he said sincerely. "We were so involved with this stuff, we sort of forgot anyone else was around," he said sheepishly. "We're going to have our noses buried in paperwork for hours. Wouldn't you prefer to stay at the party?"

"No," she said definitely. "I want to go, if you don't mind."

"Me, too," Hermione said, taking Ron's arm.

Both boys grinned. "Let's go, then!" Harry said, swinging the Fat Lady's portrait aside so they could leave.

"How are we getting there?" Hermione said. "It's not a Hogsmeade weekend."

"Remus said to flash right into the house. That way, we won't be seen and possibly get in trouble," Harry replied. "Ready?" At everyone's nod, he changed into a phoenix. They all grabbed his tail and he flashed them to Remus's living room, where he quickly changed back into himself.

Greetings were exchanged, Tonks making sure to give each of them a hug, and give Harry extra kisses on each cheek in greeting. "What can I get you lot to drink?" she offered.

"We've been eating and drinking all afternoon," Harry said with a laugh. "Nothing for me right now, thanks!" The others agreed. "Thanks for seeing us, Remus."

"I'm looking forward to this, boys," his godfather said warmly. "What fun, helping you choose which team's offer to take!"

"Yeah!" the boys chorused.

"Bring your letters over here to the table and let's see what we have to work with," Remus suggested. The girls and Tonks sat in the living room chatting comfortably while watching their men concentrate on their task.

After a bit of study, Remus moved to his desk and got two pieces of parchment, two quills and two pots of ink. "All right, here's what we'll do," he said, handing each boy a parchment, quill and ink. "Make a list down the left side of the team's names. Then make a list across the top of all the variables they're offering, or other things that are important to you. For instance," he said in response to their questioning looks, "it might be important to Harry that the team be located near London, since his house is there, and it will save him money to not have to pay for lodging elsewhere."

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"OK, got it," Harry said, then set to work.

"Yeah, thanks!" Ron agreed, bending to his task as well.

When they'd finished their lists, Remus said, "Now take your wands and create a grid on the parchment, so there are lines separating each part of the list. Then you can write into each box what each team has to offer for each criterion."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're brilliant?" Harry laughed.

"Not today," Remus said, grinning. "You could have sorted this out by yourselves once you got over the first shock of the offers."

"Yeah, probably, but this is more fun," Harry said, beaming at his godfather.

"For me, too," Remus agreed.

Finally, the boys had their grids filled. "Now what?" Ron asked.

"Now you go through and mark which ones you like the least. Perhaps they're not offering enough money, or they're offering a reserve position instead of a starter position, or they're in a location you don't like, or the team isn't doing well. That kind of thing," Remus suggested.

"OK," the boys said, then went back to work.

"We're supposed to get more offers in the next two weeks," Harry said suddenly. "We probably shouldn't go too far in this before we get those offers."

"We can eliminate the ones we like the least, anyway," Ron countered. "Then we can just add the new offers and see how they fit in."

"Yeah, that's right," Harry agreed, and went back to work.

"Aren't they precious?" Tonks said fondly, watching the three men bent over their work so seriously.

"They are kind of cute," Hermione agreed with a fond smile.

"Yeah," Ginny said dreamily, smiling as she watched Harry concentrating on his work, running his hand distractedly through his hair as he considered his options. She wanted to be the one running her hands through his hair, but she knew better than to sidetrack him when he was so focused.

"So what do you two think?" Tonks said brightly. "Do you have any preference about which team they join? Hermione, which team would be closest to your school?"

"I don't know. It doesn't really matter," she said with a shrug. "I'm going to live with my parents while I go to college, and Ron will be living with Harry. We'll get together as often as we can," she assured her friends, "but I realized recently how much time I've spent away from

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my parents all these years. I want to spend some time with them before I start my career or move out on my own or whatever else takes me away from them."

"That's sweet," Tonks said, smiling. "Your parents are such nice people. I'm sure they'll enjoy having you at home for a while before you move away permanently."

"Does Ron know this yet?" Ginny asked with a slight frown.

"Well, yes, he's heard me mention it. We haven't really talked about it much, though," Hermione said with a shrug.

"I thought maybe . . .," Ginny began, then left her statement hanging.

"Maybe what?" Hermione replied.

"Maybe you'd be getting married," Ginny said quietly.

"No, we're not ready for that," Hermione said, her tone quite definite.

"Why not?" Tonks asked.

"I have a lot of studying I want to do yet, and I want to travel more before I settle down," Hermione replied. "Ron wants to play Quidditch and go to Auror School, both of which require staying in one place. He won't have much time for travel."

"The Quidditch teams travel all the time," Ginny countered. "Their games take them all over the UK."

"I want to travel abroad, Ginny," Hermione said patiently. "Ron hasn't expressed any interest in that at all."

"He loved our trip to Egypt! Have you asked him about this?"

"No. I love him, but we want different things right now," Hermione said, shrugging. "It's no big deal."

"It is to Ron," Ginny said in a fierce whisper. "He loves you!"

"I love him, too!" Hermione insisted. "But we're not as ready to make things permanent as you and Harry seem to be."

"Well, you're right about that, at least," Ginny snarled angrily. "I'd marry Harry today if he'd let me."

"He probably feels the same way," Tonks said, smiling as she glanced over at her godson.

"Yeah, but he insists I finish school first," Ginny said with a sigh.

"He's a wise young man," Tonks said approvingly.

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"Maybe so, but still. . . ." Ginny said with a sigh. She looked back at Hermione. "You do need to talk to Ron about all this."

"I know. I'll do it after we finish our N.E.W.T.s. We've been so busy revising that there hasn't been much time to talk about things. And I don't want to distract him."

"You don't want to distract him because you know he'll be heartbroken," Ginny said darkly.

Hermione sighed. "If it really upsets Ron . . . well, I don't know. I do want to spend some time with my parents, and I have so much research and study I want to do . . . and I want to travel –"

"Don't you remember what happened when you travelled to Italy without Ron?" Ginny hissed, angry again. "You broke up with him and it broke his heart. Don't do that again."

Hermione looked at Ginny seriously. "I remember, and I do regret that."

"It can't be because Ron can't afford to travel – he'll have money, between the award the Ministry gave him last term and the salary the Quidditch team will give him," Ginny reminded her, her eyes snapping furiously. "If you can't stick to the commitment you made to him, you don't deserve my brother."

"Ginny," Tonks interrupted quietly. "It's Hermione's life. She has to do what she thinks is best. Let her and Ron work it out. If it's meant to be, they'll be together. If it isn't meant to be, then they'll never be happy together. Very few people find their true love as early as you and Harry did. Hermione's a researcher. Maybe she wants to live a little, 'research' life as an adult, so to speak, before she marries. There's nothing wrong with that."

"There is if it hurts Ron," Ginny said, still huffy, "and she made a promise to him when they made up." She sat stewing angrily for a few minutes, then finally sighed. "I see your point, Tonks. I'm sorry, Hermione. You weren't here when Ron was going through hell from your breaking up with him. I don't want to see him go through that kind of pain again."

Hermione put her hand gently on Ginny's. "I don't want to cause it, either. I am committed to Ron, but I want to spend some time with my parents before moving out for good. He does know that I plan to live with them for a while after I get out of Hogwarts, and that doesn't bother him. He and I will work all this out somehow. I'll be careful, and will do my best not to hurt him. All right?" Ginny nodded. "Honestly, though, I don't think Ron's any more ready to get married than I am. He's never mentioned a promise ring or anything like that, and we've never talked about our future together the way you and Harry have. We just enjoy each other now. If he'd talked about a future together, I might feel differently."

"He's never –?" Ginny said, aghast. Hermione shook her head, her eyes a bit sad. "I'll have a talk with him," the redhead said determinedly.

"No, don't do that," Hermione said urgently. "It has to be his decision. Since he hasn't made any such decision, I've made my own plans. When he's ready, things will change."

Ginny was quiet a moment, trying to sort things out in her mind. "If he proposed today, would you accept?" she asked curiously.

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"I don't know. I don't think so. I wouldn't refuse, but honestly, I don't feel ready. I can't explain it any better," she said uncomfortably.

"Wait a minute," Ginny said suddenly. "He already proposed. At Christmas, when Mum and Harry had that fight, Ron said it should have been a triple ceremony."

"What?" Tonks said, completely lost. No one had ever told Remus and Tonks about the falling out that had happened between Molly and Harry on Christmas Eve.

"I'll tell you later, Tonks," Ginny said urgently. "Hermione, he did ask you then."

"But he's never mentioned it since then," Hermione said hesitantly.

"Why should he have to? You said he'd never talked about your future," Ginny said reasonably. "But he did propose, and he was serious. And when you two made up after your summer fling—"

"It was not a fling!" Hermione hissed, blushing and furious at the same time.

"Whatever. When you made up, you told him you were ready for whatever kind of commitment he wanted. Harry and I heard you tell him that," Ginny insisted.

"Well . . . yes, but—"

"But nothing! Have you acted as if you wanted to talk about your plans for the future together? Have you even brought it up, or have you been waiting for him to do it? He already made the first move, Hermione. He proposed. He's probably waiting for you to talk about what your plans together will be, you know. You're known as the one who makes the plans, remember?" Ginny pressed, hoping her friend was listening with an open heart.

"Erm . . . no, I haven't said anything like that to him," Hermione admitted.

"Then you can't blame him for not talking to you about it. I know Ron. I expect he's waiting for you to say something. One of you is going to have to start the conversation." Ginny sat with her arms crossed in exasperation, trying to decide whether Hermione or Ron was more thick-headed.

"So why not bring up the subject and just see what happens?" Tonks suggested.

"Which subject? We've covered so many," Hermione said nervously.

"Your futures. Marriage. What you're going to do after school. Any of the above," Tonks said, grinning. "Maybe he's just been afraid to say something. You do know I had to nudge Remus into talking about a future together, right?"

Both girls leaned toward her. "No! Really?" Ginny said in surprise. "But he's been so . . . I mean, he's seemed so . . . I mean . . . I don't know what I mean," she ended, laughing.

"You could see he loved me, right?" Tonks said, and both girls nodded. "So could I. But he was afraid to think we might have a future together because of his lycanthropy. And, as he

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told me later, he couldn't see why I would be interested in an 'old man' like him. 'Old man,' my hat! Whoooo!" she chortled gleefully, making both girls giggle.

"What are you girls laughing about over there?" Remus asked, giving his wife an amused glance.

"I'm just telling them how hot you are, sweetie!" Tonks said brightly. All four young people chuckled as Remus blushed madly.

"Thank you, my dear. Now my students will never look at me the same way again," he said, laughing despite his embarrassment. The four students all laughed louder at this.

"Just go back to work over there, boys, and leave us to the girl talk!" Tonks said cheekily.

"Gladly!" Remus said, shaking his head and grinning as he bent over the parchments again.

"Isn't he the cutest thing?" Tonks said happily, finally tearing her eyes away from her husband and looking at the two girls.

"He is cute," Ginny agreed, "in a godfatherish, professorial way!"

"Yeah," Hermione said, laughing. "I can see that too."

"Good!" Tonks grinned. "Now, where were we? Oh yeah. So he was too shy to say anything to me about a future together, so I just sort of nudged him into talking about it a bit. You could try the same thing, Hermione."

Miss Brightest-Witch-In-Hogwarts looked at Tonks blankly. "I don't know how! What would I say?"

"How did you get Harry started talking about your future, Ginny?" Tonks said, turning to the younger girl.

"I don't know. We just sort of always understood we'd be together, once he admitted that he loved me," she said with a gentle smile. "One time we were talking about something and I asked if we'd always live in London, and he said he'd like to live in the country, that Grimmauld Place was no place to raise children, since they couldn't play outside, nor could he." Her face softened at the memory. It was one of those times when Harry's heart had done the talking, with his brain nowhere in the loop, no worries, no reservations, no Voldemort to deal with, nothing but looking toward a normal, happy future. "We're going to build a house in Godric's Hollow on the land he inherited from his parents," she said quietly. "He says there's room for a Quidditch pitch there." She sat looking off in the distance, seeing a future her friends could only imagine.

"That's sweet," Tonks said quietly after a moment. "I can see him saying that. How lovely."

"He wants Ron to buy the land next door so we can always be neighbours and our kids can play together," Ginny added.

"Harry said that?" Hermione said suddenly.

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"Yeah," Ginny said, turning to her. "He and Ron have talked about it."

Hermione gulped. "They have?" Ginny nodded. "Did anyone ever plan to tell me?"

Ginny shrugged and smiled. "I think Ron intends to tell you at some point. Try to act surprised when he does, OK?" Hermione nodded mutely.

"So are you more ready now?" Tonks asked Hermione, giving her a grin.

"Erm" Hermione cleared her throat and looked over at Ron. Had he been planning the details of their future together and simply not told her yet? "Um, I'll, um, have to think about it."

Tonks and Ginny both laughed. "You do that," Tonks encouraged her. "You'll make the right decision when the time comes. You're young yet, you have plenty of time to make all those life-changing choices."

"Yeah," Hermione said uncertainly. "Plenty of time." *He's planning a future for us*, she thought, amazed. *There's a war on. We don't know what the future holds for us, or if we'll even have one. We don't know if any of us will survive the war. And getting married during a war seems like a bad idea to me. I mean, anything can happen! It's just not a logical choice! Tonks and Remus are right in the middle of the war and got married anyway, but Ron and I – we're just not ready for such a commitment – are we? But I did tell him I was ready for whatever he wanted . . . and really, shouldn't we grab whatever happiness we can? Harry and Ginny are. So are Tonks and Remus.* She settled back on the couch, lost in her thoughts. Ginny and Tonks noticed and left her alone, chatting about inconsequential things while the men worked.

"I think that's the best we can do for now," Remus said, straightening up.

"It makes more sense now, anyway," Ron said. "I wish I could talk to Dad about this."

"You're welcome to use our fireplace," Remus offered. "The floo powder is in that little red pot on the mantle."

"Thanks!" Ron said, then moved to the fireplace, knelt in front of it and tossed in some floo powder, saying "The Burrow" in a clear voice. Soon his head was in his parents' kitchen fire. "Dad! Mum! Is anyone home?"

"Ron, dear, what's wrong?" Molly said, hurrying into the kitchen, her knitting in her hands.

"Nothing! I'd like to talk to Dad. Is he home?" Ron said with a smile. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, dear. Your dad's out in the shed working on some project or other. I'll go and call him. Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong, I just want his opinion about something," Ron said, grinning happily.

"Right. I'll go and call him."

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Soon Arthur joined Molly by the fire. "Ron!" he said brightly. "What's up?"

"Harry and I got some offers from professional Quidditch teams!" Ron said with obvious excitement. "We're at Remus's house in Hogsmeade, trying to sort out which offer is best. I wanted to get your opinion on it."

"I'd be delighted!" Arthur said. "Do you want to come here, or do you want to just tell me about them?"

"You could come here," Ron said. "The girls are here chatting to Tonks – Mum could come too. It would be fun."

"Right. Let me get cleaned up and we'll be right there, then," Arthur said with a smile. "Congratulations! I know this means a lot to you, and Harry, as well."

"Yeah! Dad – I got an offer from the Cannons!"

"Then there's no decision to be made, is there?" Arthur said, tilting his head and smiling at his youngest son. "You'll be wearing orange robes soon."

"Yeah. But I want to make the best choice, and the Cannons may not be it," Ron said, surprising his parents.

"That's wise of you," Molly commended him. "We'll be there soon, dear."

A short time later, Arthur and Molly stepped into the Lupins' living room from the fireplace. As greetings were exchanged, Molly handed Tonks a heavy basket, saying, "I've been baking. I thought I'd bring along some fresh pies, and I had a shepherd's pie in the oven when Ron called, so I brought that, as well. I hope you don't mind. I thought you lot might enjoy them."

"Wow, that's great!" Tonks said with a grin. "Thanks, Molly! I'll go and put these in the kitchen."

Arthur joined the men around the table. "Let's see then," he said with a smile as he draped his arm around his youngest son's shoulders.

Ron and Arthur discussed Ron's various offers while Harry and Remus did the same with his. Finally, silence fell over the four of them.

"Amazing, that's what it is," Arthur said finally. "Our boys recruited to professional Quidditch teams! I'm proud of both of you!"

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley," Harry said with a smile as Ron grinned at his dad.

"Are you lot finished?" Molly asked from the kitchen.

Arthur looked around the other men's faces. "Well?" They all nodded.

"Good! Dinner's ready!" Molly said. Soon the parchments were all cleared away, extra chairs were conjured and the eight of them sat down and enjoyed a wonderful meal.

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"It's a good thing you're used to cooking for an army," Tonks said, smiling at Molly. "I would never have enough in the oven that I could easily feed six extra people!"

"I have trouble cooking for only two, after all the years of cooking for nine," Molly said with a smile. "We would have been eating this shepherd's pie for days and days." She shook her head and smiled ruefully.

"That's never a problem, dear," Arthur said supportively.

Ron leaned back, patting his tummy. "That was great, Mum! I'm stuffed!"

"Me, too," Harry agreed, scraping up the last of the apple tart from his plate.

"What a fun afternoon!" Remus said, smiling around at his friends. "I'm so glad you all came over!"

"So have you narrowed down the offers yet?" Ginny asked. She'd forced herself to leave them alone about this until they were finished eating.

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile. "Once Remus gave us a system to use, it was a lot easier to compare the various offers."

"So? Which ones made the cut?" Ginny prompted.

"Better to ask which ones we eliminated," Ron corrected. "The ones that are left are all still in contention and we aren't going to think about them any more until we get the rest of the offers."

"You aren't going to think about them any more?" Ginny said with a snort of laughter. "That'll be the day!"

"Yeah, well, that's the plan, anyway," Ron replied, blushing a bit.

"You two still haven't answered the question," Hermione reminded them.

"OK, if you insist," Ron said. "I've eliminated the Ballycastle Bats and Puddlemere United, who both offered reserve positions. The Wigtown Wanderers offered a starting position, but the pay isn't that good. The Cannons offer has the best money, so they're right on top of the heap. The London Lions have the advantage of being in London, offering a starting position and good money, and doing better in the league than the Cannons. They also require fewer days per week than the Cannons. But then, it's the Cannons—" he said with a shrug, knowing everyone understood how much he loved that team.

"So it's the Cannons or the Lions for you?" Ginny prompted.

"Yeah. I won't ignore Wigtown, either. Mr. Terwilliger said they might start a bidding war if things got tight while we're deciding." Ron's face shone with excitement at the thought of professional Quidditch teams actually vying for his services.

"So, Harry? What about you?" Hermione said.

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"I've eliminated the Falmouth Falcons and the Wimbourne Wasps, so far. The Wasps want me to be a Beater, and I'd rather be a Seeker, and the Falcons offered a reserve position, not a starting one. I'm keeping the Tutshill Tornados on my list despite their offering me a reserve position because they're leading the league and the money is good. The Appleby Arrows, Pride of Portree and the London Lions have all offered me Starting Seeker positions, and the money's good there, as well. The London Lions have the advantage of being in London, where I'll be living, and where the Auror School is. They also only require three days a week of practice, and the one game day per weekend, of course."

"How can they only do three days per week? What do the others require?" Molly asked.

"I think the people in charge of the Lions must be very modern-thinking. Their offer says they've studied Muggle training methods as well as magical. They said there are a lot of studies that show your muscles get built up better by working out every other day, and giving them a day's rest in between. Since all of us should already have decent game skills, the main thing we need to work on in practice is strategies and fitness. So, rather than five half-days of practice like the other teams do, they do three full days of practice, but about a third of the day is spent in strategy sessions, learning the plays and developing new ones, so you aren't too exhausted after a whole day's flying. Still, some games do run an entire day, so it's good to have longer practices so you're used to that kind of time on a broom, I think. There was an article in one of the Quidditch magazines about their training method a few months ago. It sounds like a good system."

"You're really leaning toward the Lions, aren't you, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Their schedule will give me time for homework, and to come up here and see you," he said, blushing under the gazes of all the adults. "I like that as much as the location."

"The fact that they want both of you is a point in their favour, as well," Ginny said, glancing at her brother. "I can't imagine you two on opposing teams."

Harry was silent for a moment. "I can't either, and I'd love to be on the same team as Ron, but we'll have to make the decision that's right for each of us," he said fairly.

"Well said!" Arthur said. "You boys will have to make the best decisions possible about a great many things in the next few months – which classes to take at school, where to live, the right Quidditch team, so many things. It's an exciting time for you! What fun!"

"Yes, but in the meantime, we have N.E.W.T. revision to get back to," Hermione said reluctantly as she glanced at her watch. "This has been great, but we should go."

Harry and Ron looked at their watches and sighed, then pushed back from the table.

"We'll help you clear up," Harry said, picking up his dishes and some of the serving dishes as well.

"Harry, you just put those down and go on!" Tonks encouraged him. "We can take care of it!"

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Harry looked at her a bit sternly. "My godfather taught me that a good guest cleans up after himself," he said primly, then grinned cheekily as he carried his load to the kitchen. Remus laughed when Harry said this.

"And a good lesson that was, too," Tonks agreed, grabbing a few things to carry herself.

Soon the senior Weasleys were standing by the fireplace saying goodnight, and the students were near the door, waiting for Harry to turn into a phoenix. He was busy getting a hug and kiss from his godmother.

"You pop over whenever you want, sweetie, and bring your friends," Tonks told him. "We're your family, and this is your home. I want you to treat it that way. Come and slob out some weekend, leave a sock hanging on a lamp or something, get comfortable!"

Harry bent down and hugged her tightly. "You are so good to me. Thanks."

"That's what families are for, luv," she said, tweaking his chin playfully with her fingers. "You take care of yourself, you hear? Ginny, make sure he does!"

"I will," Ginny replied with a grin.

"I think I'm becoming henpecked," Harry mused, his eyes sparkling with humour.

"Oh, you do, do you?" Tonks said impertinently.

"Yeah! And I love it!" he said, giving her another squeeze, waving to his godfather and the Weasleys, then changing into a phoenix and flashing his friends back to Hogwarts.

"Wow, look at this!" Hermione said over breakfast the next day. She held *The Daily Prophet* up so Ron and Harry could see an article halfway down the front page.

"Hogwarts Heroes Recruited," Ron read aloud. "Huh?" He and Harry gaped at the picture of the two of them in their Quidditch robes on the front page of the paper.

"What's all that about?" Harry said.

"Hang on," Hermione said, turning the paper around so she could read it to them. "Here we go.

Hogwarts Seventh Year students Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, both of Gryffindor House, have been recruited by several professional Quidditch teams, the Daily Prophet learned yesterday.

Potter is well known as 'The Boy-Who-Lived,' the survivor of numerous battles with You-Know-Who, and a hero with numerous awards to his credit. He is the youngest recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class, in our history. He has played Seeker on the Gryffindor Quidditch team since his first year, was the youngest Seeker at Hogwarts in a century, and has served as Captain of the Gryffindor team for two years.

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Potter was recruited by the Appleby Arrows, the Falmouth Falcons, the London Lions, the Pride of Portree, the Tutshill Tornados, and the Wimbourne Wasps. Most of the teams have offered him positions as either a Starter or Reserve Seeker, although the Falcons offered him the position of Reserve Chaser, and the Wasps offered him Reserve Beater.

When asked why the Wasps offered him the position of Reserve Beater when Potter is well-known (and considered by many to be nearly unbeatable, even at a professional level) as a Seeker, Wasp management said, 'It doesn't matter what position that boy plays. Can you imagine the crowds that will come to see him? It will be the best thing that's happened to the Wasps since Ludo Bagman was on our team. The only position we have open is Beater, so that's what we offered him.'

"Bloody hell," Harry growled. "Is that the only reason those blokes recruited me? To bring in crowds to see the sodding Boy-Who-Lived? Damn!"

"Harry, calm down. That was only the Wasps. There's more," Hermione said, hoping to stave off any real anger from him.

"What about me? Did they recruit me for publicity too?" Ron said anxiously.

"Let me read it, OK? And you both need to remember that a lot of what's written in the paper isn't worth the ink they used to print it," she reminded them.

"Yeah, all right," Harry grumbled. "Go on." Ron sighed, looking rather forlorn. Ginny wrapped her arm around Harry's back supportively and patted her brother's hand, hoping to comfort him.

Weasley, who is Head Boy at Hogwarts, became famous as the General of Dumbledore's Army, a Defence Against the Dark Arts club led by Potter, which has participated in battle against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his Death Eaters. Weasley has acquitted himself quite well in these encounters and earned a reputation as an excellent strategist. In his early days on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, where he began playing Keeper in his fifth year, Weasley got off to a rough start, but ended the year by winning the Quidditch Cup for his team. The Gryffindors have been unbeatable since then, with Potter's skills as a Seeker guaranteeing them at least 150 points per game, and Weasley's long arms and good judgment keeping the opposing team from scoring more than a few goals per game.

Weasley has been recruited by the Ballycastle Bats, the Chudley Cannons (Weasley's favourite team), the London Lions, Puddlemere United and the Wigtown Wanderers. All of these teams offered him either a Starting or Reserve Keeper position.

Informed sources say more offers may be forthcoming in the next week or two. It will be interesting to see which team each boy chooses. There are rumours floating around that a bidding war may be in the offing, particularly for Potter, whose name alone would bring in tremendous crowds even if he weren't a highly-skilled Seeker.

"There, Harry," Ginny said, giving him a squeeze. "They said you're a 'highly-skilled Seeker.' They're not just after you for your name."

"It doesn't hurt, though, does it?" he said darkly. "Is that all?" he asked Hermione.

She swallowed hard. She'd been reading ahead and knew they wouldn't like the rest of the article. "That's . . . that's about it, yes," she lied, putting the paper down.

"You're fibbing," Harry said, snatching the paper from under her arm. "I can tell by now, you know."

"Please, Harry," she began.

"We may as well hear the rest," he said grimly, then began reading.

Quidditch game attendance has been in a slump the last few years for many of these teams. Apparently the fickle public only wants to watch the games of those who are leading the league, not follow their local or favourite team as loyally as they used to. Weasley, a loyal Cannons fan himself, will certainly bring in a good crowd to their games if he joins them, and he is quite a competent Keeper. Potter will add panache to whatever team he's on, not to mention the skills he'll bring, which will help his team climb the ranks in the league. It will be interesting to watch the teams vying for the services of these young men, and to see if their presence on a team really does help the team not only win more games, but also draw bigger crowds.

Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, good luck in your choices. We're looking forward to watching you play professional Quidditch, no matter which teams you choose."

"Great. They're going to want front row seats at the bidding war," Harry grumbled.

"Well, you have to expect that kind of thing. I mean, it's just interesting to the average person when something like a bidding war happens, don't you think?" Hermione said carefully. "It probably means more money, too. And you both thought it was cool when you were told about the bidding war by the agents." Both boys looked grim.

"A bidding war may also mean more perks," Ginny added, trying to help.

"Perks?" Ron said, suddenly brightening. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Whatever perks they give players to try to get them on the team," Ginny said with a shrug.

"New brooms, then," Ron said with a shrug, "but we both have Firebolts."

"Yeah," Harry muttered. He crossed his arms on the table and rested his chin on them, staring unhappily at the article. "Why can't anything ever just be simple?"

"How does this complicate things?" Hermione said. "They may offer you more money. They may give you nice things. And of course you'll both be a draw for crowds! I mean, you are both famous for these battles. People would be stupid not to honour you for what you've done."

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"They won't be honouring us, they'll be looking at us as if we're freaks," Harry snarled, sitting up suddenly. "Maybe they won't look at Ron that way, but—"

"Stop it, right now!" Ginny commanded. "Just stop. You are an outstanding Quidditch player. They're recruiting both of you for your skills. Don't brood about what the paper said. You know what idiots those writers are."

"Yeah," Harry said darkly. He glanced up at Ron, who looked a bit ill. "What's wrong, mate?"

"They recruited us because we're famous. That's what happened, isn't it?" Ron said, looking rather queasy.

Harry sighed. He was used to dealing with these feelings even if he hated them. Ron had never been forced to deal with true celebrity. "Ron. They need our skills, mate. Just remember that. That's what's important."

"Yeah," Ron said, nodding his head but still looking ill. "Our skills."

"Yeah," Harry said, glum again.

The next morning, Ron received a package from the Cannons amidst a flurry of post-owls bringing good wishes from Quidditch fans across the UK.

"Wow, look at this!" Ron said, holding up the Cannons jersey with his name on the back.

Harry forced himself to smile. "That's cool!" he said in a horribly hearty voice. "So you've signed with them, then?"

"Nah," Ron replied off-handedly. "I told you I wasn't going to sign with anyone until we got the rest of the offers." He dug through the package and pulled out a button with his picture on it in Chudley Cannons robes. "Wicked! Wonder how they did that?"

"Magic," Harry replied dryly. "What else did they send you?" he added, doing his best to be supportive.

Ron named things as he dug through the box. "Some programs, some noisemakers, a Cannons hat and scarf . . . looks like most of the stuff you can buy," he said, looking up from his digging, an amused look on his face. "Silly, since I have nearly all of this stuff already!"

"Yeah, but do they know that?" Harry replied, smiling back at his friend.

Ron shrugged. "It's kind of cool, though, right? I mean, we're getting all this free stuff! Who sent that package to you, mate?"

"The Appleby Arrows," Harry said, lifting out a jersey with his name on it and the Arrows logo on the front. He snorted with laughter. "It looks like they have the same idea as the Cannons," he commented, as he pulled similar items to Ron's from the box.

"Yeah. That's funny, isn't it?" Ron said, grinning.

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"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Isn't Euan an Arrows fan?"

"I think so, yeah," Ron replied.

"Oy! Euan!" Harry called, leaning back so he could see along the seats at the Gryffindor table.

"Yeah?" the younger boy said, leaning back to see Harry.

"You're an Arrows fan, right?"

"Yeah!"

"Come here, then." When Euan reached him, Harry handed him the entire package. "Here you go, mate. A whole box of Arrows stuff."

"Wow, Harry! Thanks! Are you sure you don't want it?" Euan said, transported with delight over the gift.

"Yeah, I don't need it. You enjoy that stuff, OK?" Harry said, smiling at the boy.

"Thanks!" Euan said, then carried the box back to his seat and started showing his friends the bounty he'd received.

"So that means the Arrows are no longer being considered, right?" Ron said wisely.

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling. "Their offer just isn't as good as the Tornados, Pride of Portree or the Lions. If the Tornados weren't offering just a Reserve Seeker position, I'd be more interested in them," he mused as he went back to eating his breakfast.

"But the Arrows offered you Starter Seeker," Ron responded.

"Yeah, but they're near the bottom of the league this year, and haven't done well the last three years," Harry replied. He and Ron had been researching the teams that had contacted them quite thoroughly.

"Are you giving away stuff?" Ginny asked curiously as she sat next to Harry again. She'd left to talk to a friend about a homework assignment.

"Yeah, I gave Euan stuff the Arrows sent me. I've decided against them," Harry said with a shrug, stuffing another forkful of eggs into his mouth.

"Why?"

"Offer's not good enough. They want too many days a week, and they aren't offering enough money to make it worthwhile," he replied.

"And they haven't done well the last few years, nor this year," Ron added.

"Oh, OK," she said, settling on the bench and tipping some bacon onto her plate. "Who's left?"

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"Portree, Tornados, Lions," Harry replied, reaching across her for the pumpkin juice.

"How about you, Ron?" she asked, noticing the Cannons stuff spilling out of the box in front of him.

"I'm weighing all my options," he said, affecting a snooty, Percy-like air, then dissolving in laughter.

"Sounds like a good idea," she replied.

"I can't believe they're sending bribes like this," Hermione said, shoving the Cannons box out of the way so she could reach the platter of toast.

"I'd hand that to you if you asked," Ron reproved her, lifting the platter and offering it to her. When he set the platter down, he removed the box from the table and set it on the floor at his feet.

"Thanks," she said, smiling sweetly at him as she bit into her toast.

"Busy day today, eh?" Ron said with a sigh. They faced several double classes as well as hours of N.E.W.T. revision.

"Yeah," Hermione said with a sigh. "I don't think I'll ever feel prepared for these exams."

"Blimey, Hermione, don't say that!" Ron said, frowning. "If you aren't prepared, the rest of us are doomed."

"Then we're all doomed," she said sadly. "I've been working so hard, but there's just so much to revise!"

"You'll manage," Harry said supportively.

"Ha. Spoken like the man who isn't required to take N.E.W.T.s," she said tartly.

"Hey, if you want to fight Voldemort by yourself, feel free. I'll be happy to take your exams for you," he said mildly.

"Sorry," she said, immediately chastened.

"No problem," he said with a shrug. He started to rise. "I've got to work with Dumbledore again today. See you lot later." He bent down and kissed Ginny on top of the head. "Have a good day."

For days thereafter, every morning brought scores of post owls with letters from people encouraging Harry and Ron to join this team or that one. And then there were more packages, which were increasing in size, value and complexity as the days went on. Most of the teams were plying Harry and Ron with various gifts, all aimed to entice them to sign with their team. Accessories for their brooms, magnificent broom cases, jerseys and t-shirts with their names

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emblazoned on the back and the team name on the front, and a wide variety of other things arrived every morning.

"What are we going to do with all of this stuff?" Harry said in exasperation one morning several days later.

"I'm keeping the best stuff and giving the rest to whoever wants it," Ron said, sorting through another box of team-related merchandise.

"Is this influencing you one way or the other?" Hermione asked curiously. "I mean, is there a team you prefer now that you've had all of these presents from them?"

"You know what?" Harry said. "Neither of us has been sent a thing from the Lions, and I actually appreciate that. This stuff bothers me somehow," he said, indicating the overflowing packages strewn across the table. At the moment, several of their friends were picking through them to see what they wanted.

"Yeah, that is odd, isn't it?" Ron said. "I mean, the Lions gave us a good offer. I wonder why they aren't sending this kind of thing?"

"Maybe they don't think you want to be courted this way," Ginny said wisely.

"Courtied?" Harry said, smiling down at her.

"Plied with gifts so they can have their way with you," she said cheekily.

"Oh, you are the saucy one, aren't you?" he said, lifting a lock of her hair and tickling her nose with it.

"At times," she admitted.

"Hey, Harry, here's something from the scouts!" Ron said excitedly as another post owl landed in front of him. "It's really thick!" A second owl had landed in front of Harry, holding its leg out expectantly. Both boys gave the owls bits of bacon and removed the packets.

"These must be the other offers," Harry said as he opened the envelope.

"Yeah!" Ron said, grinning across the table at Harry.

Harry had already opened the cover letter. "Terwilliger says these are all the offers that will be coming in, so we need to make a decision soon."

"Cool!" Ron said. "We have time before classes to look at them, don't you think?"

"Yeah, if we hurry," Harry agreed. Today was one of the days he attended classes with his friends, and he didn't want to be late.

"Let's go," Ron urged. He, Harry, Hermione and Ginny all hurried out of the Great Hall and found a quiet spot in the courtyard to go through the new offers and add them to the grids they'd created with Remus's help.

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"Anything jumping out at you?" Ron asked as he finished adding to his parchment.

"Yeah. I still like the Lions, Tornados and Portree best," Harry said with a sigh.

"Did you get some new offers from the original teams?" Ron asked carefully.

"Yeah. Did you?"

"Yeah. Looks like they're starting a bidding war, eh?" Ron said gleefully. "Wonder how long it will go on? And how high they'll go? Some of these new offers really increased the money!"

"Terwilliger's letter said we have to decide based on this stuff," Harry said with a shrug. "How do yours look?"

"I got an offer from Portree, but it's not a very good one. Reserve Keeper, and the money's not as good as some of the other offers."

"But that's another we could be on together," Harry said hopefully.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, smiling at his friend. He knew Harry was doing his best to let him make his own decision, but that he'd prefer they were on the same team. Ron felt the same way, but knew it was important to make the right choice, not just the choice that would be the most fun or the most comfortable.

Harry looked at his watch. "Uh-oh, we need to go," he said, getting to his feet and holding his hand out to Ginny to help her up.

"Let's ask Remus if he can look these over this evening and see if we've missed anything, OK?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Several days later, Harry and his friends were once again at the breakfast table in the Great Hall, being inundated by owls. The *Daily Prophet* was running editorials and opinion pieces about the prospects for the various teams once either Ron or Harry had joined them. The articles were prompting fans to write even more letters encouraging the boys to choose the fans' favourite team.

Professor Dumbledore walked up behind Harry and put his hand on the young man's shoulder as he leaned across the table to include Ron in the conversation. "Good morning! Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, could I have a word?"

"Of course," Harry said, getting up from his seat and following the headmaster. Ron followed suit.

When they were in the corridor, Dumbledore said, "I've received an owl today from the London Lions. They have representatives who would like to speak to each of you. Can you be in the Defence classroom at three, Harry, and at three-thirty, Mr. Weasley?" Both boys

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nodded. The headmaster looked at the numerous unopened envelopes in the boys' hands. "Excellent. I believe you'll find a letter from them in your morning post. Have a lovely day."

"Wonder what they want?" Ron asked, digging through the envelopes until he found the one with the Lions red and gold logo.

"Dunno," Harry said, ripping his Lions letter open. He and Ron were walking back to their seats as they talked. Each of them dropped into his seat with his eyes glued to the letter in front of him.

"What's up?" Ginny asked.

"What did Professor Dumbledore want?" Hermione said, a puzzled frown on her face as she watched the variety of expressions flitting across Ron's mobile face. "What's that?"

"Nosy, aren't you?" Harry said, grinning at Hermione, then at Ginny. "This, dear ladies, is a letter from the London Lions. Ron has one as well. They're coming today to meet us."

"Why? All of the others just sent presents," Ginny said, confused.

"Dunno," Harry said with a shrug.

"Oh, come on, what's in that letter? Ron's about to have kittens just from reading it," Ginny replied, grinning at her brother, who was beaming.

"It's a really nice letter," Ron said dreamily.

"OK. What's in it?" Hermione pressed.

"Words," Harry said cheekily.

Hermione *harrumphed* impressively. "All right, you two have had your fun. Exactly what words, in what order, are in those letters?"

Harry looked at Ron, his eyes twinkling. "You first."

Ron sighed dramatically. "All right, if you insist."

"I do," Harry said, grinning.

Ron sat up straight and shook the letter importantly, clearing his throat for dramatic effect. "Dear Mr. Weasley," he read. "The London Lions Quidditch team is most desirous of acquiring *both* you and Mr. Potter for our team. We have spent a lot of time, effort and money in recruiting the very best players for the Lions. We believe you and Mr. Potter are exactly the talent we need to fill out our roster of top-of-the-line talent. As stated in our initial offer, we practice three days a week, leaving both of you gentlemen two completely free days during the week, and one free day on the weekend. We submitted a fair offer in our initial contact, but would like to meet with you to discuss terms that we will find mutually satisfactory. Signing bonuses will be offered, of course, as well as other perks. Our current Keeper and Seeker are aging and wish to cut back on their playing time. They will, of course, be available

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to fill in for you should your services be needed on the battlefield, or if your studies at the Auror School interfere with our schedule. We are willing to be flexible with your timetables until such time as you complete Auror School and/or defeat You-Know-Who, or both. We look forward to speaking with you in person this afternoon.

"Yours very sincerely,

Chauncey Dalrymple, Owner, London Lions

Oswald Murphy, Manager, London Lions

Matthias O'Doule, Coach, London Lions

Bob Smithers, Captain, London Lions"

"Mine says the same thing, if you replace 'Weasley' with 'Potter' and vice versa," Harry chuckled.

"So how is this different than the other offers?" Hermione said. The boys had kept their offers pretty close to their chests.

"For one thing, the schedule is great!" Harry said enthusiastically. "For another, they're willing to be flexible if school or the war gets in the way of us playing. No one else has said that, and it's a very real consideration, for me, at least."

"For me, too," Ron insisted. "I'm in the Order, too, mate."

"I know," Harry replied. "So that concession to our schedules sounds really good to me. Dumbledore told us they're coming to see us this afternoon."

"I can't wait!" Ron said eagerly.

"So you're really not going with the Cannons?" Ginny said, looking surprised.

"How many times do I have to say I'm going to consider all options very carefully before deciding?" Ron replied, looking a bit exasperated.

"It's just that . . . it's the *Cannons*!" Ginny replied.

"Yeah, I know," he said, sounding a bit despondent. "But you know what? All they've done is talk about how big a crowd I'm going to draw. They haven't said anything about doing stuff to benefit me. It's all about them. I don't know how I'll manage school with the schedule the other teams all have – five days a week of practice, not counting game days. There will only be a few hours between practice and school, and I'll have to Apparate to London from wherever I am, and I'll have to get my own lodging. It would be difficult for me to live very far from the team." He shook his head. "There's a lot to consider."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

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After a day in which the hands on his watch seemed to stand completely still, it was finally three o'clock and time for Harry's appointment with the Lions' representatives. He entered the Defence classroom, nervous and excited. Four men waited for him there. All of them rose when he entered the room.

"Mr. Potter, thank you so much for coming," a portly man said genially, extending his hand to shake Harry's. "I'm Chauncey Dalrymple, owner of the London Lions."

"Hello, sir," Harry said, shaking the man's hand. Dalrymple made the introductions of the team manager, coach and captain and Harry introduced Remus, who he'd asked to attend the meeting with him. Soon they were all comfortably seated around a conference table Dumbledore had provided for the meeting.

"Mr. Potter, what are your goals in regard to a Quidditch career?" Dalrymple asked.

"Erm . . . what do you mean?" Harry asked carefully.

"Do you have any idea how long you intend to play? I know you plan to attend Auror School, so you're brighter than many who want to play professional Quidditch. At least you'll have a career after your playing days are over," Dalrymple said with a smile.

"Oh. Yes. Erm . . . I'd love to play Quidditch as long as I'm physically able – possibly ten years or so." Harry knew ten years was a long career for a Seeker. "I do plan to be an Auror, and I will be attending Auror School with that as my long-term goal. As for Quidditch – I love the game. There's nothing like it! I can play Seeker or Chaser, but I prefer to play Seeker. That's where I have the most experience. I've been Captain of our house team for two years now and have enjoyed coaching them, helping the young ones with their flying, working out plays, planning strategies with Ron – erm, that's Ron Weasley, my best mate. He's a chess master and wonderful at strategies. Someday, it would be fun to coach a team, I think, but that would be a long time from now." He fell silent, watching their reactions carefully.

"Wonderful," Dalrymple said with a warm smile. "We know you have an excellent record with your team here at Hogwarts. We've watched you play – and by the way, all four of us are Gryffindors, as are all of the team members! We didn't plan it that way, but that's the way it's worked out."

He chuckled and Harry smiled in return, beginning to relax with these men, all of whom appeared to be friendly and good-natured. He glanced at Remus, who was also looking more relaxed than when they first entered the room.

"Now, then, Mr. Potter, what's the most important thing to you in choosing your professional Quidditch team?" Matthias O'Doule, the team coach, asked.

"Honestly, there are a lot of criteria I'm considering," Harry began.

"Such as?" O'Doule prompted.

Harry looked at Remus, who winked. "Erm. . . we made a list," he offered, then pulled out his parchment. "The criteria I'm considering include location, timetable, salary, the team's standing, that kind of thing. I'd also like it if my friend Ron and I could be on the same team,"

he added diffidently. "We're used to playing together, and we're planning to room together after Hogwarts as well as going to Auror School together, so it would be convenient if we were on the same team."

"You do know we made an offer to him, don't you?" Dalrymple said.

"Yes," Harry replied. "It's just one of the criteria I'm considering."

"I see," the owner replied. "Very good."

"Bottom line, Mr. Potter," Dalrymple said seriously. "I have a contract here that only requires your signature and you'll be a London Lion. It's a three-year contract, with the salary re-negotiated each year, with the potential for annual bonuses, as well. I'd like you to look it over and see what you think of it. I think you'll see we've met all of your criteria rather well, with the possible exception of Mr. Weasley's participation. That, of course, is up to him."

"I understand," Harry said, taking the proffered document. He pulled his chair closer to Remus's so they could read it together. The room was silent for a long time. Finally, Harry looked at Remus, his eyes shining.

Remus smiled. "Well?"

"What do you think?"

Remus leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, "Go for it! It's a great offer."

Harry beamed. "Yeah, that's what I thought, too." He turned to the four men across the table and took a deep breath. "I'll be happy to sign your contract. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter! I hope you noticed the one-hundred-and-fifty galleon bonus for each Snitch you catch. We're expecting a lot from you, but we also plan to make it worth your while!" Dalrymple said with a smile.

"I did notice that, sir," Harry grinned. "I'll do my best!"

"And your best is better than most," Coach O'Doule said, looking pleased as they watched Harry dip a quill in the ink bottle, preparing to sign the contract. They were surprised when he stopped with the quill poised over the document. "What's the matter, Harry?"

Harry gulped. In his joy over the offer, he'd nearly forgotten. "Voldemort," he said dully. He looked up at the men, studying each face in turn. "I may miss games or practices if I get attacked, or go after him. Mr. Terwilliger said he'd explain that to you. You did say something about it in your letter, but the contract . . . "

"He did discuss it with us, Harry," Dalrymple said. "The clause in the contract that covers absences is quite flexible. We didn't want to put You-Know-Who's name in the contract as the possible cause of your absences, but if you have to go and fight him, we will not penalize you in any way, nor release you from the team. He is nothing more than a terrorist. If terrorists think they can disrupt our lives, they win a victory. We simply won't allow that. So we'll be as careful as we can be, and will take the best possible care of our players, staff, families and

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friends, but we'll live our lives as normally as possible, too. You should be able to live a normal life too, and we want to help you with that. We'll support you, Harry, in whatever you have to do. It's that simple."

"You really are Gryffindors, aren't you?" Remus said with a smile.

"Yes, we are," Dalrymple agreed. "So, Harry, does that ease your mind?"

Harry swallowed hard. They were putting tremendous faith in him, allowing him to join the team with the threat of Voldemort hanging over his head. He nodded and said, "Yes, it does. Thank you so much!" Grinning now, he bent his head and quickly signed the contract.

"We've brought some signing bonuses for you, Mr. Potter. I hope you'll be pleased with them," Dalrymple said as team captain Smithers stood and picked up a large bag lying against the wall. "First off, we want our Seeker to be blindingly fast. With your flying skills, you are already one of the fastest men in Quidditch on a broom. We think this will be a help to you."

Harry gasped as Smithers pulled a new Firebolt Excalibur, the best racing broom in the world, out of the bag. "Whoa!" he said in awe. "That broom has a top speed of over 230 miles an hour!"

"Yes, it does, and it goes naught to 200 in 10 seconds. We hope you'll learn to use it well before you start practicing with us. We have high-speed, hard practices, and we don't have time for you to be mucking about trying to sort out which pedal does what. All right?" Smithers said with a smile.

"Yeah! I'll work on it!" Harry promised, his eyes huge as he ran his hands along the beautiful broom's glossy handle.

"Also, we have some casual, Muggle-style clothes for you – not your robes yet, you'll need to be measured for those. Just some fun logo wear for you to enjoy," Smithers said as he began pulling items out of the bag. "And it will be wonderful advertising for us for you to be seen in them. All of our players wear them," the captain continued. He spread the clothes on the table for Harry to look at. They included a jersey, several t-shirts and a jacket all in the Lions red and gold colours, with the Lions name and logo emblazoned on the front, with "Potter" and the number "7" on the back in glittering gold.

"Whoa! Thanks!" Harry said, his face shining with delight.

"One more thing, Harry," Murphy, the team manager said. "We'll have a reporter and a photographer come and interview you in the next day or so for articles in the press. Signing you, and hopefully, Mr. Weasley, will be worth some publicity to our team. We'll try not to interfere with your class timetable too much, but I hope you'll cooperate with the reporter. There are many such interviews in your future as a professional Quidditch player."

Harry hesitated a moment before speaking. "Erm . . . I'll be fine with that, as long as they don't go on and on about the Boy-Who-Lived stuff. If it's about Quidditch, I'll talk to them as long as they want. But if they're going to get into that other stuff, I won't like it."

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Murphy stood considering Harry for a long moment, long enough to make Harry rather uncomfortable. "You're not happy with the articles they write about you being a hero, are you?" he said sagely.

Harry blushed. "No, sir. They rarely print the truth, and even when they do, they exaggerate things so much . . . I'm not comfortable with that at all."

"We'll be using sports reporters, Harry. They should stick with the Quidditch topic. But if they stray, what will you do?" Murphy said, tilting his head as he watched the young man's reactions.

Taking his time to answer, Harry chewed the inside of his cheek, trying to work out the best and most truthful response. "As long as they treat me with respect, and not like . . . an object, I guess you could say, I'll be fine. And I'll do whatever I need to do to promote the team."

"That's good enough for me," Murphy said with a smile.

"Right, then. Let's put these things back in the bag and let you go so we can speak to Mr. Weasley, all right?" Dalrymple said with a smile. "And Harry? Don't tell anyone what we're paying you, nor about the bonuses. Each player's salary is a private matter between team management and the player. All right?"

"Yes, sir, I understand," Harry replied, holding the now-refilled bag in both hands and grinning broadly.

"Not even Mr. Weasley," Dalrymple added.

"Not even Ron," Harry agreed.

"We look forward to you joining our practices when you finish Hogwarts, then, Mr. Potter," Dalrymple said, holding his hand out to shake Harry's. "We'll send you a practice and game schedule in a few days."

"Thank you, sir. I'm looking forward to it," Harry said, shaking each man's hand in turn. He walked out of the room feeling as if he were floating on a cloud.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione were waiting outside the door. "How did it go?" Ron said nervously.

"They're really nice. You'll like them," Harry assured him. He was smiling so broadly, his face was glowing.

"What's in the bag?" Ron said, tearing his eyes from Harry's obviously happy face.

"It's a goody bag," Harry said with a chuckle. "And I can't show you the goodies. You have to go meet them now. I'll show you later."

"And maybe I'll show you some of my own," Ron said with a sudden grin. He looked up and saw Remus standing behind Harry. "Would you stay for my interview as well?"

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"Of course," Remus said, holding the door open for Ron and following him back inside.

As they closed the door behind them, the girls crowded around Harry. "Tell us what happened!" Hermione demanded.

"Show us what's in the bag!" Ginny said, bouncing on her toes. "You signed with them, didn't you?"

"Yeah, they gave me a great deal!" Harry said, laughing in delight. "I still can't believe it. I can't tell you how excited I am. I feel numb, sort of, and as if I'm floating at the same time! It's fantastic!"

"I'm so happy for you!" Ginny said, pulling him into a tight hug and kissing him thoroughly.

"Wow, Harry, this is so great!" Hermione said sincerely. "Congratulations!" She gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek as soon as Ginny released him.

"I can't believe it! I'm a professional Quidditch player!" Harry cried excitedly, grabbing both girls around the waist and spinning them around until they squealed with laughter.

Finally, the three of them sat on the floor of the corridor and Harry showed them his new broom and the logo-bedecked clothing. "Huh, this t-shirt's a bit small for me," he said in surprise as he separated everything and held it up for their inspection. "But it would fit you nicely," he added, opening it up and tugging it over Ginny's head, making her laugh. He helped her pull her hair out of the neck opening and grinned. "Your hair clashes magnificently with this shirt, m'lady."

"Just think how awful it would be if you were on the Cannons!" she countered.

"Yeah," Harry said darkly. He was still worried that Ron might join his favourite team and they'd have to play against each other.

"Don't worry, Harry," Hermione said, sensing what was bothering him. "I don't think their offer pleased him that much."

"But they offered him a huge salary!" Harry said, surprised.

"Money isn't everything, as you well know," Hermione said pertly. "He didn't like the way they wanted to exploit his status as 'hero of Hogwarts.'"

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "He didn't tell me that,"

"You've dealt with that kind of thing all of your life," she replied. "He was surprised by how uncomfortable it made him. He didn't need to talk to you about it – he knows how you feel about people treating you like 'famous Harry Potter.' He's so fond of the Cannons, it's hard for him to sort all of this out. He'd love to play for them, but their attitude toward him – well, that's why he's considering other offers so seriously, despite the money the Cannons were offering."

"Maybe the Lions will make him a better offer," Harry said with a hopeful smile.

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"Did they give you more money than they first said?" Hermione said. "Their first offer wasn't as high as some of the others."

"I'm not allowed to talk about it," Harry replied, doing his best to stifle a delighted grin, "but yeah, they improved the offer. I'm very happy with it."

"Great!" Hermione said. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Me too," Ginny said, squirming around to try to see how she looked in the t-shirt now engulfing her small frame.

Harry pulled out the small mirror he carried to talk to Remus and did an enlargement charm on it, then held it so she could admire herself in it. "Despite that colour clash," he said with a grin, "it looks fantastic on you."

"I'll bet it will look better on you," she said. "Try one on!"

"OK," he agreed, then pulled out the jersey. He removed his robes and tugged the jersey on over his shirt, standing up and modelling for the girls. "Well?"

"Gorgeous, simply gorgeous!" Ginny enthused. She held the mirror for him and he preened dramatically to make the girls laugh.

"Look at this!" Harry said, his eyes shining as he pulled out the Excalibur.

"Whoa! That's the best broom in the world!" Ginny breathed in awe. She kept up with the reports on new brooms almost as much as the boys did.

"Yeah, can you believe it? It's fantastic! I can't wait to try it out!" They spent a long time examining the broom before Harry very carefully put it back in its custom made broom case, which was labelled "Potter 7" like everything else the Lions had given him.

Sooner than he would have expected, Ron and Remus came to the door. Harry held his breath anxiously, waiting for Ron to say something.

Ron kept his face serious, wanting to savour the moment when he shared his news. "I signed," he said finally, a huge grin splitting his face.

"YES!" Harry cried, grabbing Ron in a bear hug and lifting him off the ground. "YES! YES! YES!"

When he set Ron down, he saw a large bag by Ron's feet, exactly like Harry's, only it said "Weasley" by the opening, where Harry's said "Potter."

"I see you've already sorted through your goodie bag," Ron said, chuckling as he plucked at Harry's jersey. "Looks good on you!"

"Let's see how yours looks on you!" Harry chortled. "It clashes with Ginny's hair, but yours is more ginger – it might go quite well!"

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"So now you're a fashion expert, eh?" Ron laughed as he pulled out the jersey and tugged it over his head.

"Absolutely," Harry said, straightening the shoulders of Ron's jersey. "Yeah. Your hair looks better with this colour than Ginny's."

"And both clash horribly!" Ginny teased. "But that's OK. You look fantastic, Ron! Congratulations!"

"I'm so happy for you!" Hermione said, giving him a big hug and kiss.

"I see your ladies are pleased with your decisions," O'Doule said with an amused smile from the doorway.

"Yeah," Harry said, blushing a bit.

"And I see that you noticed there was a smaller t-shirt in the bag for your girlfriend, Harry," O'Doule chuckled. "It looks lovely on you, Miss Weasley."

"Thank you," she said, spinning around to show off her shirt.

"You and Miss Granger will be excellent advertisement for the London Lions," Murphy said with a grin. "Who can resist a pretty girl in a t-shirt? We'll send you some in smaller sizes. We didn't realize how petite you girls are."

"Thank you!" Ginny and Hermione said together, both of them beaming.

"Now, lads, if you don't mind, we'd love to see you try out those brooms," O'Doule said with a grin. "Smithers and I brought our brooms so we can fly with you a bit."

"Wicked!" Ron said with a grin. "Let's go!"

"Remus? Come with us!" Harry invited, grabbing his godfather's arm as he quietly started to walk away, a bemused smile on his face.

"All right. I'd love to," Remus agreed, grinning broadly.

As they walked toward the pitch, Harry pulled a small bundle out of his pocket. "I want you to have this," he told his godfather, placing it in his hand.

"What?" Remus said, knowing what the bundle contained. "No, I don't need it. Thank you, though. You should keep it. It was Sirius's birthday gift to you. I know how much it means to you."

Harry tucked his new broom under his arm and held up both hands, counting off points as he spoke. "Number one, you are my godfather and I want to keep you as safe as possible in battle and otherwise. You'll be safer on this broom. Number two, Sirius would agree with me that you should have it if I don't need, it and why do I need two brooms? And number three," Harry added with a grin as he folded down a third finger, "you need a better broom so you can keep up with us when we play Quidditch at the Weasleys!"

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Remus could see the sincerity in his godson's eyes. He beamed at the young man. "Thank you, Harry. What a lovely gift! I can't wait to try it!"

"I'll give you a lesson now," Harry said. "I don't want you to get hurt!"

Soon Harry, Ron, Remus, O'Doule and Smithers stood on the pitch, their brooms all vibrating and eager to take to the sky. Harry gave Remus some instructions on how to handle the Firebolt, and then Smithers explained the Excalibur's controls and features to Harry and Ron. Soon all of them kicked off, Harry, Ron and Remus whooping with delight as they felt the power of the brooms beneath them.

Harry flew alongside Remus until he was sure his godfather would be safe on the powerful broom. Once Remus was comfortable on the Firebolt, Harry turned his new broom upward and kicked it into high gear. "WHOOOOOOO!" he cried as he zoomed away, leaving a laughing Remus in his wake.

"You know, we have friends who'd love to see this," Hermione told Ginny.

"Yeah. Let's let them know," Ginny agreed. A few Adferos later, Gryffindors and D.A. members began streaming down to the pitch, cheering wildly as the fliers zoomed overhead.

Harry was in heaven. This broom made flying his Firebolt feel like driving a lumbering old truck! He streaked heavenward. "HA! WHOOOOO-HOOOOOOOO!" he cried as he raced toward the clouds, then turned and zipped down in a spectacular dive.

"Oh no! He doesn't know that broom yet!" Ginny cried anxiously.

"He'll be fine . . . won't he?" Hermione said, growing more nervous the closer he got to the ground. Soon the girls were clinging to each other in terror. Harry wasn't slowing down. He was going to hit the ground at over 200 miles an hour!

Harry watched the ground approaching at a speed he'd never experienced before. He was exhilarated, filled with a rush of fierce joy. He saw the girls grab each other in fear and grinned. A few feet from the ground, he hauled up on the broom's handle and it instantly responded. He was skimming along just above the ground now, his toes nearly touching the grass. Just before he would have hit the wall, he hauled on the handle again and shot straight up in the air.

"Look at that!" Murphy told Dalrymple. "The boy can do ninety degree turns! That's damned good, especially on a new broom."

"We knew he was good," Dalrymple said, smiling. "But he's even better than I'd hoped. I think we did quite well with that one."

"Weasley's good too," Murphy said fairly as he turned his attention to the redhead streaking above them. "He's not as flashy as Potter, but as a Keeper, he doesn't need to be."

"Yes. We'll have to give Terwilliger a bonus for finding them for us," Dalrymple said, laughing as Harry zoomed by upside down and screeched to a halt over his girlfriend, hovering there long enough to give her a kiss and ruffle the hair of Weasley's girlfriend before

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taking off in a spiralling climb diagonally across the pitch. "That boy's amazing. I've never seen such flying."

"I've never seen some of those manoeuvres!" Murphy said. "He's quite creative. Interesting!"

Up in the air, Smithers called Harry to him. "Potter! It looks as if you have a decent feel of the broom now," he commented dryly, then laughed. "Some of those moves of yours are new to me. I didn't know you could do such things on a broom."

"I love to fly," Harry replied, grinning broadly as he spoke.

"It shows," Smithers said approvingly. "Let's see how you do with a professional Snitch. I've brought one with me." He pulled it out of his pocket. "I must warn you, though. School Snitches are slow compared with the kind we use."

"Cool!" Harry said, grinning gleefully as his eyes locked onto the tiny golden ball in the team captain's hand. The instant the man released it, Harry was after it, lying flat on his broom for extra speed. This Snitch was not only fast, it was elusive, zipping here and there with blinding speed, changing directions in the blink of an eye. Harry was fully concentrated on getting it, sliding smoothly between the other men flying over the pitch, streaking toward earth one moment, straight up toward the sun the next. The Snitch fled earthward again, and Harry pushed the broom to its greatest speed as he dove. People screamed as his dive neared the ground, with no reduction in speed at all. Harry reached out as far as he could and grabbed the Snitch, turning his broom horizontal just as the front of it touched the grass. He pumped his Snitch-filled fist in the air to cheers of "Well done, Gryffindor!" and "Well done, Lions!" He glided back up to where Smithers and O'Doule waited, both of them grinning broadly.

"Well done, Potter!" O'Doule said, clapping him on the back. "Excellent!"

"You gave us a bit of a scare there," Smithers said, laughing. "I didn't know if we were going to lose our new Seeker just as we'd signed him or not!"

Harry laughed. "There was no danger of that," he assured them.

"Tell my heart that," Coach O'Doule said dramatically, then laughed. "It stopped beating until you levelled off!"

Harry handed the Snitch to Smithers, who said, "Let's give Weasley a bit of a workout as well. Mind playing Chaser for a bit?"

"No, not at all," Harry agreed. Soon, he, Smithers and Remus were playing Chaser, trying to get a goal past Ron, who was having a bit of trouble getting his broom to stop and turn in as short a distance as he needed to guard the hoops. Despite his not being used to his broom yet, he managed to stop most of their goal attempts.

"Well done, gentlemen!" Smithers said at last. "I'm looking forward to your first practice with us. You'll like the lads. They're a fun bunch."

"Great!" Ron said happily.

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"Yeah!" Harry agreed. He, Ron, the coach, the captain and Remus circled in the air chatting for a while before landing.

Meanwhile, Team Manager Murphy had gone into the stands. He couldn't let a publicity opportunity like this pass him by.

"Good afternoon! I take it you're all Quidditch fans?" he said jovially as he walked in front of the first row of seats. His question was met with cheers. "And you're also fans or friends of Potter and Weasley?" More cheers. "Then I'd like to invite you to watch the London Lions next season, where your friends are both starting players!" Huge cheers greeted this news. "I have brochures here listing our game schedule. If you will tear off the bottom portion where you see a number, put your name and address on it, and owl it to us, you'll be put in a draw for a free season's pass to the Lion's home games!" The cheers grew louder at this news. "And I believe I won't be out of line offering a discount on ticket prices to Gryffindor House members and D.A. members!" He glanced at the team owner, who smiled. "Right! It's been approved! So come one, come all, and enjoy the best in professional Quidditch at the London Lions stadium! A map to the stadium is on the back of the brochure!"

As he passed out the brochures, Murphy noticed a tall young man taking photographs of the fliers above him. He could tell the boy was concentrating on Harry and Ron. "What are you up to?"

"Oh. I hope it's OK. I take pictures of our Quidditch teams and make posters of them. Some of the proceeds go to a charity fund Harry set up to help those who've lost family members to the war," Colin explained hastily.

"Oh, you're the lad who made the posters and took the photo that's on Harry's Famous Wizard card, then?" Murphy said with a smile. "You're quite good. Have you thought of a career as a photographer?"

"That's what I want to do, sir!" Colin said eagerly. Dennis, seated next to him, nodded earnestly.

"What's your name?"

"Colin Creevey, sir," Colin said politely. "And this is my brother, Dennis."

"Nice to meet both of you. You like Quidditch, then?"

"Oh yes, sir! We're Beaters on the Gryffindor team."

Murphy ran an experienced eye over the broad-shouldered, muscular young men before him. "Are you now? Well, well. And you'd rather do photography than play professional Quidditch?"

"Yes, sir," Colin said immediately. "I don't think I'm good enough to play professionally, but I love photography."

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"Tell you what. We should have brought a photographer with us today, but we didn't think of it. Send me copies of the pictures you've taken today, and maybe we'll be able to use them for some publicity. If we do, we'll pay you for them."

"Cool!" Colin said excitedly. "Uh – will I still own my copyrights?"

"Oh, you are a wise young man, aren't you?" Murphy said with an amused chuckle. "Yes, since you took these on your own, you will own the copyrights. If we hire you to do photography for us, we'll own the copyrights. There will be a contract covering all of the details if we decide to hire you. How's that?"

"You'd . . . you'd . . . you'd consider hiring me?" Colin said, gulping as realization hit. "Really?"

"Really. Do you finish Hogwarts this year?"

"No, sir, I have one more year," Colin said quietly, seeing that one year of study killing the opportunity he was being offered.

"All right. If, and I said 'if,' we like the pictures you're taking today, we may give you a position for the holidays and see how you work out. If that goes well, we'll see what happens after that," Murphy said with a smile.

"Really? Honest? You're not kidding me?" Colin said in disbelief.

"Nope. I never kid about business," Murphy said. He saw Colin glance skyward again, watching Harry streaking by. "You're a friend of Potter's, then?"

"Yeah, of both of them, actually, but Harry – he's just brilliant! I've admired him ever since I first heard of him. He's my hero."

"Is he?" Murphy was intrigued. They hadn't spoken to any students about their feelings about the boys they were recruiting. He wondered if he might find a good publicity angle from speaking to this young man. "Why?"

"He saved my life," Colin said, suddenly serious. "I was dying, and he saved me."

"How did he do that?" Murphy asked curiously.

"Erm" Colin suddenly realized he might be better off to not reveal too much about Harry's hidden talents. "I was injured in battle and he saved me," he said, not revealing Harry's healing powers.

"Oh, that's what those ribbons are for on your robes, right?" Murphy said, noticing both of the Creevey boys' award ribbons. He glanced up in the stands and noticed that nearly everyone there had at least a few ribbons. Colin had more than many of them. "Can you tell me what they represent?"

"This one's for the Battle of Little Hangleton," Colin began. "That's where I was injured. This one's for being injured. This one's for courage, but I was stupid, not brave," he said in disgust.

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"What do you mean?" Murphy said, quite interested now.

"I got ahead of my squad. I've always been impulsive and I just kept going, you know? And then I was cut off from the others because I was too far ahead of them. That's when I got hurt. Minister Bones thought it was brave of me to keep going forward, but it was just me being impulsive again," he said with a shrug.

"She doesn't give awards lightly, young man," Murphy said quietly. "She must feel you earned it."

Colin hung his head shyly. "Yeah, I guess."

"I'm honoured to meet you both," Murphy said sincerely. "I appreciate what you're doing to protect us." The boys smiled sadly at him, obviously remembering painful things. Murphy decided he'd heard enough for now. "Right then. I didn't mean to make you relive bad memories. Thank you for talking with me. And do send me those photos, all right?" he said, preparing to leave.

"Yes, sir! Thank you for the opportunity!" Colin said, brightening again.

Two mornings later, Harry and Ginny were seated across from Ron and Hermione as usual at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. As Harry tipped bacon on his and Ginny's plates, the post owls soared in. Two Great Horned Owls bearing large packages landed in front of each of the girls. Soon the owls had been given some bacon and released of their burdens.

"What is it?" Ron asked as Hermione unwrapped the package.

"I don't know," she said. She and Ginny got the boxes opened at about the same time. Ginny's was full of buttons showing pictures of Harry in his Lions jersey, zooming along on his new broom. Above his picture were the words "London Lions" and below it was, "Harry Potter, Seeker." She also had buttons with pictures of Harry and Ron together, with "London Lions" printed across the top and "Seeker Potter and Keeper Weasley" across the bottom.

"Cool!" Ginny exclaimed as she pulled out one of each kind of button and pinned them to her robes.

"I have the same thing!" Hermione said, looking at Ginny's buttons, "except that the photo of only one of them is of Ron!"

"Wicked!" Ron said, looking at the buttons.

"These are Colin's pictures, I'm sure of it," Hermione said, studying them closely.

"Oy! Colin!" Harry called down the table. "Can you come here a sec?"

"Sure!" the excitable boy said eagerly. He hurried up to Harry's seat. "Yeah?"

"Look at these!" Harry said with a grin, handing him the buttons.

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"Cool!" Colin exclaimed. "They said if they liked them, they'd use them and pay me for them." He admired the three styles of buttons, then looked up as his brother called him. An owl had arrived for him down at his seat. "Maybe that's my payment now!"

"You can keep those buttons, Colin," Ginny said with a smile. "We have plenty. I imagine we're supposed to give them out."

"Thanks!" Colin said, taking extras for his brother, then racing back to his seat to read his letter.

"Ooooo, look!" Ginny said as she dug deeper in the box. "A shirt that will fit me! No, two. . .three! Wow!" She pulled out two t-shirts and a scoop-necked, sleeveless, feminine top, all of which matched Harry's jersey, complete with the name "Potter" and the number "7" on the back.

"I got some too!" Hermione said happily. "Oh, these are fun! Too bad we can't wear them with our robes."

"Yeah. But after class, I'm changing!" Ginny said gleefully.

"Me too!"

Harry and Ron sat back and watched the girls with bemused expressions, then glanced at each other. Huge grins crossed their faces.

"They're not only taking care of us, they're taking care of our girls, as well," Harry said happily. "You can't ask more than that!"

"I can – I'm going to need shirts like that for the whole family, or there will be trouble!" Ron said with a laugh.

"Yeah, I can see that," Harry agreed.

"We need to save some of these buttons for the family, as well," Ginny said, "and make sure we give some to Remus and Tonks."

"I hope you also have some for me," Professor Dumbledore said with a smile, leaning past Harry's shoulder to look at the items in the box. "I'm sure Professor McGonagall would also like buttons with her star Quidditch players."

"Right!" Hermione said as she and Ginny passed buttons to their headmaster. "Let's count out enough for Weasleys, then we can pass the rest out – remembering, of course, to give Remus two of each so Tonks will have them too!"

Dumbledore admired the buttons, then pinned them to his gorgeous purple robes with a broad smile. He winked at the boys and proceeded toward the Head Table, stopping to speak to students here and there as he went.

Ron and Harry sat and chuckled at the girls as they raced to the Head Table and began offering buttons to the staff. Harry was amazed to see nearly every professor take at least one

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button. Even Snape took one of the buttons showing Harry and Ron together. He looked directly at Harry and held it up for a moment, giving the briefest of nods and smiles.

"Did you see that?" Ron breathed. "*Snape!*"

"That's *Professor* Snape," Harry said teasingly. "Yeah. I would not have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Amazing," Ron breathed. He and Harry could hardly wait to begin practicing with the Lions. They'd been out on their brooms every chance they had, learning to ride them by instinct. Hermione had fussed quite a bit about all the revision they were missing by playing, but they just had to point to the London Lion on the shirt she wore after classes were over to quiet her. She, like Ginny, had been wearing one of the boys' shirts, which fit the girls like dresses, they were so big for them.

Now, watching the girls still handing out badges, Harry mused, "Did you ever think we'd really make it to a professional team?"

"Nah," Ron said dismissively. "I always thought it was a kid's dream, nothing that would ever happen."

Harry looked at Ron quite seriously. "I still can't believe it."

"Me either. I can't wait to get on that broom again!"

"Right!" Harry grinned. Except for the fact that N.E.W.T.s were breathing down everyone's neck, and there was still Voldemort to deal with, life couldn't get much sweeter. He was a professional Quidditch player, he and his best mate were on the same team and he was in love with a beautiful girl who loved him in return. Who could ask for more than that?

Chapter 28 – Patterns

At breakfast a few days later, Dumbledore stopped behind Harry at the Gryffindor table. He said "Good morning" to Ginny, then turned to Harry. "Would you join me in my office at nine this morning?"

"I have Potions this morning," Harry reminded him.

"I'll have a word with Professor Snape," Dumbledore said serenely. "See you at nine, then?"

"Yes," Harry agreed. "What do you want me to bring?"

"Just yourself. We'll be attending a meeting together." He started to move away.

Harry frowned and got up to follow his headmaster. "A meeting?" he said quietly. They stopped to talk near the end of the Gryffindor table, a few feet away from the nearest students.

"Yes. Bring Merlin. I'm sure he'll enjoy it," Dumbledore said with an approving smile. "I was hoping you'd be wise enough to leave the table to ask your questions."

"So this was another test?" Harry said, retuning his mentor's smile. Dumbledore was constantly springing surprises on him to test his judgement and reflexes. "I got up because I thought I should find out if I'm in some kind of trouble or not," he added with an impish grin. "Am I?"

"Do you feel you've done anything worthy of getting in trouble?" Dumbledore said, one eyebrow quirked quizzically.

"Not lately, amazingly enough," Harry chuckled, "but it's not usually me who thinks I've done something wrong, is it?"

Dumbledore smiled at the young man fondly. "You are such a delight, Harry," he said, patting the boy on the shoulder. "No, you're in no trouble, but the Ministry is. They're being quite foolish. They are at an impasse and want my input. I told them they would have to come here, as I can't leave Hogwarts right now."

Harry frowned. "Why can't you leave Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I merely wanted to have the meeting in the comfort of my own office. I'm old and not that fond of travelling anymore. And if they have to come here, they will be out of their comfort zone and may possibly listen to reason a bit more easily."

"I see," he said, not really certain if he "saw" or not.

"You'll understand once the meeting begins. Be at my office a bit early, if you can, and be sure to wear your medals."

"My medals?" Harry said, surprised. "Why?"

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"You'll be meeting with the Minister's Cabinet. You should look as 'official' as possible. You don't need to wear the actual medals, just the commemorative ribbons – which you're supposed to wear daily anyway, remember?"

"I don't see you wearing yours," Harry countered with a grin.

"Ah well, do as I say, not as I do," Dumbledore said philosophically. "Just wear them, all right? And do bring Merlin. He should get quite a laugh out of some of it. And Harry – walk to my office, don't flash there. You want to make as good an impression as possible."

Harry frowned again. "I am in some kind of trouble, aren't I?"

"No, dear boy, you aren't, but students and non-Ministry members, except for consultants like me, are *never* allowed at such meetings. You were part of the Ministry meetings I took you to in the past because you were involved in what they were talking about – the battle in France, for instance. You're not involved in what they're meeting about this time, but you do have a better working knowledge of the situation than most of them do, so I think it will be useful for you to be there. However, we'll be breaking a great many traditions and putting several noses out of joint. No point in giving them anything else to get twitchy about, is there?"
Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles.

"No, I wouldn't want to give them more reasons to get twitchy," Harry agreed, smiling at the mischief he saw in his mentor's eyes. "But what is it that I have a working knowledge of? What's it about?"

"I'd rather not discuss it further here," Dumbledore said, glancing around at students who were paying too much attention to his and Harry's conversation. Ron and Hermione looked at them quizzically as they arrived for breakfast, but just waved and moved on when they noticed Harry and Dumbledore were speaking seriously, not just chatting.

Harry understood at once. "All right. See you then," he said, then went back to his seat to finish his breakfast.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked curiously.

"He wants me to attend a meeting in his office," Harry said, leaning across the table toward his best mate and Hermione so he could speak quietly.

"What did you do?" Ron asked, his eyes wide.

Harry laughed. "Nothing! You know, I've just realized that we haven't broken many school rules this year. We're slipping!"

Ron gave him a wicked grin. "What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing yet, but work on it, all right? We have reputations to maintain!" Harry said, chuckling.

"Boys!" Hermione scolded. "Ron, you're Head Boy! You can't –"

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"Relax, Hermione, we're only joking," Ron assured her, while winking broadly at Harry. Harry and Ginny fought to stifle their laughter.

Harry glanced at his watch, then hurried to finish his breakfast. "I've got to run."

"You never said what the meeting was for," Ginny reminded him.

"I'll tell you later. I have to do some stuff to get ready for it," Harry said, kissing her on the temple and picking up his bag. "Have a good day, all of you. See you later."

"Are you skipping class?" Hermione said, stunned. Harry had been faithful in his attendance of Potions, Inter-Beings Languages and Care of Magical Creatures once he and Dumbledore had settled to a schedule for their sessions, and he had Potions this morning. She hadn't realized the meeting was going to interfere with the class.

"Have to. He said he'd clear it with Snape. Take good notes for me!" Harry said, waving as he strode off down the length of the Great Hall. He didn't want to tell his friends about the meeting until he knew more about it, and it would take him a while to get his ribbons onto his robes neatly anyway, so he needed to rush back to his room and get ready.

Harry walked into Dumbledore's office with ten minutes to spare, Merlin riding happily on his shoulder. His headmaster was busy moving tables and chairs around.

"What can I do to help?" Harry said as Merlin flew over to join Fawkes on his perch.

"We need to move all the tables out of the way and make a circle for fifteen chairs," Dumbledore said, sending one more table gently against the wall with a wave of his wand, "and then conjure those chairs."

"Where would you like me to start?" Harry said. "Shall I move tables while you start on the chairs?"

"That would be splendid," Dumbledore said with a smile as he began conjuring chintz-covered cushy armchairs. Soon they had the office arranged the way Dumbledore wanted, and several tea trays set up ready to serve the meeting attendees.

"What's the meeting about?" Harry said as they finished their preparations. Before the headmaster could answer, there was a knock on the door.

"Harry, would you answer that?"

"Sure," he said, moving to the door.

A grim-faced portly man strode haughtily into the office, his eyes on Dumbledore and the room's arrangements. He didn't spare Harry a single glance, but tossed his cloak at the young man as if Harry was a coat rack – or a servant. Harry surmised that this man was the type of person who expected to be waited on, yet never noticed those who were taking care of him. The man moved to a chair and settled himself, then opened his newspaper and began reading.

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A moment later, he held his hand out as if expecting something to be put in it. When nothing happened, he snapped his fingers impatiently.

Harry looked at Dumbledore uncertainly and saw a twinkle in his mentor's eyes, so he put the cloak on a nearby bench without saying anything and then went back to arranging things properly on the tea trays around the room.

The man snapped his fingers again, still with his nose buried in his paper. Finally he sighed. "Tea, two sugars," he said without even glancing at Harry. "Your servant is awfully slow, Dumbledore."

"He isn't a servant," Dumbledore replied smoothly. "He's my apprentice. If you'd like tea, please help yourself. My apprentice and I have a few more preparations to make." He nodded at Harry and turned toward the back of his office, knowing the boy would follow him.

The man huffed with irritation and then got up, tossed his newspaper into the seat of his chair and went to the tea tray to make his own tea.

When they were in the back of the office, Harry leaned toward Dumbledore and whispered, "Who is he and why is he like that?"

"That, Harry, is the current version of Lucius Malfoy."

"What?" Harry said, startled.

Dumbledore sighed. "His name is Colm Dorking. He was always in Malfoy's shadow when it came to peddling his influence in the Ministry. Now that Mr. Malfoy is gone, he's been throwing his weight around, trying to be the 'power behind the scenes' that Malfoy was. Unfortunately for him, Amelia Bones isn't as easily swayed as Cornelius Fudge was. Keep an eye on him. He's trouble."

"Is he a Death Eater?" Harry asked, his eyes wide.

"I don't know for certain, but I do trust your instincts. Watch and listen, Harry. Feel free to chat with people before the meeting they speak to you, but once the meeting starts, don't speak unless someone asks you something directly. You can learn a great deal more by watching and listening than you can by speaking. By the way, you did very well by not saying anything when he came in. You may have noticed I didn't introduce you to him. That was deliberate. He still doesn't know who you are." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily. "The look on his face when he realizes he was treating Harry Potter as a servant should be interesting." He smiled fondly at his apprentice. "When the meeting is over, we'll discuss everything, all right? This meeting is an important part of your training, and I've found your observational skills to be first-rate. I will be interested to hear your conclusions about various people."

Harry smiled at the conspiratorial look in Dumbledore's eye. "What are you up to?"

"Watch and listen. And hold your tongue during the meeting as long as you can. That's all you need to know for now. Stay here until the room has filled up a bit more, all right? There's no point in spoiling a good surprise!"

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"You are up to something, I know you are," Harry said, greatly intrigued.

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes dancing, and laid a finger on the tip of his long, crooked nose. "Right in one. You are a clever boy."

"And I don't get any warning?"

"Your reactions will be much better with no prior warning," Dumbledore said confidently. "When you do speak, I would like you to speak with complete honesty, no matter what it is you feel like saying. And do use your Occlumency so none of these people can read you, all right? I don't know if any of them are skilled at Legilimency or not, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Yes, Professor."

"Right. I'm off to greet our guests. Stay here until the noise level gets a bit higher. I'd rather you blend in at first rather than standing out."

Harry tilted his head, perplexed, but nodded his agreement.

Within a few minutes, the office was filled with noise as people milled around chatting, getting their coffee or tea, snacking on scones and biscuits before the meeting was called to order. Harry peeked through the doorway and saw Dumbledore nod at him. He moved into the room, standing quietly by the back wall until a mass of curly red hair passed close in front of him.

Percy Weasley turned startled eyes on Harry. "What are you doing here?" he said in an unfriendly tone.

"Hi, Percy. How are you?" Harry replied quietly, deciding to be as friendly as possible and not react to Percy's rudeness.

"Too busy to deal with students. Tell Dumbledore what you need and get out," Percy snapped.

"He knows I'm here. He asked me to come."

"What? Why?"

"I'm his apprentice," Harry said simply. He almost didn't say anything else, but the image of Molly Weasley's broken-hearted tears over this straying son of hers popped into his head and compelled him to speak. "Your family misses you."

"I don't need them. They've caused me nothing but trouble."

"I don't want to argue with you," Harry said. He regretted speaking to the irritable young man.

"Then don't. Are you still so thick with my brother?"

"Oh yeah, best mates," Harry assured him with a smile. "I'm rather 'thick' with your sister, as well."

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"What?" Percy said, horror-struck.

"Haven't you read the papers in the last year?" Harry said, shaking his head in wonder. "We've been mentioned in there as a couple. There were loads of photos of us together, as well."

"I hoped those reports were erroneous," Percy said stiffly, "or that she'd come to her senses by now."

"They had pictures of us *kissing*, and you. . .? Never mind," Harry said with another shake of his head, giving up on him. "I'll tell your mum you looked well."

"Don't bother," Percy snapped nastily.

Harry couldn't leave things there. "She deserves better treatment than that. She loves you."

"Look, Potter," Percy said in a harsh undertone, "I don't know how you've convinced so many people that You-Know-Who is back, but you can't fool me. This is all some elaborate hoax by Dumbledore in an effort to take over the Ministry."

Harry was taken aback. "There were pictures in the paper showing me fighting Voldemort," he said, rather enjoying Percy's shudder at the sound of the enemy's name. "How could you ignore that?"

"Not everything you read in the paper is true. Even pictures can be doctored."

"Yes, and the paper tells loads of lies about me," Harry snapped, his temper dangerously near the surface. "But this happens to be true!"

"I am not convinced."

"You still believe Fudge and Umbridge and that lot despite the change in the Ministry?" Harry was aghast.

"Dolores Umbridge was a fine administrator. She would have done wonders here at Hogwarts," Percy said prissily.

Harry held up his right hand, the back of which still bore the scars of the evil black quill Umbridge had forced him to use for many detentions. Harry hadn't bothered to get that scar removed when his others had been healed months ago. It reminded him that even non-Death Eaters could be evil and needed to be dealt with. "See this? Does this look like something a 'fine administrator' would do to a student?"

"How did you get that?" Percy said, stunned.

"She made me use a 'special' quill for detention that cut into my hand the lines she made me write," Harry said, pointing to the words on his hand. "'I must not tell lies,' written in *my own blood* over and over, cutting into my hand until the mark won't go away even two years later. And I wasn't the one telling lies. She was."

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Dumbledore saw the two young men having rather heated words in the back of his office. "Harry? Hello, Mr. Weasley," he said with a small smile. "Would you two please join us now?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said, following Dumbledore to a pair of vacant chairs. Percy moved to a seat at a desk shoved against the wall directly across the room from where Harry and Dumbledore were seated. Harry realized Percy was still acting as a clerk, which probably meant he hadn't had a promotion for quite a while.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said from the chair on Harry's other side, her voice warm and friendly.

"Good morning, Minister," Harry said with a genuine smile. This Minister of Magic had a good head on her shoulders and was both honest and fair, characteristics quite lacking in the former Minister. And she seemed to both like and respect Harry, which he found quite refreshing. He wanted to stay on her good side if at all possible.

Madam Bones cleared her throat and silence fell in the room, except for the scratching of Percy's quill. Harry glanced at Percy and saw the resentful look on the young man's face when he realized Harry was being included in the meeting, apparently as an equal. Harry swallowed hard, wishing he'd avoided speaking with Percy at all. He'd wanted to try to heal the bad feelings between them, but it seemed he'd made things worse. His being seated between Madam Bones and Professor Dumbledore and not being required to take notes only added insult to the injury. He could feel the heat of Percy's animosity all the way across the room.

"I'd like to thank all of you for making the trip here to Hogwarts," Madam Bones began. "Mr. Weasley, are you ready?" she said, glancing at her clerk. At his curt nod, she went on. "I feel we need to discuss the current situation with those who are experts in the field, but, as you are aware, Professor Dumbledore was unable to leave the castle to come to our meeting. Mr. Weasley, if you would, please include a list of everyone who's here in your notes, and make sure each one receives a transcript of today's meeting."

"Even *Potter*?" Percy said in disbelief.

"Yes, even Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said smoothly.

"Why is that boy in our meeting?" Dorking demanded imperiously.

"I asked him to come," Dumbledore replied. "He's my apprentice and I want him to learn about diplomacy and statesmanship as well as magic."

"Why do you need an apprentice?" the man snapped. "You run a school. Surely you don't think that boy is going to be the next headmaster?"

"No, I don't think Harry will be the next headmaster," Dumbledore replied, maintaining his calm and relaxed tone, "but there's no reason he couldn't be at some point in the future, if he chooses to go into teaching. However, I am getting old. I know a great deal that is not taught in any school, nor is it written down in any book. I decided it was time I taught it to someone, and required someone who would be able to understand and use what I'm teaching him. Harry is the perfect candidate, and is doing very well as my apprentice."

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"Why him? He gets enough attention," another man said aggressively. "And he's a nutter anyway."

"Why indeed? Could it possibly be that he's the most talented wizard it has been my pleasure to know in all my long life?" Dumbledore said, still polite, but with steel behind his words. "And those who believe he's a 'nutter,' as you say, believed stories printed in the *Daily Prophet* which have been shown, many times over now, to be lies."

"He keeps trying to get himself killed," the second man said. "The papers have printed numerous stories about him being in serious or critical condition –"

"Some of which were true, some false, but you can see he's healthy and strong now. And it isn't up to you or anyone else who I choose as my apprentice," Dumbledore said sternly. "Harry's qualifications as my apprentice aren't in question here today, nor will they be at any other time or place. He's doing what I've asked him to do. He didn't ask to be in this meeting. He hasn't acted inappropriately in any way, nor will he. So please, stop wasting the Minister's and my time and let's get on with the meeting, shall we?"

Harry sat silently throughout this heated exchange, doing his best not to blush under the intense scrutiny he was receiving. He wondered again what Dumbledore was up to.

"As I was about to say before we were interrupted," Madam Bones said, her voice edged with irritation as she glared around the room, "the young man at my right is Harry Potter, a student at Hogwarts and a national hero in the fight against Lord Voldemort, as you should all know. He is also the apprentice of Albus Dumbledore. Next is Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts Academy of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

She looked at each of her Cabinet members in turn, wishing she'd had the time to replace many of them. The holdovers from Fudge's administration gave her headaches on a regular basis, but with their form of government, she was saddled with them until either their terms were up, or they made some serious mistake that could be documented so she could fire them. She was quietly seeking new Cabinet members to replace the recalcitrant ones, but in stepping into the Minister's position between elections, she had to take things one step at a time. She sighed and got back on track.

"I've called you all to this meeting because we must develop a workable plan for dealing with the raids around the country by Dementors and Death Eaters."

"Turn Potter loose on them," one man sneered. "He's the war hero. Let him fight them."

"He's only a boy," another man said, sounding outraged. "He's done more for this country than anyone has the right to expect, especially from one so young."

Harry felt like squirming, but forced himself to sit still, keeping his hands open and relaxed on the arms of the chair, his face attentive and calm. Maintaining this appearance was taking a great deal of energy. He saw Dumbledore glance at him out of the corner of his eye and looked toward his headmaster for an instant, receiving a very deliberate wink for his trouble. Harry smiled inwardly. Whatever was going on, it must be going exactly the way Dumbledore wanted it to.

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"ORDER!" Madam Bones called when the wrangling got louder. "Mr. Potter is not on trial here! This meeting has nothing to do with him. Please keep on the subject of today's meeting or we'll never get anything resolved!" When things settled down a bit, she tried again. "This type of behaviour is why we have not reached any conclusions in our discussions. We simply cannot let the meetings dissolve into invective and innuendo. There will be no more discussion of Mr. Potter's qualifications. He is far more qualified than most of you to be in on this discussion. That's the end of the matter," she said sternly.

She looked at a middle-aged man who bore the appearance of an athlete gone a bit to seed. "Mr. Whittier, would you please give your report?" As he stood, she turned to Harry and Dumbledore and said, "Mr. Whittier is a representative of the Aurors." Dumbledore nodded in acknowledgement and Harry smiled at the man. An Auror! He would finally get to see what they did other than catching Dark wizards. He sat with an eager expression on his face, ready to hear whatever the man had to say.

"We have had a tremendous increase in the number of attacks by both Death Eaters and Dementors in recent weeks, all over the country," Whittier began. "They've been staging random raids around the country for months, but the recent ones have become much more frequent and more violent."

As he read off a list of statistics, Harry shuddered. It was horrifying. So many families murdered. So many people disappearing. Dark Marks appearing in clusters all over the country. But the worst were the Dementor attacks, which were becoming more widespread. Whittier displayed a map with sparkling spots of red light showing the locations of various attacks.

"We have done every type of analysis we can think of. We simply cannot predict where they will attack next. We have no way to stop them," the Auror concluded with a sigh. "That's all I have to report." He sat down.

There was much discussion and dissention as the report was verbally shredded, the reputation of the man who gave it ripped to pieces right along with it. Harry looked at the group in dismay, wondering why they were attacking the man that way. He gave Whittier a sympathetic look, then turned his eyes to the map, studying the red spots. A small frown line appeared between his eyebrows as he stared at the map.

After the harangue had gone on for several minutes, Madam Bones demanded quiet. "All this yelling is getting us nowhere. It's exactly the same thing you've done at every meeting. Just be quiet! We have new voices to listen to, and I'd like to hear what they have to say." She turned to Dumbledore. "What do you think of the situation, Professor? Do you have any suggestions?"

"I think the situation is abominable, and that these people," he said, indicating the Cabinet members, "need to stop abusing the Aurors, who are understaffed, underpaid and overworked," Dumbledore said calmly.

"Hear, hear!" several people said loudly.

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"I think we need to try to educate the public in how to do the Patronus Charm," he added, "but I realize many people will never conquer it. However, I believe there may be some other solution."

"Really?" Madam Bones said hopefully. "What is it?"

"Ask my apprentice. I believe he knows the answer."

"Huh?" Harry said, feeling stupid. He'd been concentrating so hard on the map that he hadn't listened to the conversation until he'd noticed all eyes were suddenly on him.

"Professor Dumbledore seems to think you know the answer to our problem," Madam Bones prompted. "Do you?"

"Erm. . ." Harry said, stalling for time. He glanced nervously at Dumbledore, who smiled benignly and nodded his head. "I do?" he said, looking at his mentor in disbelief.

"You do. I saw you working it out just now," Dumbledore said with a smile, nodding toward the map.

"Oh, that!" Harry said, relieved he finally had a clue about what his headmaster thought he knew. "Well, I don't know that it's a solution, but yes, I did have an idea."

"Do go on, Mr. Potter," Madam Bones encouraged him.

"May I . . .?" he asked her, gesturing toward the map.

"Please. Whatever you need."

He rose and studied the map up close, then turned to the Auror. "Is there a way you can mark the date and time of the attacks on these spots?"

"Yes, there is," Whittier said. "Hang on." He waved his wand over the map and small numerals appeared inside each spot.

"Great. Now, is there a way to make the colours different to show the separate attacks?"

"Of course," the man replied, a puzzled frown on his face. What was this kid up to? He waved his wand and the spots changed into many different colours. "All the marks that are the same colour are attacks that occurred during the same time period," the man explained, pointing to various groupings of same-coloured spots.

"Great," Harry said, studying the marks more closely. He was silent for a long time.

"What are you doing, Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones asked after several minutes.

"Studying the patterns," Harry replied, still concentrating on the map.

"Could you explain?" she prompted.

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Harry sighed and turned to face her. She was looking at him with open curiosity and a willingness to listen, as were many of the others in the room. Other people gave him openly hostile looks. He didn't understand what the problem was, but he was determined to help Madam Bones if it was at all possible.

"I'm looking at the patterns of the raids," he said, turning to point to the map. He moved his hand over a cluster of blue spots. "These attacks that are this shade of blue all occurred the same morning. They were individual attacks that were part of one greater, overall attack, if you see what I mean. I'm sorry, I'm not saying this very well," he said nervously, taking a quick look at the Minister.

"You're doing perfectly well, Mr. Potter. Please, go on," Madam Bones said.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore who was smiling, looking quite pleased about something. He nodded slightly when Harry caught his eye. Harry took a deep breath and went on. "So, for instance, these attacks – the ones shown in light blue – all happened on the morning of the 15th. These shown in green were mid-day on the 15th. These in yellow were the evening of the 15th." He touched the map and followed one colour of spots with his hand as he went on. "If you look at these patterns carefully, you can see that they form sort of a spiral pattern out from a central point. It would take more analysis than I can do here – and I'm not the strategist, Ron is. You might want him to look at this, as well – but it seems to me that the Dementors have to nest or rest or hide somewhere. I think the centres of these spirals may be those hiding places. If we can determine where they are, those places could be raided and the Dementors captured."

Many shocked and scoffing exclamations rolled around the room as the Cabinet expressed their disbelief. "You can't predict what a Dementor will do, you stupid boy!" one man blustered.

"There's a pattern here," Harry insisted. "Look at the times. They go out at morning, noon, evening, and night. Four times a day. They're . . . they're feeding," he concluded, surprising himself with the logical explanation that had just popped into his head. "Breakfast, lunch, dinner and a bedtime snack."

More noises and rude comments came from several Cabinet members, but others had grown silent and were looking at Harry thoughtfully.

"Silence!" Madam Bones snapped. "I asked Mr. Potter to tell me what he saw on that map. I will hear him out with no further interruptions!"

"Could I have a piece of parchment and a quill?" Harry asked suddenly, bending closer to the map.

Dumbledore stood up and got some parchment, a quill and an ink pot off of his desk, setting them on the table nearest the map for Harry to use. He stood looking over Harry's shoulder for a moment.

"Do you see it?" Harry asked his mentor, looking up at him with wide, hopeful eyes.

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"I do see the pattern you mentioned, yes," Dumbledore said. He patted Harry on the shoulder. "Well done, lad. Carry on."

Harry gave him a brief smile, then went back to studying the spots on the map. He began making a diagram of some of the patterns, studying it carefully, then perusing the map closely again. He looked up at the Auror and said, "Some of these marks are Death Eater attacks, right?" The man nodded. "Can you mark them separately, so they stand out from the Dementor attacks, and also mark what happened at each attack? For instance, were people killed, or kidnapped, were there children kidnapped, were there people of certain occupations taken, that kind of thing?"

"Yes, I can do that. Hang on," Whittier said, digging out a parchment from his bag. "What are you thinking?"

"It's just a feeling I have," Harry said quietly. "I want to see if I'm right before I say too much."

"I respect that," the man said with a smile. He went through the parchment in his hands and spent quite a while revising the map to reflect the information Harry wanted. Harry watched him with interest.

Meanwhile, the Cabinet was getting restless. "Why are we here? Why are we listening to the prattling of a schoolboy?" Dorking demanded. "My time is valuable. This is ridiculous."

"No, it isn't," Minister Bones insisted. "You are a member of the Ministry's Cabinet. As such, you are required to participate in meetings like this one. If you don't like it, I'd be happy to accept your resignation so I can replace you with someone who isn't so disruptive!"

"Minister Bones!" the man blustered. "I have been a loyal servant of the Ministry . . ." He went on for several minutes, growing more and more aggressive in his defence of his service. Other members spoke out, some in support of him, others telling them to shut up, still others saying they didn't appreciate having to travel so far to have exactly the same kind of meeting they'd been having in London, and some saying they shouldn't be disturbing Harry as he tried to sort out the pattern he thought he'd seen.

Harry sighed. It was very hard to concentrate with all the noise in the room. He glanced at Dumbledore, who was watching the Cabinet meeting dissolve into name calling with a benign smile on his face. Harry was surprised to see his headmaster wink at him again. Harry went back to work on the patterns and then shook his head.

"Professor, could we get Ron up here? He's much better at this kind of thing than I am," Harry said, his hands now full of several parchments he'd made notations on.

"Minister?" Dumbledore said politely. "May Ron Weasley join us? Harry is correct, Mr. Weasley would be an excellent resource." He ignored the huff of disdain coming from Percy's corner.

"Yes, please do invite him," she said with a smile. Her patience with her Cabinet was growing thin, but she could tell Harry felt he was on to something, and she wanted to know what it was.

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Dumbledore wrote a note to Ron, asking him to come up right away, and reminding him to put his medals on before he came, then handed it to Fawkes to deliver.

Harry continued to work on his notes, scratching his head as he tried to force his brain to ferret out the pattern he instinctively knew was there. His head snapped up when he heard the spiral staircase beginning to move.

"Ron's here, sir," he said. "May I go and tell him what's going on?"

"Yes, please do," Dumbledore said, turning his attention back to the Cabinet's scrappy attempts at doing business. He was finding the show both sad and amusing. He glanced up at Merlin, and smiled. Merlin was listening avidly, his head moving to follow the conversation, his eyes bright and attentive. The bird saw Dumbledore looking at him and cocked his head, obviously intrigued by the proceedings. Dumbledore smiled and nodded at the phoenix, who nodded back briefly, then went back to trying to follow the many discussions flying across the room.

Harry went out onto the landing, meeting Ron when he got to the top of the stairs.

"Thanks for coming," Harry said with a relieved smile. "I need your help."

"What's going on?" Ron said, perplexed. "Why did I have to get dressed up?" he added, gesturing at his ribbons, which he'd put on in such haste that they were all crooked.

"Hang on," Harry said as he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Ron's ribbons, straightening the line to perfection. "That's better. There's a meeting inside of the Ministry of Magic's Cabinet," he said.

Ron blanched. "What do they want with me? And thanks, by the way."

"No problem. You're not in any trouble. I'm trying to find – oh, just come with me and I'll show you what we're doing. This lot don't get along well. Don't let anything they say get under your skin," Harry warned as he opened the door. He held it nearly closed for a moment and added in a whisper, "I should warn you, Percy's in there. He's taking the minutes. And he's not in a friendly mood."

Ron nodded, then followed Harry into the room. He glanced around at the gathering of adults, most of whom were looking rather grumpy, then at his headmaster.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Weasley," Madam Bones said graciously. "I hope you and Mr. Potter can help us with this situation."

Ron turned his puzzled eyes to Harry's. "Huh?"

"Come here, mate, let me explain," Harry said, drawing him over to the map. Soon both young men had their heads together, studying the tiny notations on the spots on the map, referring to and revising the charts Harry had begun, and talking in soft voices.

"And exactly how much longer are we supposed to sit here while they do whatever it is they're doing?" Dorking sneered.

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"As long as it takes," Madam Bones said. "If you would stop complaining, we could get these other matters resolved." She went back to a discussion the Cabinet had been having about allocating more funds for the Aurors' pursuit of the Death Eaters.

Some time later, Harry turned to face the Minister again. "If you'll excuse us for a few minutes, we need to make some calculations. It would be easier to do in another room where we can spread things out on the table. May I use that workroom?" he said, looking at Dumbledore and tilting his head toward the room that was his when he stayed with Dumbledore.

"By all means, go ahead," Minister Bones said.

"Yes, you may use that room, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "Do you need anything?"

"More parchment, I think," Harry said, gathering up the sheets of parchment they'd already covered with notes. "And may we take this map with us?"

"Of course," Whittier said, handing it to Harry.

"Thanks. We'll be back in a bit." He and Ron went into his room and spread the parchments and map on the work table. "What do you see?" Harry asked Ron.

"I see the patterns you mentioned. And I see the timetable, as well," Ron said, making some notes. "I think it would be useful if we . . . um" He stopped talking and began writing some kind of formula on the parchment. "Hmmm," he muttered, staring at what he'd written, then looking back at Harry's notes again. "Yeah. Um"

Harry studied their notes and the map himself, knowing Ron was working on the same thing with a completely different approach.

"Hey, mate," Ron said finally, "I think I'm on to something." He showed Harry his findings and Harry grinned.

"That's exactly why I wanted you involved. I knew this could be done, but I couldn't think how to do it. It didn't help that they were all yelling most of the time I was trying to work, but still – this is brilliant, Ron! C'mon, let's go tell them what we've worked out."

The two young men re-entered the office to find the Cabinet still wrestling with each other verbally. Harry had no idea how they ever got anything done.

"Have you found something?" Madam Bones asked with interest.

"Yes, I think so," Harry said. He set up the map and went through his notes again. "All right. As I said before, there's a pattern to the Dementors attacks. Morning, noon, dinner and bedtime attacks, as if they're feeding – which they probably are. The attacks spiral outward from a central point for four and a half days – and then they stop. The next day, attacks begin in a new area. So they're moving their camps every fifth day. Each attack is a certain distance farther out on this spiralling path than the previous one. They're being fairly consistent with this. There are two things we think you can do with this information. You can work your way

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back to the centre and find where they're hiding, or you can move forward and anticipate where the next attack is coming."

The Cabinet members muttered in shock and disbelief.

"That's impossible," Dorking said dismissively. "You can't know such things."

"We've analyzed the data and . . ." Ron began.

"Isn't his father that nutter who loves Muggles?" Dorking commented snidely to the man on his left.

Harry turned to the annoying man, his patience at an end. "There's no reason for you to be so disruptive," he said, "nor to insult my friend and his dad. We're trying to help, and you're making it very difficult for us to explain what we've found."

"Nobody wants to hear the natterings of a couple of school boys," the man said dismissively.

Harry ground his teeth, his eyes flashing furiously. "Mr. Dorking, either be part of the solution or be quiet!"

The man's face turned purple. "You can't speak to me that way!"

"I. Just. Did," Harry snapped, his body tense and ready. He sensed a real adversary in this man. He kept his eyes on the man's hands. One false move and Harry's wand would be pointed at his heart.

"Everyone, please, calm down," Madam Bones began.

"This whelp has no idea who he's dealing with!" Dorking blustered. "And his theories are a complete waste of our time!"

Harry's temper flared. "You lot asked for my help, and I'm *trying* to give it to you. But you keep interrupting, making it impossible for me to work things out in the first place, or tell you what I've worked out now that Ron and I have managed it! You insist on spending all of your time posturing and pontificating and not doing anything to solve the problems the wizarding world is facing! I thought the Ministry was supposed to have the public's interests in mind, but you lot seem to only be concerned about your own welfare, not in what will keep the public safe." He glared around him. "I'm sorry. I don't mean any disrespect. But if you want our help, then give us a chance to tell you what we've found without being interrupted. And you had no reason to make a rude comment about Ron's dad," he added, glaring at Dorking again.

"Nothing you have to say interests us," Dorking sneered in a flash of temper. "You're just a misguided, publicity-seeking troublemaker. And Arthur Weasley is a joke."

"Mr. Dorking!" Madam Bones said, both shocked and angry now herself. "Calm yourself. You are entirely out of order, sir!"

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Something clicked in Harry's brain. "Push up your sleeves," he said in a dangerously quiet voice.

"What?" the man said, his face going from purple to white in a heartbeat.

"I said, push up your sleeves," Harry repeated, his wand in his hand so quickly no one noticed the movement that placed it there.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Dorking is a member of the Cabinet and should be treated with due respect," Madam Bones said, appalled at Harry's sudden aggression.

"Get him to push up his sleeves and I'll apologize like a good boy," Harry replied through clenched teeth.

"Why do you want his sleeves pushed up?" Madam Bones said.

"To look for the Dark Mark," Harry replied, which caused many people in the room to gasp.

"I don't have the Dark Mark!" Dorking snarled.

"Prove it! Just push up your sleeves!" Harry demanded, beginning to advance on the man. "Do it, or I'll do it for you."

"I don't need to prove anything to you, you scar-faced freak!" Dorking barked, half-rising from his chair.

"Sit down and shut up," Harry ordered the man, pointing his wand at the man's heart now. "Push up your sleeves! I'm tired of waiting!"

"Dumbledore, call him off!" another man cried.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, enjoying the show. "No," he said simply.

"No?" the man gasped.

"No," Dumbledore repeated. "It would be in Mr. Dorking's best interests to show us his arm."

Finally losing patience, Harry pointed his wand at Dorking's left arm and made the sleeve move up magically. A Dark Mark was revealed, causing pandemonium in the room. Whittier rushed up to Dorking and held him at wandpoint.

"Well done, Potter," Whittier said. "How did you know?"

"Instinct," Harry replied, still holding his wand on the man. "Just to be safe, let's see everyone's arms. Sleeves up, please. I mean no disrespect, but I, for one, need to know who I'm dealing with." Nearly all of the Cabinet members willingly bared their forearms, but two others were reluctant. Harry glared at them and one man slowly pushed up his sleeve, revealing his Dark Mark. The other man refused to move his sleeve, but Madam Bones used her wand to lift his sleeve magically.

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"Three Death Eaters in the Cabinet?" she said, appalled. All three were holdovers from the previous administration. "Mr. Whittier, please take these men into custody."

"We haven't done anything wrong!" one of the prisoners cried.

"You have taken the Dark Mark," Madam Bones said sternly. "That in itself is something 'wrong.' You'll have a hearing at a future date. For now, you no longer have the security clearance required to be in this meeting." She turned to Dumbledore. "May we use one of your dungeons for a while?"

"To hold these prisoners? Certainly," Dumbledore replied with maddening serenity.

When the men were removed and relative calm restored, Madam Bones looked at Harry with new respect. "How did you know?"

"I suspected Dorking from the moment I met him," Harry said with a shrug. "Then I noticed a pattern in the way your meeting was being disrupted. The same three men always interrupted or argued, and their points were rarely good ones. They seemed to be arguing simply to argue. So either they were gits, or they had a hidden agenda. I thought it best to be safe."

"I agree," she said with a tired smile. In one fell swoop, Harry had cleaned the worst troublemakers out of her Cabinet, something she'd been trying to do since taking office. "You were going to tell us your findings?"

"One second," Harry said, remembering something. He crossed the room and stood in front of Percy Weasley. "Let's see your arms, Percy."

Percy blanched. "What? Why me?"

"You're the only one who hasn't shown us your arms. If you have nothing to hide, you won't mind pushing up your sleeves," Harry said as reasonably as he could manage, but his wand was still held loosely in his hand.

Percy's face reddened in anger as he shoved up both sleeves, revealing white, freckled arms with no Dark Mark. "There. Happy now?"

"Yes, thank you," Harry said, turning back to the map and giving Whittier a wan half-smile as the man returned from taking his prisoners to the dungeons. "Maybe we can get something accomplished now."

He looked at the map for a moment, as if he was planning to get back to his explanation, then glanced around the room and shook his head, finally turning to face the Minister.

"Madam Bones, you were an Auror. How could you not know you had three Death Eaters in your Cabinet?" he said, watching her closely.

She sighed. "A background check was run on every Cabinet member when he or she was being considered for the Cabinet," she explained. "If that check was clear, then the person could be appointed to the Cabinet. Cornelius Fudge didn't require as stringent a background check as I do. And the way our government is set up, the Cabinet stays in place when there's a

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change in Minister between elections, to try to have as smooth a transition as possible, so I inherited his Cabinet when I became Minister. When I took office, I required each member of the government to show his left forearm, but since they stood in line for that inspection, they had time to create a Glamour Charm to hide the Mark. I will institute some changes in our policies after this experience."

"OK. I just wondered," Harry said mildly. "Thanks." He turned back the map and stared at it, trying to pick up where he'd left off. "Rats. Ron, where were we?"

Harry's approach to Percy had truly frightened Ron. What if his own brother bore a Dark Mark? He was glad Harry had forced the issue, and relieved to see Percy's pale arms were unmarked. If Percy had taken the Dark Mark, Ron didn't know how his parents would survive such a blow. The very thought had sent his mind reeling. Now Ron gulped, forcing himself back to business. "Erm . . . you told them what we'd discovered about the pattern, and what could be done with that knowledge."

"Oh yeah! Thanks, mate," Harry said, looking relieved. He was still dizzy with the knowledge that there had been three Death Eaters in the Ministry's cabinet all this time, that they'd been receiving confidential information from the Ministry meetings they attended and most likely then passed it on to Voldemort. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Ron, can you . . .?"

"Yeah, I've got it," Ron said, having managed to settle himself. He could see Harry's mind wasn't on the task at hand. He took a deep breath, then turned to face the Minister. "What we learned from studying these patterns, as Harry said, was that we can predict where the next attacks will be. It will be lunch time in about an hour. If you can get Aurors to these five areas," he said, pointing at spots he and Harry had placed on the map, "before then, you might be able to protect people from the Dementors' attacks."

"You're kidding," Whittier breathed, looking at the map more closely. He looked up at Ron. "How sure are you of this?"

"I can't say it's a certainty, but they move every five days – this is the second day in these locations. They should follow their pattern unless it's been interrupted for some reason," Ron explained.

"I need to send some messages to get the Aurors in place so we can capture them. May I borrow some owls?" Whittier said, looking at Dumbledore urgently.

"You may borrow my phoenix," Dumbledore said, gesturing to Fawkes. "He is much faster than any owl, and he can go to several locations on the same trip, all very quickly."

"Thank you," Whittier said, then began working on the message he was going to send out.

"You can capture Dementors?" Harry asked Whittier curiously.

"Oh, yes. That's how the Ministry controlled them when they used to work for us guarding Azkaban Prison and doing other jobs, as well," the man replied.

"I'd like to learn that spell!" Harry breathed.

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"Me, too!" Ron said, equally awed.

"You'll learn it in Auror School, lads," Whittier assured them with a smile.

"Wicked!" Ron said, grinning happily.

"If you manage to stop or capture one group, won't that make the others move, or change their patterns?" Minister Bones asked curiously.

Harry was back on track now. "These groups are widely separated. I think it's unlikely they're in communication with each other. Voldemort might send messages to them and get them to work together, or call them to him to do a mass attack, but right now, they seem to be on their own, each group staying in a certain region, a good distance from any others. I suspect it's similar to animals staking out territories. Each of these groups has claimed that area as their territory. Until he needs them for something specific, Voldemort's probably happy to let them do as they wish as long as they're causing trouble, which they are." He gazed at the map again. "It would be best if you can catch them all at once. They might share information once they know someone's anticipating where they'll attack next. But if we go after them quickly, try to capture them all today, during one of the next two or three feedings, it should be okay, I think." He shrugged. "Of course, this is all speculation. . . ."

"But it's the best suggestion anyone's come up with," Madam Bones said stoutly. "Mr. Whittier, what else do you need?"

"We need more manpower," Whittier said. "We should probably use everyone with Auror experience. The desk jockeys, the instructors at the school, call in the retired Aurors . . ."

"Do it," she instructed. "Mr. Weasley, help Mr. Whittier to get the orders drafted. I'll sign whatever you need." Percy and Whittier soon had their heads together making copies of the message and a list of all the necessary recipients.

"If it's too much for Fawkes to do quickly, you can use Merlin too," Harry offered when he noticed how long they were working on the list of recipients.

"Thanks," Whittier said. "All right. Fawkes, would you take these? Merlin?" He gave each bird its assignment and the messages to carry then stood back as they flashed out of sight. "Handy having phoenixes around," he commented with a smile.

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "Let's hope those Aurors can get in place in time. In the meantime, I'll order up some lunch for us. I imagine you still have more business to discuss, Minister?"

"Yes, we do," she said. "Thank you." She looked at Harry and Ron, who had their heads together over the map again. "Mr. Potter? Do you have other ideas?"

"We're working on the pattern for the Death Eaters," Harry explained.

"They have a pattern as well?" she said hopefully.

"It's not as well defined as the one for the Dementors. It's going to take a bit longer," Harry said apologetically.

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"Anything you can do would be most appreciated," she said sincerely. She led the Cabinet members in a discussion of some policy matters while the boys worked in Harry's room again. Harry and Ron emerged a bit later. Harry squatted next to Dumbledore's chair to have a private word with him.

"We're not having much luck. Would you mind if we went to the Great Hall for lunch? I need to clear my mind, and I'm sure Ron wouldn't mind a break either," Harry said diffidently.

"I think that's a good idea," Dumbledore said. "What are you going to say when your friends ask you why you're wearing your ribbons?"

"That you have an Auror up here we've been talking with about Auror School. It's the truth, after all," Harry said with a cheeky smile.

"Yes, it is," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

"May we take the map with us in case something strikes us while we're out? We won't let anyone else see it," Ron promised, hunkering down next to Harry. "Well, except for the girls, unless you object."

Dumbledore looked from one boy to the other, then at Whittier, who was watching curiously. "Mr. Whittier, if we might have a word?"

"Is there a problem, Professor?" Madam Bones said, interrupting a heated discussion she was having with the Cabinet over some policy matters.

"No, no problem," Dumbledore assured her as Whittier moved to stand by Dumbledore's seat. Dumbledore rose and led the other three aside. He explained to Whittier that the boys wanted to go to lunch and take the map with them. "I see no problem with their request. Harry and Ron know how to be careful with such things. But it's up to you," he told Whittier.

Whittier looked at the boys, then at the map in their hands. "Let me take some of the markings off of it," he said after a moment. "You can remember what the colours stand for, right?"

"Yes," Harry assured him. Ron nodded his agreement.

"All right. I'll put these notations back when you return," Whittier said.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said sincerely. "Oh, could you remove the Dementor patterns and just leave the Death Eater attacks? That might make things easier for us."

"Certainly," Whittier said, changing the markings on the map with a wave of his wand and a quiet incantation.

"Thanks," Harry said. "We'll try to be back quickly, but we just . . ."

"Believe me, if I could get out of here to clear my head, I would," Whittier said with a grin. "Enjoy your break."

"We will!" Harry said, returning the man's grin.

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Dumbledore smiled and patted Harry on the shoulder. "Have a good lunch and rejoin us when you can."

"Yes, Professor," he said, then led Ron out of the office.

In the entrance to the Great Hall, Harry and Ron stopped and looked down the Gryffindor Table, trying to find the girls. "There they are," Harry said as Ginny moved a bit and her long red mane flashed on Neville's far side. The boys hurried down the Great Hall and plunked themselves down on the seats next to their girlfriends.

"Hi!" Harry said brightly, giving Ginny's shoulders a squeeze.

"Hi, yourself! All finished?" she said with a smile as she handed him a platter of devilled eggs.

"Not by a long shot," he replied, piling his plate up with food. Ron already had his mouth too full for any kind of intelligible speech.

"Why are you two dressed up?" Neville asked curiously.

"Erm," Harry began intelligently, "we've been talking with a man from the Auror Office."

"Really? Cool! Why is he here?" Neville said with an eager smile.

"Just going over stuff with us," Harry said off-handedly.

"But I thought you two were already accepted to the program and all," Neville said, confused.

"Oh, we are! There's no problem," Harry hastened to assure him. "But this man came to see Professor Dumbledore on some Ministry business and Dumbledore is letting us chat with him to learn more about the program, the day-to-day operations, and so on."

"Cool," Neville said with a smile. "What have you learned?"

Harry thought a minute. What had he learned that he could share? "Erm . . . oh, yeah! We learned there's a spell to actually capture and control Dementors! That's how the Ministry controlled them when the Dementors guarded Azkaban."

"You're kidding! They can be controlled? And even captured?" Neville was astonished.

Harry grinned. "Yeah! Cool, huh? He said we'd learn that spell in Auror School. I wanted him to teach it to us, but I suppose it's too complex to learn in a short time."

"What's he like? Is he nice?" Neville pressed.

"Yeah, he seems to be," Harry replied. "Neville, we've only got a short time to eat before we have to go back, sorry. We'll tell you more later, OK?"

"Oh, yeah, sure! OK! Sorry!" Neville said, blushing a bit. "I didn't mean to keep you."

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"No, it's OK, really," Harry assured him. "We've just got to rush, that's all."

"OK," the other boy replied, looking relieved.

Harry looked at Ron and said, "It's a beautiful day. Why don't we take our sandwiches outside and enjoy the sunshine while we have the chance?"

"Huh?" Ron said, his mouth crammed with several things at once. "Bwha fub?"

"Just swallow, grab a handful of food and follow me, OK?" Harry said, chuckling at his best mate's dilemma. "Ladies? Would you like to join us?"

"Yes, of course!" Hermione said. She'd been puzzled when Harry suggested he and Ron eat outside, but the look Harry had given Ron had told her a lot. They wanted to talk to the girls but couldn't with other people nearby. "Here, Ron, let me put those in a napkin for you," she said, gathering up things Ron was trying to hold in his hands. Ginny was making a similar bundle for Harry.

Soon the four of them were outside, still nibbling on their lunches as they sat down and leaned against the castle wall, which was warm from the bright sunshine.

"So what's up, Harry?" Hermione urged. "You seemed to want to tell us something."

Harry quickly told her and Ginny about the meeting, the map, everything, with Ron filling in the gaps here and there.

"You yelled at Cabinet members?" Hermione squeaked.

"There were Death Eaters in the Cabinet?" Ginny cried at the same time.

"Yes, to both!" Harry replied. "And I'd do it again! But here's the thing. There's a pattern to the Death Eater movement, too. I can feel it, but I just can't see it!"

"We have the map with us," Ron said, glancing around. They were alone in one end of the courtyard. "Do you want to have a look? Maybe you can see the pattern. We're just seeing spots in front of our eyes now, we've been staring at it for so long."

"Yes, of course, we'd like to look!" Hermione said eagerly. She and Ginny leaned over the map Ron spread on the ground, careful to keep the boys' food away from the parchment. Once Harry explained the meaning of the various spots, the girls just gazed at the map silently.

Hermione was the first to speak, after being lost in thought for several minutes. "These are all Death Eater attacks?"

"Yes. He took the Dementor attack markings off of the map so they wouldn't confuse us," Ron told her.

"There are so many," Ginny breathed, shaking her head in dismay.

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"If we can find a pattern and anticipate where they might hit next," Harry said seriously, "we might be able to prevent more attacks. Can you see anything?" He watched Hermione's and Ginny's faces as they studied the map, then sat back and thought about what they'd seen.

"It would help to know the times of these attacks," Hermione said quietly.

"I can put them back," Harry said, waving his hand over the map.

"How did you do that?" Ron said, aghast. "Whittier took those off!"

"I watched his spell and just reversed it," Harry said casually. "I'll keep watch. You lot study it. I know the markings now quite well. That helped me put them back." His eyes roved around the courtyard watching for anyone approaching them, just glancing at his friends' faces from time to time. "Anything?" he prompted after a while.

"I can see there's something there," Hermione said cautiously, "but I . . . it's difficult."

"Their attacks are much more widely spread than the Dementors," Harry replied, "in part, I believe, because they're Apparating to the places they attack. That's going to make it harder to find the pattern."

Ron was studying Hermione's face. "What do you see, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

She was silent for a long moment, then sighed. "I see a lot of heartache, a lot of sadness . . . and no real pattern."

"You're not wrong," Harry sighed. "I kept trying to find a pattern, but it's just not there, is it?"

"There's something . . ." Ginny said hesitantly.

"What do you see?" Harry prompted. "Did you find the pattern?"

"Not exactly a pattern," she said, running her fingers lightly over the spots on the map. "More of a . . . decrease in activity."

"What do you mean?" Harry said, bending over the map himself.

"See here? They were kidnapping people with green eyes frequently here, but then those kidnappings became spaced out at a regular interval," she said, pointing to various notations. "But here," she said, pointing to the notations of more recent kidnappings, "they've slowed down."

"Damn," Harry said. "I knew I saw a pattern somewhere, but I was going about it all wrong. Well spotted!"

Ginny beamed at him, then said, "I don't know what it means, though."

Harry stared at the notations until spots danced in front of his eyes. "I can't make heads or tails of it," he said finally. "I've been looking at it too long, I think."

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"Me, too," Ron said, sitting back and stretching. "It makes no sense to me."

Hermione pulled out a scrap of parchment and began making notes on it.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked. "What have you found?"

She held up a finger, warning him to leave her alone for a bit. Harry, Ron and Ginny sat quietly, watching Hermione work, her quill flying over the parchment as she made notes and scratched them out, drew lines and diagrams and scratched those out before beginning again. Finally, she sat back, a satisfied smile on her face. "There! That's it, I think."

"What's it?" Ron said, leaning over her shoulder.

"The pattern. They kidnapped green-eyed people at random intervals at first, then started kidnapping them at regular intervals, spaced about two weeks apart. Then there was the big kidnapping that Harry saw in his vision, where they captured seventeen Muggle children. That happened right here," she said, putting her finger on a cluster of yellow spots on the map. "There was another kidnapping two weeks later, and since then, they've been doing them once a month, and then only one or two at a time, not so many people at once the way they used to do." She looked around at her friends. "I don't know what it means, but there's your pattern."

"It means he's perfected his potion and his eyes last a month at a time now," Harry said darkly.

"Oh, you're right! How could I have been so stupid? I should have seen that," Hermione said, so completely engrossed in research that she didn't notice the horrified shudder running through Harry's body.

Harry swallowed the bile at the back of his throat and forced himself to be calm. "That's great, Hermione," he said sincerely. "Thanks a lot. I was hoping the pattern would help us catch them or stop more attacks, but I don't see how we can extrapolate where they'll hit next from this information. It just doesn't work the way the Dementor patterns did."

"Hey, mate, at least we know what the pattern is now," Ron said supportively. "That's something."

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I wonder where he's getting his unicorn blood, since Hagrid's keeping the Forest's unicorns in the paddock? Dumbledore put all kinds of protections there so they couldn't be captured or killed."

"Perhaps he has a European supplier," Hermione suggested. "There are unicorns in France and Austria and the Netherlands."

"Other places as well, most likely," Ron agreed.

"Well, whatever the case, we've done all we can here," Harry said, Vanishing the markings from the map and rolling it up as he got to his feet. "I really appreciate your help," he said to Hermione and Ginny, "and our picnic was fun, too. Thanks." The four friends walked back into the castle, pausing in the corridor where their ways would part.

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"I'm just glad we were able to help," Hermione said sincerely. "So you have to go back to the meeting now?"

"Yeah, we'd better get moving. We've been gone quite a while," Harry said, sliding the map into his pocket. "See you later." He and Ron waved at the girls, then started back toward the headmaster's office. They were walking along talking quietly when Blaise Zabini and his cronies blocked the corridor ahead. Harry and Ron started to walk around them without saying anything, but Zabini had other ideas.

"You think you're so friggin' special," Zabini growled. "Why are you so dolled up? Why weren't you in class, Potter? Why did you get called out of class, Weasley? What's going on?"

"Nothing that concerns you, Zabini," Harry said quietly, watching the Slytherin boys carefully as he tried to move past them. "Budge over."

"No!" Zabini said defiantly. "What are you two up to?"

"What we're 'up to' is giving you and your friends detention if you don't move," Ron said sternly.

"You can't do that!" Zabini snarled.

"As big as I am, and with ginger hair and all, you'd think you might remember me? I'm the one who wears the Head Boy badge, in case you hadn't noticed," Ron said, trying to keep things light, but his tone was mocking despite his best efforts.

"Don't you mock me!" Zabini cried, pulling his wand.

"Put that away!" came a slow, measured voice. "Why are you disturbing my class?" Firenze the Centaur appeared in a nearby doorway, with a forested background showing through the door behind him. Harry hadn't noticed that they were near the Centaur's classroom.

"Freak!" Zabini muttered as he turned away.

"That's a week's detention, Zabini," Ron said sternly. "Firenze, may I give him the detention with you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Weasley," Firenze replied, smiling at Ron and Harry. He turned his strange, bright blue eyes on Zabini and his friends. "It would be my pleasure to deal with this young one. He has not learned proper manners nor respect. We shall work on that during your detentions, Mr. Zabini."

Blaise was furious, his face mottled red and white. He blanched when Firenze leaned close to him and spoke to him very softly indeed.

"You will not be rude to other students again, nor to me, not after I've taught you a few things," Firenze murmured coldly, his face mere inches from Zabini's, his tail lashing furiously. "Now leave!"

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As the Slytherins raced down the hall, Firenze turned amused eyes to Harry and Ron. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I have long wished to teach that one some manners."

"And he needs it!" Ron said with a grin. "Thanks, Firenze."

"Yeah, thanks a lot!" Harry agreed.

"Harry Potter," Firenze said, reaching out and grasping Harry's shoulder in a firm grip, "you are in the midst of great things. I have seen it in the stars."

"What have they told you?" Harry said, hoping the stars spoke more clearly to Firenze than they ever did when he tried to read them himself.

"You are on the cusp. You face great trials, great tragedies, and great triumphs. Do not lose heart, for many marvellous things lie ahead for you." The Centaur released Harry's shoulder and nodded sagely. "It is written in the stars. So it is written. So it shall be."

"Can I just skip over that whole 'trials and tragedies' part?" Harry said with a half-hearted smile.

"There is a saying I have heard among men, Harry Potter. 'That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.'"

"Yes, I've heard that one," Harry said with a sigh.

"And of those who are given great gifts, great things are expected."

"I've heard that one too," Harry agreed.

"They were written about you, Harry Potter," Firenze said seriously.

Harry felt like laughing, but knowing Firenze as he did, he refrained. "Those are ancient sayings, Firenze. Nobody knew about me then."

"Nevertheless, Harry Potter, they were written about you."

"Uh . . . OK. Thanks," Harry said, not knowing what else to say.

"Have a good day, Harry Potter," Firenze said with a smile. "You see? I am learning the manners of humans, so they will be comfortable with me."

"I'm comfortable with you, Firenze," Harry assured him. "You have a good day too." With a wave, he and Ron hurried down the corridor toward Dumbledore's office again.

"That was weird," Ron breathed as they turned a corner.

"Yeah. Those were written about *me*?" Harry said with a nervous chuckle. "Those sayings are really old!"

"Yeah, but think how well they apply to your life, Harry," Ron said seriously.

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"That's enough Divination stuff for now, OK?" Harry said uneasily. He saw Tonks rushing down the hall toward them. "Now what?"

"Oh, Harry! There you are! Hi, Ron!" Tonks said as she ran to them, totally out of breath.

"What's wrong, Tonks?" Harry said, concerned.

"It's a bloody awful mess, is what it is," she growled. She looked around, then pulled the boys to the side of the hall. "Dumbledore sent for me. He asked me to protect you."

"*WHAT?*" Harry said in shock. "From what? Or who? What's going on?"

"The Cabinet. They're fighting like mad up there," she said, obviously worried. "I went to his office when I arrived in case you'd already returned. I couldn't believe how they were behaving."

"Fighting about what? Start at the beginning," Harry urged her. "Did the Aurors capture the Dementors, or did it all go wrong?"

"We caught them, all of them!" she said excitedly. "There may be the odd one still loose out there, but we caught all of the Dementors in each group, Harry. Your pattern thing was brilliant!"

"Wow! That's great! So why is the Cabinet fighting, then?"

"Some of them think you had inside information, and the whole meeting turned really ugly after that," she said with a grimace. "Dumbledore didn't want you coming up there unaware."

"I can take care of myself!" Harry said vehemently. "And what about Dumbledore? Is he OK?"

"He's fine. He's busy doing the diplomatic thing, you know," she said with a shrug.

"Is Ron in trouble too?" Harry said suddenly. Ron had watched this exchange in total silence, his face growing more grim by the moment.

"I don't know," Tonks said honestly.

"I'm the one who came up with the calculations to find where they'd hit next," Ron said darkly. "So I'm in trouble too."

"That's just stupid! We help them get rid of the Dementors and they're *angry* with us?" Harry said, highly offended.

"Nobody ever said politicians were logical," Tonks said wisely. "Now come on. You boys have been gone longer than they expected. They think you took off with the map."

"It's right here, and there's nothing showing on it anyway," Harry said testily. He and Ron took off down the hall, Tonks doing her best to keep up.

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When they arrived at Dumbledore's office, they stepped into a scene of mayhem. Cabinet members were standing up and shouting in each others' faces, some supporting Harry, others vilifying him, and still others arguing about a wide variety of other topics.

"SILENCE!" Madam Bones cried when she saw Harry. "Everyone sit down. I will have order in this meeting or *heads will roll!*"

"Does she mean that literally?" Ron whispered hopefully in Harry's ear, making Harry snigger.

"Did you have something to say, Mr. Weasley?" Madam Bones asked Ron imperiously.

"Erm . . . no," he said meekly.

"I do," Harry said, striding boldly into the centre of the office. "I understand you've captured all the Dementors?" he said to Whittier.

"Yes, we have. You and Mr. Weasley are to be commended on your brilliant work," Whittier said with a genuine smile.

"If that's true, why was everyone yelling when we got here, then?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Erm" Whittier seemed to be at a loss.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, sit down, please," Madam Bones said, gesturing to chairs.

"I'd rather stand, thank you," Harry said grimly as he studied the faces around him. Some were friendly, some admiring, some openly hostile. Ron stood at an angle at his shoulder, Tonks at his back, the three of them all facing out in a protective triangle.

"As you wish. The Ministry would like to thank you young men for your part in our capture of the Dementors," she said with a smile. "Brilliant work, gentlemen, truly."

"Thank you," Harry said, hoping she'd explain what was going on soon.

"Who is that woman, and why is she here?" one of the belligerent Cabinet members demanded, pointing at Tonks.

"I'm Tonks Lupin. I'm an Auror as well as Harry's godmother. I'm here to look after his best interests," Tonks said boldly. The belligerent man subsided somewhat. Whittier grinned at Tonks and she winked back at him.

"Welcome, Mrs. Lupin," Madam Bones said smoothly. "I appreciate your coming." She turned back to Harry. "There was some contention among the Cabinet members about how you came to such conclusions when our experts haven't managed it despite months of concerted effort," she said quietly.

"You lot all saw what happened," Harry said, turning slowly to look at each man in turn. He paid close attention to which ones refused to meet his eyes, and which ones met his eyes defiantly. "Mr. Whittier showed us the map and I saw a pattern in it. Then Ron and I spent a

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long time working out how to project that pattern to anticipate where the Dementors would attack next. You saw us work on it."

"As I've explained several times now," Dumbledore said patiently, "sometimes fresh eyes can catch something that has eluded those who've worked on a project steadily. I believe that's what happened in this case. Harry had no prior knowledge of the Dementors' movements or plans."

Harry's was incensed. "How could you think that I would know about upcoming attacks and not warn people? I've been *fighting* Dementors for years now! What's wrong with you people?"

"It was just too neat, too pat, how quickly you came up with the right information," one man said prissily. Others soon raised similar objections.

"QUIET!" Madam Bones cried after repeated attempts to silence the obstreperous Cabinet members. She glared at the troublemakers one after the other. "Can you prove Harry Potter had prior knowledge of any of this? Can you prove any of your allegations?" She asked each of those who'd objected the same questions, getting no straight answers.

"Mr. Potter accused the Cabinet of pontificating earlier today," Madam Bones said when she'd restored order once more. "He's right. Some of you are spending far too much time trying to prove how powerful you are, rather than working toward the greater good of our people. That's going to stop right now." She got up and stalked slowly around the circle of Cabinet members, stopping in front of three of them. "You're fired," she said in each case.

"You can't do that!" cried a woman whose sharp tongue had caused a great deal of strife.

"I just did," Madam Bones said with satisfaction. "Mr. Whittier, would you take them in that other room and debrief them so they can go home?" Whittier nodded. "Mrs. Lupin, perhaps you'd like to help?"

"Oh, yeah!" Tonks said eagerly, following Whittier to the room where Harry and Ron had worked out the patterns earlier.

Harry and Ron sat down beside Dumbledore. "What's going on?" Harry asked quietly.

"A long-overdue housecleaning," Dumbledore said with satisfaction. "Watch and learn, Harry, watch and learn."

Harry and Ron sat back and watched as Madam Bones spoke with other Cabinet members, then moved over to speak to Percy.

"Mr. Weasley, may I see the minutes for the past hour?" she said, holding out her hand.

Percy gulped, then handed her the minutes with shaking hands.

"I thought so," she muttered as she browsed Percy's notes. "Mr. Weasley, you have not transcribed minutes of the meeting we've had here. You've written only parts of it, and when these parts are read, they paint an entirely unrealistic picture of the meeting and the characters

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of the people involved. This is not the first time you've done such a thing, but it's certainly the most blatant. You portray Mr. Potter, and even your own brother, as devious, lying, paranoid." She sighed in exasperation. "I can't believe I gave you so many chances to reform, and you've simply continued on your wayward path. You're fired, as well, Mr. Weasley. Go and see Mr. Whittier, then return to the Ministry and clear out your desk."

Percy sat with stricken eyes, his mouth gaping open repeatedly like a fish out of water. Ron's eyes were huge, going from his brother's shocked face to Madam Bones' resolute one.

"Now, Mr. Weasley," she snapped. Percy gathered up his blank parchments, ink pots and quills and packed everything away haphazardly, then stumbled toward the room where Whittier was dealing with the other now-unemployed people. Percy looked back over his shoulder at the minister, then glared furiously at his brother and Harry before storming out of the room.

"Now, then," Madam Bones said with a cheerful smile. "We can get some business done!"

"Who will take minutes?" one of the remaining Cabinet members said.

"You will, for now," she said amiably. "Clerks are easy to come by. We'll have a new one by evening."

Harry and Ron looked at each other, knowing how devastated Percy would be to learn he could be replaced so easily. They watched the rest of the proceedings in amazement. Policies Madam Bones had been trying to get ratified for hours suddenly passed with no problem. They didn't make such progress because everyone agreed with her, but because now they could discuss the pros and cons reasonably without people belittling them for their opinions, or filibustering to the point that nothing was accomplished. Other items on the agenda were quickly dealt with, and she soon called a halt to the meeting.

"Erm . . . Madam Bones?" Harry said hesitantly. "Before everyone leaves? We did find one small pattern in the Death Eater attacks."

Everyone sat down and gave Harry their full attention.

"Please, go on, Mr. Potter. I'm sorry we didn't give you the opportunity to speak earlier," Madam Bones apologized.

"You were all a bit busy," Harry said diffidently. "Um . . . we found that the only real pattern in the Death Eaters' attacks is that they are not kidnapping green-eyed people as frequently. The frequency and the number of those kidnapped began decreasing two months ago, and has settled into a pattern of two people kidnapped per month, always Muggles."

"What does this information tell us? Do you know?" Madam Bones said curiously.

"I believe it tells us that Voldemort's potion to replace his eyes lasts for about a month at a time now. After a month, he needs to refresh his potion, so he kidnaps more green-eyed people."

"Why green eyes, Mr. Potter?" an elderly witch asked.

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"I don't really know, but I suspect it's because I have green eyes," he said uncomfortably.

"Why does it matter what colour your eyes are?" the witch said, tilting her head in confusion.

"You know he took some of my blood to create his new body," Harry began. They nodded. "I think he may believe it will make it easier for him to defeat me if he has eyes like mine. It's not really logical, him thinking that, but I don't know what other reason there could be."

"Whatever the reason," Dumbledore said, "he has been concentrating on green-eyed people for months now. The fact that he's not collecting as many eyes as he was means he's stabilized his potion somehow. Well spotted, boys." Both boys returned his approving smile gratefully.

After some discussion, the meeting ended. Whittier released the fired Cabinet members and Percy, all of whom had been Memory Charmed so they would forget any classified information they'd known. The Auror waved to Harry and Ron as he and Tonks escorted the group out of the office and down the spiral staircase.

As the Cabinet members left the office, Madam Bones turned to Dumbledore, Harry and Ron.

"Professor Dumbledore, I cannot thank you enough for hosting this meeting for us," she said warmly. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, again, the Ministry of Magic is most grateful for your assistance in solving the Dementor problem. And Mr. Potter, thank you for helping me sort out the problems in the Cabinet itself. The way our government is set up, the Cabinet stays in place when a new Minister is named, and it can be quite difficult to get them out of their positions. You've done the Ministry, and me, personally, a great service today. It will be a pleasure to find replacements for these positions. There are a lot of qualified candidates. I can't wait to start looking at CVs!" She looked as excited as a youngster looking forward to a birthday party. "Good evening, gentleman," she said with a smile, then left the office.

"That was an interesting day," Dumbledore said with satisfaction. "Well done, both of you."

"Thanks," Harry said. He looked at Ron uneasily. "What's wrong, mate?"

"Mum. She's going to have kittens when she hears," Ron said, his expression grim.

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "He's right. Can we warn Mr. Weasley so he can get to her first?"

"I was just going to suggest we contact Arthur," Dumbledore said. He got out his Famous Wizard card and sent the little photographic Harry off to ask Arthur to call Dumbledore on the Floo Network. Moments later, Arthur's head appeared in the fire.

"Hello, Albus!" Arthur said cheerfully. "How are you today? Oh, hello, Ron, Harry! You boys aren't in trouble, are you?" he teased, not expecting any such problem. He suddenly noticed how serious Ron looked and said, "What's wrong? Is Ginny all right?"

"She's fine," Harry said quickly.

"We wanted to tell you something that happened today, Arthur," Dumbledore said, pulling his chair up close to the fire. "Madam Bones brought the Cabinet here for a meeting. They

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wanted my input and I simply didn't feel like going to London – don't tell them I said that, though," he said with a chuckle. "I wanted Harry to get more experience in high-level meetings like this, and he and Ron were both quite helpful. I'll tell you about that in a moment. I need to talk to you about Percy."

Arthur's face hardened. "What about him?"

"Madam Bones fired him this afternoon, Arthur," Dumbledore said gently. "Percy was quite upset."

"Why did she fire him?"

"He was not taking minutes of the meeting properly. The notes he was taking made the meeting sound quite different to what happened in reality, and made some good people look quite bad. Madam Bones said she'd given him numerous chances and she couldn't afford to give him any more. I'm sorry. His memory of classified matters has been erased, and he's been sent to clear out his desk. I thought you'd want to know so you could be the one to tell Molly," Dumbledore said kindly.

"He was altering the minutes of top-level meetings? He'll never get a job in the government again!" Arthur said, aghast. Dumbledore nodded. Both boys stayed quiet. Arthur collected himself and said, "Tell me what the boys did that was so helpful. It will be good if Molly can hear good news along with the bad."

"The good news is quite good indeed, Arthur," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Harry noticed a pattern in the Dementor attacks, and Ron worked out a formula to project where and when the next attacks would occur. The Aurors used this information to prevent the next round of attacks and captured all the Dementors!"

Arthur was stunned. "Ron? Is this true?" he said, looking at his youngest son earnestly. Ron nodded, his ears turning pink under his father's pleased scrutiny. "Well done, lad! And Harry found the patterns in the first place! Oh, this is wonderful! I'm so proud of both of you! Your mother will be delighted, Ron." He smiled at the boys, then looked back at Dumbledore. "It will be a help to her to hear this news. Thanks for telling me. I'd best be getting home so I can arrive before she hears the news on the wireless. Goodbye!"

"Well, that's all we can do for now," Dumbledore said, getting tiredly to his feet. "You boys should try to get some rest this evening. It's been a stressful day."

"Yes, it has," Harry agreed. "Did you have any idea what you were getting me into?"

"I knew there were problems in the Cabinet. I also knew what Whittier was going to present in the meeting today. His presentation is why I wanted you involved. I knew you'd want to know how things were going. I had no idea you'd see a pattern in the attacks. That was just a lucky accident, I suppose," he said with a smile.

"I suppose," Harry agreed as he and Ron walked to the office door. "Have a nice evening, Professor."

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"And you, as well," Dumbledore said, smiling warmly as the boys stepped across the entry and onto the moving spiral staircase.

Chapter 29 – Death and Destruction

Harry smiled at his headmaster as the staircase began to carry him and Ron down toward the entrance door. Suddenly, his scar flamed with pain and he collapsed, falling hard on the stairs.

"Harry!" Ron cried, reaching out to grab his friend before he tumbled farther down the moving staircase. Ron caught Harry by the arm and hauled back on him as hard as he could, falling backwards onto the stairs himself as he tried to save him. The stairs stopped moving, then reversed, going upward again.

"What happened?" Dumbledore said as he helped Ron pull Harry onto the landing and get him into the office.

"It's his scar," Ron said. Harry was beyond hearing them, moaning in pain as he clutched his scar, writhing on the floor in agony, sweat pouring off his body. "He needs a cold cloth. I'll be right back," Ron said, then ran into the bathroom attached to Harry's room and quickly returned with a cold, damp flannel. He pressed it to Harry's scar as Dumbledore tried to hold the young man still.

"We need to put him to bed," Dumbledore said sadly. "He'll hurt himself on the floor." He started to Levitate Harry, but Ron stopped him.

"No! He hates that! It makes him feel worse," Ron said urgently. "I'll lift him when he stops thrashing around." He put a Cushioning Charm on the floor so Harry would be a bit more comfortable.

"It's apparent you've seen many more of these episodes than I have," Dumbledore said, glancing at the redhead with appreciation. "You know just what to do."

"Yeah, I've had years of practice now," Ron said with a sigh.

Finally, Harry lay quite still, gasping for breath as he pressed his hands tightly against the lightning-shaped mark.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore said quietly.

"Scar. . . ." Harry whispered. His face was stark white, his skin cold and clammy.

"This was a bad one, wasn't it, mate?" Ron said sympathetically. "Are you going to be sick?"

Harry nodded weakly, and Ron pulled Dumbledore away as Harry vomited spectacularly.

Dumbledore Vanished the sick and ran his hand over the boy's forehead. "You're cold. Do you want a blanket?"

Harry nodded, then took the damp cloth Ron was still holding against his scar and wiped his face with it as he tried to sit up. He was shaky, weak, and pale as a ghost.

"Let me help you, mate," Ron said, helping Harry sit up and taking the flannel from him. "D'you want me to carry you?"

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"No, I can walk," Harry said with more confidence than he felt.

Ron helped him get to his feet. "You need to rest." He led Harry to the bed in his room and helped him lie down, covering him gently with a blanket. "Better?"

Harry clutched his scar and curled up in a ball of misery, apparently lost in whatever nightmarish vision he'd had.

"Harry? Have you been doing your Occlumency?" Dumbledore asked with concern. Harry nodded, then groaned, sat up a bit and vomited again. Dumbledore Vanished the sick once more as Ron wiped his friend's face with the flannel. Harry grabbed the cloth again and pressed it against his scar, moaning as he did so.

"What happened?" Dumbledore said seriously. "It must have been something awful to get past your Occlumency."

Harry nodded, then looked up at his headmaster and his friend with anguished eyes. "P. . .p. . .Percy," he muttered.

"Percy?" Ron said in shock. "What about him?"

"Voldemort . . . Percy," Harry said, still in agony. He pressed the flannel against his scar, closing his eyes against the pain. "Percy. He's . . ."

"He's not a Death Eater, is he?" Ron gasped.

Harry shook his head. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could get the nightmare vision out of his head, but he knew he had to relive it so he could tell the others. *I have to tell the others. Yes. I have to tell them now. So just do it already!* Swallowing the bile that threatened to overwhelm him again, Harry took a deep breath and forced his eyes open. He looked at Ron, then Dumbledore. "You have to find the Weasleys and the Grangers right away. Get them to somewhere safe. Straight away."

"Why?" Ron said as Dumbledore straightened up, already preparing to contact people.

"I'll send them to Order Headquarters, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Which Weasleys do we need to find?"

"All of them," Harry said, "to be safe. Start with his parents. And the Grangers, don't forget the Grangers," he added urgently. Dumbledore moved away.

"What happened?" Ron asked urgently. "Are Mum and Dad OK? What's going on?"

"Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said from across the room, "you should contact your sister and Miss Granger and ask them to come up here immediately."

Ron nodded and got out his Famous Wizards Card. "I need you to tell Hermione and Ginny to come to Dumbledore's office as fast as they can," Ron said to the photographic image of Harry. "Try not to scare them."

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"What should I tell them when they ask why they need to come up here?" the little Harry said, curious as ever.

"Tell them Dumbledore wants to see them," Ron said, thinking fast. "Don't scare them. Just get them to come quickly."

"OK!" the picture of Harry said brightly, then flew out of the edge of his frame.

Harry had begun to relax a bit as the pain finally subsided. He pushed himself upright and looked at his headmaster with haunted eyes. "Did you find them?"

"The Weasleys, yes. It will take a bit longer to contact the Grangers. I've sent Order members to their house as well as their office to find them."

"Who did you send?" Harry asked, his eyes suddenly anxious. "Did you send Remus or Tonks?"

"Yes, Tonks is one of those . . ."

"CALL HER BACK! Don't let her go!" Harry said, frantic now. "Percy . . . Percy was tortured by Voldemort. He's been under Imperius for years. Barty Crouch, Jr., cast it first, then when he died, Lucius Malfoy did it, and then this Dorking bloke took over when Malfoy died. Percy just told Voldemort where to find everyone who's important to me and my friends, everyone who isn't safe at Hogwarts," he said, his voice breaking with emotion. "He's going after all the Weasleys, the Grangers and Remus and Tonks! But Remus is here, isn't he?" Dumbledore nodded. "At least he's safe, then. Voldemort's already tried to go after the Dursleys, but the blood protection must still be in place."

"I'll call Tonks in and I'll make sure Remus doesn't go anywhere, either," Dumbledore said, doing his best to calm the boy. "Try to relax, Harry. We'll do everything we can."

"I know, but what if it isn't enough?" he cried, his voice breaking with emotion. "It's not fair, it's just not fair."

"Mr. Weasley, I still have messages to send, and it sounds as if the girls are at the door," Dumbledore said quickly. "Let them in and try to keep them calm. I'll be right back," he said, hurrying into his office.

Ron ran to the door and opened it, his white face shocking the girls. "What's wrong?" Hermione said, terrified by his expression. "Are you all right?"

"Where's Harry?" Ginny demanded urgently, pushing past her brother.

Ron pointed toward Harry's room, unable to speak. Ginny raced through the door to find her boyfriend.

"Ron, what's wrong? Is Harry OK?" Hermione said, trying to get him to focus on her. "Talk to me!"

"Come on," Ron said darkly, taking her hand and leading her to Harry's room.

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"What's wrong with him?" Hermione said, not budging from her spot. She was terrified now. Ron was acting so oddly. Something horrible must have happened to Harry. "Did those Cabinet people do something to him? What happened?"

"No. It's scar pain. He's OK," Ron said, his voice tense. His face was still ghastly white, his hands trembling. "Come on."

They entered the room to find Ginny and Harry with their arms around each other. Ginny's face was confused, but she was doing her best to comfort him.

"You haven't told her yet, have you?" Ron said in an unnatural voice. Harry shook his head. "Go on, then. We're all here."

Harry looked up at Ron uneasily. His best mate was looking at him with fear plain on his face. "Um . . . Percy got fired today," Harry began.

"What?" Ginny said, shocked. "Why?"

"Skip that part, Harry. Tell them the important stuff," Ron insisted.

"That's where it began, though," Harry said uncertainly. He and Ron exchanged a look that seemed to strengthen both of them somehow. "OK. Percy was told to go and clear out his desk at the Ministry, but there were Death Eaters waiting for him as soon as he got off Hogwarts' grounds. I suppose Whittier and Tonks turned the people they were escorting loose as soon as they got off the grounds so they could Apparate, since their memories of classified things had been erased. At any rate, Percy was captured and taken to Voldemort, who tortured him. He told Voldemort where to find all the people who are important to me or my friends. Your families are in danger, as are Remus and Tonks. Dumbledore is sending them to Order Headquarters to protect them. That's the gist of it." He shuddered, seeing horrors they couldn't even imagine.

"Our families?" Ginny breathed. "Mum and Dad?" Harry nodded.

"My parents too?" Hermione said in a small voice. Her legs began to wobble and she just barely made it to a nearby chair before they gave out on her.

Harry looked at her for a long moment and nodded, then said, "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Ginny said stoutly.

"No, it isn't," Hermione agreed sadly. "So they're at Grimmauld Place?" she said a bit more hopefully.

"He's trying to get them there, yes," Harry agreed.

"*TRYING?*" she squeaked.

"Since they're Muggles, it's harder to contact them," Harry explained.

Dumbledore came into the room. "Feeling better, Harry?"

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"A bit," he said in a low voice. "Did you find everyone?"

"All the Weasleys have been located and are on their way to headquarters. I've called Tonks back from the field, and she should be at headquarters soon. She's near the twins' shop, so she's going to come in with them." He turned sad eyes to Hermione. "Your parents are not at home nor at their office. Do you have any idea where they would be?"

Hermione paled. She gulped, trying to force her brain to work. "Um . . ." She looked at her watch. "It's time for them to go home. They'll be in their car. They might be stuck in traffic somewhere, or perhaps they took the Tube today if there are a lot of roadworks in London. They hate sitting in traffic queues."

"Ah, good, that's helpful!" Dumbledore said brightly, then disappeared into his office again.

"What happened to Percy?" Ginny asked suddenly. "You said Voldemort was torturing him."

"Erm . . . you don't want to know, baby," Harry said sadly, tenderly tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Is he . . . dead?" she asked in a small voice.

"No. Not dead," Harry said, his voice and expression bleak.

"Then what? Tell us, mate," Ron insisted.

Harry sighed. "Percy put up quite a struggle. He didn't want to give Voldemort any information. He fought the Cruciatus Curse as hard as he could. He pissed off Voldemort by refusing to tell for so long, so when he finally got the information he wanted, he . . ." Harry shook his head, unable to go on.

"He *what*?" Ron cried.

Harry turned tormented eyes up to his best mate. "He . . . he tortured him into insanity. He's like the Longbottoms now. I don't know if Voldemort will leave him that way or kill him. He was still thinking about it when I managed to pull out of the vision."

His friends gasped in horror and sat wide-eyed and trembling for a long time. A single fat tear slid down Hermione's face. Ginny's face was so pale, her freckles stood out like beacons against its whiteness. Her dark eyes glistened with unshed tears. Ron stood by Hermione's chair, his hand on her shoulder, too caught up in his own emotions to be able to comfort her more.

Dumbledore came striding into the room again. "I've made a Portkey to take you to headquarters," he said, holding out a shabby old carpet slipper.

"Have you found my parents yet?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Not yet," Dumbledore replied. "We're doing everything we can, Miss Granger, I promise you."

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"Why couldn't they have had protections like Harry's relatives?" she demanded harshly.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore began, but then thought better of it. "Nothing I say will comfort you right now. Go to headquarters and wait for me there. Everyone should be there soon."

"Where's Remus?" Harry said suddenly.

"On his way up here. He'll go with you via this Portkey," Dumbledore replied.

Harry relaxed the tiniest bit. At least his godfather would be safe, rather than outside somewhere looking for his wife. And the Weasleys, except for poor Percy. But what about the Grangers?

"Where's Tonks?" Harry said.

"She and the twins should be at headquarters by now," Dumbledore assured him. "Ah, I hear the staircase. That will be Remus." He left to greet the other man.

"What's going on?" Remus asked, looking quite confused.

"Harry will tell you when you get there," Dumbledore said, holding out the carpet slipper. "This is your Portkey. Tonks should be there waiting for you. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Remus looked anxious and confused, but took the Portkey and held it out for the others to touch.

"Three, two, one," Dumbledore said, and suddenly Harry, Remus, Ginny, Hermione and Ron all felt the tug behind their navels as the Portkey activated, taking them to Harry's home and Order headquarters. They landed in the hall near the front door. Ron stumbled and knocked Ginny into Harry. Remus helped Hermione stay upright.

"Ron! Ginny!" Molly Weasley cried. "Are you all right? When Albus told us to come here, he said it was some kind of emergency."

"Are Bill, Charlie and the twins here?" Ron asked anxiously, looking around.

"The twins aren't here yet. What's going on?" Arthur said, hugging his daughter, who had burst into tears at the sight of her parents. "Ginny? What's wrong?"

"Where are the twins?" Ron asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Arthur said. "Albus said he'd contacted all of us. That's the last I heard."

"We need to go find them!" Ron said, turning toward the door.

"No, we don't," Harry said grimly as he grabbed Ron's arm.

"Give over, Harry! I'm going to find them!" Ron insisted, trying to get away from Harry's restraining hand.

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"No!" Harry persisted. "They'll be here. Dumbledore said they were on the way."

"Would someone please tell us what's going on?" Molly said in frustration. Bill and Charlie stood behind her, staring anxiously at the newcomers.

"Yeah, OK. We need to sit down," Harry said with a sigh once he saw Ron relax a bit. "Come on." He led them into the living room and began telling them what had happened.

There was a long silence when he'd finished, punctuated only by Ginny's and Hermione's soft crying. Molly was too much in shock to respond for a long time. Finally, she spoke. "And . . . and Percy. . ."

"Was as brave as anyone I've seen," Harry told her sincerely. "He fought so hard to resist Voldemort and protect everyone." His voice broke and he dropped his face into his hands, unable to look at all of those grieving redheads in the eye any longer.

"Where the devil are Fred and George?" Arthur worried as he tried to comfort his wife. "They should be here by now."

"So should Tonks," Remus said darkly. "Albus said they were together. I can't stand this." He got to his feet, but Harry rushed to stand between him and the door.

"Dumbledore said to stay here. They're on the way," he said adamantly.

"They should be here now!" Molly sobbed. "It's bad enough about P-P-Percy – we can't lose the twins too!" She simply couldn't bring herself to say more about what had happened to her third son. She wrung her hands in despair, then began tearing at her hair, frantic that she couldn't help her children.

"Nobody said we're losing the twins," Arthur said, trying to calm her. He held his wife closely while exchanging worried looks with Bill and Charlie.

The door opened and Tonks came in, looking tired, worn and dishevelled, her robes torn and a bit bloody.

Remus raced to her and wrapped her in his arms, holding her close and burying his face in her neck. "There you are! I was so worried!" When he heard her groan, he stood back from her and looked at her over carefully, the state of her clothes finally registering in his mind. "What happened? Where are you hurt? Come and sit down. Do you need to go to St. Mungo's?"

"I'm fine, Remus, really," Tonks said wearily. "Harry, love, I could do with some of your healing touch." She opened her robes, pulled up her shirt and showed serious spell burns on her rib cage. Her arms were burned as well.

"Of course!" Harry said, already starting to work on her. "What happened?"

"Where are the twins?" Molly cried.

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Tonks sighed and relaxed as Harry magic began to ease her pain. "Those hands should be reproduced and sold on the open market. You'd have more money than Gringotts. That's wonderful, Harry."

She opened her eyes and looked at Arthur and Molly. "I went to bring the twins in. I'd just had orders to look for the Grangers when Dumbledore told me to come to headquarters right away. I told him I was in Diagon Alley and he told me to go and make certain the twins actually came here with no mucking about on the way. So I went to their shop. They were shutting things down before leaving. I helped them close up the shop and we were about to Apparate when we were attacked."

"How are my boys?" Molly asked, wringing her hands anxiously. "They're not hurt, are they?"

"George is in St. Mungo's with some serious spell damage," Tonks replied sadly. "Fred won't leave him. That's why they aren't here. Fred's guarding him, and I got a couple of Aurors to stand guard, as well. I made certain that Healers Pomfrey and Bradford were the ones working on George."

"Is he . . . will he . . .?" Molly couldn't bring herself to finish her question.

Tonks leaned forward and clasped the other woman's hands comfortingly. "It's bad, Molly, I won't lie to you. But he's getting the best care possible."

"I'm going to St. Mungo's," Molly said, standing up determinedly.

"If you try to leave here, I'll have to hex you," Tonks said seriously, her wand instantly in her hand, "and I'm too tired to fight. Please, Molly, stay here with the rest of your family."

"The . . . rest . . . of my family," Molly said, looking at the wide-eyed, heartbroken faces around her one by one.

"They need you, Molly," Remus said. "Don't risk yourself by going there."

"My son needs me!" Molly cried vehemently.

"So do these sons and your daughter!" Remus insisted.

"Molly," Arthur said, his heart breaking. "Please. We're all hurting. Let's stay together. Fred will send word as soon as he knows something, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, he promised he would," Tonks said, relaxing under Harry's healing hands again. "Please calm yourself, Molly. I'm so very sorry." As her head fell back against the sofa cushions, her eyelashes sparkled with tears. She sighed heavily, forcibly controlling herself. "I did the best I could to protect them. They both fought so well, but we were badly outnumbered at first. Other Aurors and Order members came to help. They captured or killed most of those who attacked us, but some of them got away. It turned into a major battle before it was over. George wasn't the only casualty."

"Who else?" Harry asked quietly.

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"Ben Whittier – the Auror from your meeting today. After we delivered the Cabinet members to the Ministry, he and I had a pint at the Leaky Cauldron. I never had a chance to tell you boys how brilliant you were working out that way to stop the Dementors."

"Huh?" Bill said. "What's she talking about?"

"We have a lot to tell you," Ron said. "Later."

"Did Whittier die?" Harry asked sadly.

"No, thank goodness. He's badly injured though. He's in St. Mungo's too, along with a couple of others who aren't as seriously injured as he is. That's why there were so many Aurors available to protect George. When one of our own goes down, we all gather round to do what we can to help. George is as safe as he can be with so many Aurors and Order members around him."

As all Tonks had said sunk in, Ginny moved from Harry's side to stand behind her mother with her arms around Molly's waist, her head leaning on Molly's back, trying to comfort her and draw comfort from her at the same time. Ron, Bill and Charlie looked at each other in shock. They'd gone from six brothers to five, perhaps four, in the space of a couple of hours. Hermione stayed in Ron's arms, trying to comfort him, but scared to death for her own parents, as well.

Arthur held Molly closely, looking at his children one after the other, loving each of them the same, loving each of them differently, loving each of them more than life itself. Three sons missing from the family circle. One son as good as dead. One son seriously injured. The third son would probably shatter if he lost his twin. The twins were so close, they seemed to share a brain. How would Fred survive without George? How would any of them go on without those two lively, bright spirits spreading joy and mayhem wherever they went? Arthur smiled through his tears. Nothing ever kept the twins down for long. He'd never known funnier, more cheerful people. What were they going to do if George . . .? He couldn't bear to think about it. He sighed heavily and rested his cheek on Molly's bright hair, lifting one hand from his wife's back to cup his daughter's head in the palm of his hand. Such a rowdy, happy, tumultuous, loving family he had. And now it was damaged. How could he have been angry with Percy for so long? How could he have not seen the Imperius Curse on his son? He sighed again, shaking his head. How was he going to get past this horrible evening?

Harry worked on Tonks for a long time, getting her to turn over so he could take care of the injuries on her back as well. When he came back to her front side and sensed inside her looking for any internal damage he might have missed, he hesitated, then concentrated on what he'd found. He wasn't certain at first . . . then he was. He glanced at her and saw she was looking at him oddly.

"Did you find something serious?" she asked in concern.

"You're fine," he said, sitting back and pulling her shirt back down. "You might want to see a healer to be certain, but I think you'll do."

"Thanks, ducks," she said with a sad smile. She cupped his cheek with her hand, her thumb stroking the smooth surface tenderly. "You're the best godson ever. I think I'll keep you."

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Harry smiled a bit, then moved away from her so Remus could sit with her. He found an empty chair and dropped into it like a stone. He sighed, then sat with his face in his hands, thinking about the happy spirit that was George Weasley. George and Fred were bright spots in Harry's life, good friends, like brothers to him. They were Ginny's favourite brothers. Truth be told, they were probably everyone's favourite Weasleys. He groaned a bit, rubbing his scar surreptitiously as it prickled again. No visions this time, thank goodness, but Voldemort was up to something evil, he knew that much. Harry went back to his dark thoughts. How could Fred go on without his twin? The world would be a much darker place with one of them gone. If George died . . . if George died the heart would go out of Fred, Harry was sure of it. And a bright light would go out of the lives of everyone who knew him.

Some time later, Hermione cleared her throat and wiped her eyes. "Did you . . . did you hear anything about my parents, Tonks?" she asked hopefully.

"No, love, I didn't. I'm sorry. That's where I was going when Dumbledore caught me and told me to come here – and then he told me to check on the twins first. The rest you know." The room quieted again, with only quiet sobs and sniffles to break the stillness.

Dobby and Winky had watched the entire scene from a spot by the wall. They had planned to offer refreshments to their master's guests, but when they sensed all the heartache in the room, they didn't know what to do. Dobby pulled on his ears anxiously while Winky wrung her hands.

Harry rubbed his face roughly with his hands and settled his glasses back on his nose properly as he looked up. He saw the uneasy house-elves hovering nervously by the wall. "Hi, Dobby, Winky. How are you?" he said kindly.

"Dobby is most distressed by all this," he said, gesturing to the grieving people scattered around the room. "What can Dobby and Winky do to help?"

Harry took a deep breath and sat up a bit straighter. "I'm sure we'd all like some tea, Dobby. Maybe something to eat, too."

"I don't think I'll ever be hungry again," Ginny said, her voice hollow.

"It won't hurt to have some food ready in case anyone gets hungry," Harry said, moving behind her and rubbing her back tenderly. She turned to him and held on tightly.

"Dobby will make tea and sandwiches and find some butterbeer as well," the elf said as he and Winky left the room.

"How long has it been?" Molly said suddenly. "We should have heard something by now! Albus should have –"

The doorbell rang and Dobby popped to the foyer to answer the door. He opened it and bowed to Dumbledore when he entered. "Hello, Dobby," he said kindly. He looked up at the room full of grieving people. "I'm so sorry I'm late," he murmured, looking thoroughly done in.

Everyone started asking him questions at once. Harry was the only one who remained silent, watching his mentor carefully. He could tell Dumbledore had some very bad news to share,

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and he suspected he knew what the news was – but who had died? Harry braced himself for whatever was coming.

"Please, please! Calm yourselves," Dumbledore pleaded. "I know you're going through a terrible time, but I'll answer all your questions as soon as I can."

"Come sit down, Professor," Harry offered kindly. "You look tired."

"I am," Dumbledore said, sitting heavily in the armchair Harry had offered. He looked around at all the anxious faces. "Fred is fine. George is holding on. The healers are hopeful he'll make a full recovery, but he's not out of the woods yet."

"Did you see him?" Molly asked nervously.

"Yes, I just came from there, actually," he said, stretching his legs out on the ottoman Harry had solicitously pushed near his feet.

"What's wrong with him?" Arthur said.

"Spell burns, some broken bones, some internal damage, a lot of blood loss," Dumbledore said quietly. "They're healing him as quickly as they can."

"Who attacked them?" Bill asked.

"A band of Death Eaters who had been sent to capture or kill your brothers," Dumbledore replied. "Please, I have a great deal to tell you. Give me a moment to gather my thoughts and I'll explain everything."

"Professor—" Hermione began fearfully.

"I will tell all of you everything I know. Please give me a moment," he said patiently. "Harry, could I have some tea?"

"Yes, Professor. Dobby's bringing some now," Harry replied.

"Thank you," Dumbledore said. He pushed up his half-moon spectacles and rubbed his eyes tiredly. "All right. Everyone get some tea, sit down and drink it. And then I'll tell you everything."

"Every single thing," Molly insisted.

"Every single thing," Dumbledore promised.

An uneasy peace reigned as they all forced some tea and at least part of a scone or sandwich down their throats while they waited impatiently for Dumbledore to speak. Finally, the elderly wizard seemed to be recovered enough to tell them what was going on in the outside world.

"Thank you for giving me a little time to rest. It's been a very trying day, and this evening has just . . . well, you don't want to hear that. All right. Fred is fine, Molly. He had a few spell burns and those have been healed already. He is perfectly well. George, as I told you, has

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more injuries, but he's young and strong and a fighter. The healers were optimistic about his chances. Percy . . . we haven't found Percy yet. Harry, did you tell them . . .?"

"I told them everything I knew," Harry replied.

"Then you know everything I do. I have people out looking for him, as does the Ministry. As soon as he's found, he'll be taken to St. Mungo's for treatment."

"Harry said Percy was very b-b-brave," Molly said, her voice breaking.

"Yes, I believe he was," Dumbledore said as comfortingly as he could. "I am sorry we didn't recognize that he was under the Imperius Curse. We might have . . . well, there's no point in worrying about that now, is there? I'm so sorry."

Arthur and Molly nodded. What else could they do? Nobody could change what had happened to their boy. It was just a relief to know he had been brave to the end, and that he hadn't been attracted to the Dark side but had been forced to it. They drew what comfort they could from that knowledge.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore said gravely, turning to Hermione. "I'm afraid I have rather bad news for you."

Ron tightened his grip on her shoulders. "What is it?" he said gruffly, hoping his strength would help her.

Dumbledore glanced up at Ron and smiled wanly at him. He was glad Hermione had someone to help her through what she was about to face. He gazed at Hermione with heartfelt sympathy in his eyes. "Your parents were on a train," he said gently. "The Death Eaters caused a derailment, resulting in a terrible crash. Hundreds of Muggles were killed. I'm afraid your parents are among them."

"You're . . . you're afraid they are? Are you sure or not?" Hermione said, grasping at any hope she could find.

"I'm sure. I am so very sorry," he said sadly.

"My . . . my parents . . . are . . . *d-dead*?" she said in a small voice. "Both of them?" Ron moaned and wrapped her up in his arms. She shivered, unable to cry for the moment.

Harry had moved behind her when his mentor had begun speaking to her. Now he stood rubbing her back gently, tears streaming down his face. His best friend was an orphan too. His heart ached for her. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

Hermione whirled out of Ron's arms and faced her headmaster, her face furious. "How can this be? Harry gave you plenty of warning! How could this happen?"

"They're Muggles, Miss Granger. We don't have the quick ways of communicating with them the way we do with wizards," Dumbledore explained, his hands spread wide in a helpless gesture.

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"*DID YOU EVER HEAR OF A TELEPHONE?*" she shrieked.

"I called them on the phone as soon as I got word to look for them," Tonks said miserably. "They'd already left the office. I tried to reach them on their mobiles, but they were already on the train, and there are tunnels between their office and their home. They must have been in the tunnels when I called. I even tried sending them Adferos, but they may not have been able to leave the train once they got the message – and that's if they understood it and believed it at all."

"Other Aurors went to the stations between their office and their house to try to reach them, but they got there too late," Dumbledore added sadly. "I'm so sorry. We did our best. Sometimes it just isn't enough."

Hermione gasped, gulping back a sob, then ran out of the room and up the stairs. They heard her slam the door to her room. Ron glanced around the room then slowly, heavily, trudged after her.

"I have more news for you Weasleys, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said as Ron started up the stairs. Ron paused partway up the stairs to listen.

"What else could there be?" Molly said hysterically.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "The Burrow has been levelled."

"*What?*" Molly cried. "It's not enough for that monster to . . . to . . . but . . . our *home*? How could they get past our wards? No, it's impossible. It can't be true."

"Alas – it is true," Dumbledore said sadly. "Even the best wards can be breached with the proper information and enough power. Voldemort himself did it."

"Information?" Molly breathed uncertainly. Her shoulders drooped suddenly. "Percy."

Silence reigned for several long moments. "What will we do?" Molly said tearfully.

"The house can be rebuilt, Molly," Arthur said in as calm a voice as possible. "We'll manage."

"I can't take any more, I just can't!" Molly cried. "Please tell me there's no more bad news, Albus!"

"There's no more bad news, Molly. That's everything," Dumbledore said. He looked exhausted both physically and emotionally.

"You're welcome to stay here while your house is being rebuilt," Harry offered. "There's plenty of room."

"Thank you, Harry," Arthur replied as he comforted his wife. "You're very kind. We may take you up on that."

Harry nodded, then glanced at the stairs, where Ron still stood motionless. He watched his best mate sigh, then trudge upstairs as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. Harry

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heard Hermione's door open and close again as Ron went in to comfort his girlfriend in her awful loss.

Harry couldn't remember a worse feeling. He'd known what was happening. He'd warned everyone as well as possible, yet the Grangers were dead. George was in bad shape. Percy was . . . Percy was . . . Harry didn't want to think about Percy.

Ginny was unable to decide if Harry or her mother could comfort her more, or if she needed to console Harry, or if her mother needed her the most. It was all so confusing. So she went back and forth, holding her mother for a while, then sinking into Harry's arms gratefully again, soaking up whatever consolation he could give her and trying to give him some in return.

When Ginny moved back to her mother's arms, Harry sat next to Dumbledore, turning heartbroken eyes to his beloved mentor. "Did I cause this by what I did at the meeting today?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Madam Bones would have cleared out the people she didn't want eventually. You just helped her get started."

"Is Madam Bones safe? Or has he sent people after her as well?" Harry asked, suddenly worried about the minister.

"She's safe. I warned her as soon as I'd sent people to find the Weasleys and Grangers. She's staying inside the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in a room that's as protected as Hogwarts is. They keep witnesses there who might be in danger if they weren't in protective custody."

"She's put herself in protective custody?"

"It's the safest place for her other than Hogwarts or here," Dumbledore said, "and I'm not willing to expose headquarters even to Madam Bones. I trust her, but still . . . it's best to be careful about who we tell about this place."

"I understand," Harry said, wishing he truly did understand all that was going on.

Dobby and Winky served tea again, carrying trays overloaded with a wide variety of food, trying to tempt everyone's stomachs. Very little of what they were passing around was taken. They finally set the trays on a table by the wall and stood silently waiting to be needed.

"We should check on Hermione," Harry said, standing and holding his hand out to Ginny, who'd gone back to sitting with him.

"Do you think so?" she said uncertainly, glancing at her grieving mother.

"I'll go. You stay with your mum," Harry said, understanding her reluctance. "She needs you."

"Oh, poor Hermione," Molly said suddenly. "I didn't even think . . ."

"No one expects you to think about anything for a while, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said kindly. "You just rest. I'll go and see how she's doing."

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Harry walked slowly up the stairs, making a decent amount of noise in case Ron was comforting Hermione in an, erm, intimate way. Harry thought about that for a moment. What could possibly be more comforting than being loved by the one who loves you, being reminded that you're alive, that life goes on? He knew it wouldn't ease her heartache for long, but if it gave her even a moment's peace. . . . He hoped Ron had thought of it.

When he reached the girls' bedroom door, he stopped and sighed heavily before knocking. He didn't really want to interrupt them, but he did want to see how she was. What was the right thing to do? Then he heard Ron talking and relaxed. He knocked and waited for his best mate's rumbling, "Yes?" before slowly opening the door.

"It's me," Harry said as he poked his head around the door. "May I come in?"

"Yeah, sure," Ron said quietly. He and Hermione were sitting on her bed, Hermione's head in his lap, her face blotchy and tear-stained. Ron was stroking her curls and rubbing her shoulder in an effort to comfort her. She sniffled from time to time but didn't seem to notice Harry was there.

"How is she?" Harry asked as he sat in a chair near the bed.

"How do you think she is?" Ron said bitterly.

"I'm sorry, mate, I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't. It isn't your fault. I'm sorry," Ron said, disgusted with himself. "I feel as if I've been trampled by a herd of hippogriffs. I'm sore everywhere. I can't . . . I don't" He stopped and swallowed hard.

"I know," Harry murmured.

"No, you don't!" Ron hissed. "You've never lost a brother, and I might lose two!" His voice broke and he sniffed hard, trying to staunch the flow of tears that trembled in his lashes. "And the Burrow. . . ." He shook his head, unable to believe all that had happened in such a short time.

"You and your brothers are as close to brothers as I've ever had, Ron," Harry said simply. "I love your family. I wish I could do something—"

"Well, you *can't*!" Ron snapped, but then was immediately repentant. "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry. I don't know what's wrong with me. You did what you could. If you hadn't warned us, there might be more of us dead." He lifted disconsolate eyes to Harry's and just gazed at his best friend. "I don't think any of us thanked you for the warning. I'm sorry for that. Thank you."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said dismissively. "If—"

"Harry? Don't. You told us what happened as soon as you could. I know that. I was there, remember? Don't blame yourself, mate."

Harry swallowed hard. Ron's words were a balm on his soul. Harry had been racking his brain trying to think how he could help, how he could have warned them faster, what else could

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have been done, but he kept coming up with no answers. Ron didn't blame him. Ron appreciated what Harry had tried to do, and his warning. "Thanks," he said simply, not knowing what else to say.

The three of them sat like that for a long time, Hermione finally sleeping fitfully, Ron holding her in a loving embrace, Harry sitting staunchly by their sides. Finally, someone knocked softly on the door and Ginny came in. She walked past Harry and leaned over to look at Hermione's sleeping face, then crawled into Harry's lap and curled up there like a cat. As he gently stroked her hair and rubbed her back, she began to relax a bit under his calming touch.

"How are things downstairs?" Ron asked after a while.

"Quieter," Ginny said. "How's she doing?"

"She's been asleep for a while now," Ron said.

Ginny turned a bit so she could look up at Harry, still curled cat-like in his arms. "How are you?"

"I'll do," he said. "And you?"

"I'll do."

"Any news?" Harry asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"No."

Hours later, Mad-Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived, looking tired and worn. When Harry heard the front door open, he got up and gently put the sleeping Ginny in her bed. He and Ron exchanged an understanding look, and then Harry tiptoed downstairs to find out what was going on.

"Any news?" Dumbledore asked when he saw the two Aurors. The Weasleys had all been so disconsolate, he'd been afraid to leave them for fear they'd try to go to the hospital and endanger themselves as well as the Aurors who were trying to protect George and Fred.

"George is doing a bit better," Mad-Eye said gruffly. "That's a tough kid. He's made of good stuff, he is. He took spells that would have killed a lesser man."

"Alastor," Dumbledore warned, but Molly seized on the first thing Moody had said.

"He's better? Really? Are you sure?"

"Saw him myself," Mad-Eye said, "and not just with the shifty," he added, referring to his magical eye.

"He's got some colour now, and he's breathing better. The healers are pleased with his progress," Kingsley added.

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"Thank heaven!" Molly said, and began a new bout of crying. "Oh, I'm giving myself such a headache!"

"We brought some potions we thought you might need," Kingsley said. "Dreamless Sleep Potion, a Calming Draught, headache potions, the Draught of Peace. With everything you lot have been through, we thought you might need some of these."

"Thank you, Kingsley," Dumbledore said with heartfelt gratitude. "I'm sure they will be much appreciated."

"How's the Granger girl?" Mad-Eye asked. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs with Harry, Ron and Ginny," Bill said. "Do you need to tell her something?"

"We got her parents' bodies out of the wreckage. They died from the crash, not from any spells. They didn't suffer. I thought she'd want to know."

"I think she will appreciate knowing that, Alastor," Dumbledore said quietly. "Perhaps not just yet, but when she's ready."

"They've been taken to a Muggle funeral home near the crash," Kingsley said. "She will need to claim the bodies so they can be buried. We identified them, but they require a signature from a family member to release them."

"Does she have any other family?" Molly asked suddenly. "I've never heard her say."

"No, she only had her parents," Dumbledore said sadly.

"Damn that cursed man anyway," Molly said vehemently. "First he kills my brothers, then he goes after my sons, and now Hermione has no family!" She sniffled hard, then growled, "She *will* have family. Our family. We'll make sure she's taken care of."

"That's very kind of you, Molly," Dumbledore said, patting her hands gently. "I'm sure she will appreciate it."

Everyone was quiet for a while. Harry, who'd stopped on the stairs to listen, came the rest of the way downstairs silently, watching the scene in the living room. Mad-Eye and Kingsley helped themselves to food and tea. Tonks got up and wandered into the kitchen. Harry followed her.

"Can I help you find something?" Harry said when he found her poking through cabinets.

"I was looking to see if we had any firewhiskey or brandy here," she said. "Molly could use it. So could I, for that matter."

"Erm . . . Tonks, I need to talk to you," he said hesitantly.

"What's up, luv?" she said, turning to look at him.

"Would you mind sitting down?" he invited, pulling out a chair for her.

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"You did find something inside me," she said, her eyes wide and frightened. "I knew something was wrong. I could see it in your eyes. What is it? Do I have a tumour or something?"

"Yes, I found something, but it isn't a tumour," he said, taking her hand in his. "I don't know how to say this. Erm . . . I think . . . I think you're pregnant."

"*What?* Don't tease me that way, Harry!" she said with a nervous laugh. "I can't be! I take my potion every January . . ." Her voice trailed off. "Oh no. We were on our honeymoon until school started again, and then I was busy putting the house together in Hogsmeade . . ." She gasped. "I forgot! I forgot my potion!"

"So it's likely you are pregnant, then?" Harry said. "I mean, I've never worked on a woman who was pregnant, so I wasn't sure."

"What did you find? Tell me what made you think. . .?"

"I found a second heartbeat. I found a small, moving body inside yours. Little arms and legs flapping around a bit, I suppose," he said with a tender smile. "And its magic pushed back against mine."

"What? What do you mean, its magic pushed back?"

"When I look for internal injuries, I send my magic into the person's body," he began.

"Yeah, I felt that," she said, frowning as she concentrated on what he was saying.

"I've never had my magic pushed against before. And I did find a little heartbeat, a very fast one. I wasn't certain what it was at first, and then it moved a bit and I knew it wasn't part of you – it wasn't a tumour or something wrong with a blood vessel, for instance. It's a baby." He smiled again, his eyes filled with wonder as he remembered sensing the small life within her.

"Oh, my," she gasped. She touched her abdomen. "*A baby?* Bloody hell, I was in a *battle* today! What if a spell injured it?"

"I think it's fine, but you do need to see a real healer to find out for certain."

"What's going on?" Remus said as he entered the kitchen. He started when he saw his wife's pale, shocked face. "Tonks, are you all right?"

"I'm . . . I'm . . ." she stammered. She took a deep breath and blew it out, then stood up and wrapped her arms around her husband. "Erm . . . remember that talk we had about starting a family?"

Remus looked confused as he slid his arms around her slim waist. "Yes. Why?"

"It's started a bit earlier than we planned," she said, looking into his eyes hopefully.

"What? What do you mean?"

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"When Harry examined me . . . he, um, found an extra heartbeat. He thinks I'm pregnant."

Remus looked from Tonks to Harry, then back at Tonks. "Harry only knows about injuries. He doesn't know anything about pregnancies." He turned to his godson. "Do you?"

"Nope. But I know when something isn't normal inside someone's body. She has a small – let's say 'object' – with its own heartbeat, moving on its own, and pushing magic back at me when I was sending magic through her to examine her. If that's not a baby, what is it?" Harry reasoned.

Remus stood silently, looking stunned, as he processed all this information.

Tonks began to look frightened. "If you don't want it," she began uneasily.

"Not want it? Your baby? Our baby? Are you daft?" Remus said, his face glowing as realization finally sank in. "We're pregnant? How did it happen?"

Harry snorted. "If I have to give you the little Remus talk again," he teased.

Remus laughed and blushed as he said, "No, that part I understand."

"I was so busy getting the house fixed up after our honeymoon, I forgot my potion," Tonks admitted. "I'm hopeless at remembering things, you know that."

"A baby!" Remus said, grinning at her. He leaned down and kissed her seriously, then held her in a tight embrace. "On this horrible day, what an absolutely wonderful thing to hear. I love you, Tonks. I can't wait to see our baby. We need to get you to a healer right away, to make sure everything's OK!"

"Harry says the baby seems fine, no spell damage. All the spells hit me higher," Tonks assured him. "We can wait until this crisis is over to see a healer."

"How are you feeling?" Remus said, suddenly solicitous. "Sit down, you should rest."

Tonks giggled. "If you're going to coddle me like this, I'll get pregnant every year!"

"That would be fine with me," Remus said tenderly.

"What's going on in here?" Molly said plaintively as she entered the kitchen. "I heard laughter."

"Tonks is pregnant!" Remus said, his face split in an ear-to-ear grin. "Here, Tonks, Molly knows everything about being pregnant. She can help you until you can see a healer."

"I'm fine, Remus!" Tonks insisted, laughing at his excitement.

"Pregnant? When did this happen?" Molly said, sitting at the table with Harry and Tonks, trying to be supportive despite her grief.

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"Harry found the baby when he was examining me this evening," Tonks said with a fond smile at the young man.

"How lovely for you," Molly said, starting to smile, but then bursting into tears. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

"No, we're sorry!" Tonks said, rising and putting her arms around the older woman. "Everyone's going through so much right now . . . when Harry told me the news, it was such a shock, I laughed about it. Remus did too, once he believed us. We meant no disrespect."

"Oh, I know that," Molly said, waving off Tonks's apology. "I'm just . . . I was pregnant six times, you know," she said wistfully. Everyone nodded. "There's nothing like it. You can feel that precious child growing beneath your heart and you love it long before it's born. You can tell a lot about its personality before it's born. Fred and George were so rowdy – so was Ginny, for that matter. Ron was quiet, but had his moments. Charlie was very active. Bill was quieter. Percy gave me the worst indigestion," she said with a chuckle, then burst into tears. "Oh, my poor Percy!" she sobbed.

"I came in here looking for firewhiskey or brandy," Tonks said with determination, starting to get to her feet.

"Oh no, you don't," Remus chided her, pushing her back into her chair. "No alcohol for you. You're pregnant!"

"It isn't for me, it's for Molly!" Tonks retorted.

"I've had a Draught of Peace and two Cheering Charms," Molly said. "I shouldn't have anything else for a while. But thank you." She sniffled and tried to pull herself together. "Have you been feeling quite well? Or have you been sick in the mornings?"

"I've been a bit queasy some mornings, yeah," Tonks said, sitting down and gazing into the older woman's eyes. "I thought I was just tired. Bloody nuisance."

"Put some crispbread or cheese biscuits by your bed and when you wake up in the morning, eat several of them while you're still lying down," Molly advised. "That should take care of it. That's better than taking potions. You want to take as few potions as possible when you're pregnant. There's no telling which ones might affect the baby."

With the women becoming more deeply engrossed in baby talk, Harry rose from his seat and started to leave the kitchen, having done what he came here to do. Remus stood up and pulled him into a hug.

"How can I thank you?" Remus breathed. "If you hadn't told her, she'd be back out there fighting again the first chance she got. Now she'll have to be given a desk job until the baby comes. She'll be so much safer. Thank you, Harry."

"I'm so happy for you, Remus!" Harry said, his eyes sparkling. "And how nice to hear some good news for a change."

"Yes," Remus agreed, turning eyes full of love on his bride. "Such good news!"

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Some time later, Harry was sitting with Dumbledore, talking about all the things that had happened in such a short time. Ginny had come back downstairs and sat in a corner drawing something on a bit of parchment.

"I forgot Merlin," Harry said suddenly. "He's still in your office."

"And we have no owls here at present," Dumbledore said. "I left Fawkes at Hogwarts so Professor McGonagall can reach me quickly if she needs to. You can send for Merlin and he'll come. We could use him here to send messages."

"He'll hear me call him from London to Scotland?" Harry said, surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Give it a try," Dumbledore said serenely.

"Merlin, I need you!" Harry cried, holding his wand up. In a moment, a flash of light burst over Harry's head and Merlin settled down on his master's shoulder.

"Thanks for coming, mate," Harry said sincerely. "Would you go to St. Mungo's and see what you can do for George Weasley? And Ben Whittier, as well." Merlin blinked and spread his wings, preparing to take off.

"Wait!" Molly said suddenly. "Did I hear you say you're sending Merlin to George?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "He might be able to help, or at least make him more comfortable."

"Oh, thank you, Harry! Can he carry a note to the twins as well?"

"Of course!" Harry replied.

"Give me just a moment," she said, looking for parchment and a quill.

"I've made George a get-well card," Ginny said, holding up the piece of parchment she'd been doodling on for quite some time. "Would everyone like to sign it?"

Soon the card was signed, a note was written and Merlin took off with instructions to bring back word as soon as there was any change.

"It's quite late," Dumbledore said. "Why don't you all go to bed? I'll let you know when there's news."

"Dobby has set up all the guest rooms with fresh linens," Harry added. "And I'll come wake you all if Merlin returns during the night."

Reluctantly, slowly, everyone went up to bed except for Dumbledore, Mad-Eye and Kingsley, who were going to stay in the living room and guard the house as well as waiting for word from other Order members or the hospital.

"How is she?" Harry asked Ron when he and Ginny returned to the girls' room.

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"Still asleep. She took some of the Dreamless Sleep Potion, but she won't let go of me," Ron said. He'd been sitting on her bed holding her in his arms for hours and he was stiff and sore, his legs numb from her weight in his lap.

"Need to use the loo, mate?" Harry said with a gently teasing smile.

"Oooh, don't say that," Ron moaned.

"Hang on, let me help you up," Harry said, sitting on the bed and taking the sleeping girl in his arms.

Ron groaned as feeling rushed back into his legs, needle-like pains shooting through them as he began to move. "Thanks," he said gratefully. "She's such a little thing, you wouldn't think her weight could put my legs to sleep like that."

"Even a small weight can do that if you sit still long enough," Harry said philosophically as he tried to lay Hermione down. She clung to him desperately and he couldn't think of a gentle way to get her to let go. He sighed and lay down with her in his arms. He gave Ginny an apologetic look as he did so.

"That's OK, you have to do that for me next," Ginny said with a hint of a grin.

"You're on," Harry said, his eyes twinkling briefly. Hermione sniffled and began to cry in her sleep, pulling herself more tightly into Harry's arms. He tucked her head under his chin and held her closely, letting her cry herself out.

"I thought she had Dreamless Sleep Potion," Ginny said in confusion.

"Sometimes it doesn't completely stop the dreams," Harry said, his voice of experience speaking.

Ron returned and took Harry's place once Harry managed to loosen Hermione's grip on him. "She's been crying," Harry said as he got up from the bed.

"Yeah, that potion doesn't seem to be helping much," Ron said sadly. "I don't know what to do for her."

"I think you're probably doing all that can be done," Harry said sadly. "Are you OK? You were gone for a while."

"Yeah. I went down to see how the family was," he said gruffly.

"Any change?" Harry asked as delicately as he could.

"No. Mum's . . . I don't know what to call it. She's always been so strong, you know?" Harry nodded. "But she seems to be just barely holding on right now. She burst into tears when she saw me."

"I'm sorry, mate," Harry said, giving Ron's shoulder a gentle squeeze.

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Ron glanced up at him and nodded, his lips pressed tightly together. He lowered his eyes and rested his cheek on Hermione's hair, a heavy sigh escaping him.

Harry sighed too, then crossed to Ginny and settled on the bed with her. He held her for a little while, then kissed her and started to get up. "I guess I'd better go to my room."

"Why?" Ginny said, her eyes miserable. "Don't leave me, Harry."

"I don't relish the idea of sleeping over there alone," Harry said, "but if . . . well, your mum will have kittens if we do anything and she catches us. She's had enough stress for one day."

"Please, just hold me," Ginny said. "I can't sleep anyway."

"Behave yourself," he warned her, but in a teasing way.

"If you insist," she said reluctantly. Harry reclined on her bed and she snuggled in next to him, holding him tightly. She cried for a while, then finally dozed off in exhaustion.

Some time later, the door of the room opened and someone tiptoed in with a dimly lit wand in hand. Harry was instantly awake and wary, but it was only Molly Weasley, come to check on her children.

"Why are you boys in here? I was worried when I found your room empty," Molly hissed when she saw Harry was awake.

"Hermione won't let go of Ron even when she's asleep, and Ginny's pretty upset too. And I didn't want to be over there by myself anyway," he replied. Ginny was sleeping soundly, little whistles coming from her nose. Ron's soft snores were accompanied by Hermione's sniffles and sighs. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to make sure everyone was all right," she said. "I know you're all grown, but I can't help it. I've checked on Bill and Charlie, as well," she admitted sadly.

"It's OK, Mrs. Weasley," Harry assured her. "You should probably take some of the Dreamless Sleep Potion so you can get some rest."

"I want to be awake when Merlin brings news," she said anxiously.

"I'll come and wake you, I promise," Harry replied.

"Oh. Well. Um. . .OK," she said tremulously. "I suppose that will be all right."

"Good night, Mrs. Weasley," Harry murmured, hoping she'd actually take the potion and let everyone sleep.

Molly seemed not to have heard him. She sat on the side of the bed, twining her fingers in Ginny's thick silky hair, some of which was spread across Harry's chest. "I don't know what to do, how to feel. Percy's . . . oh, poor Percy," she said, tearing up again. She dropped Ginny's hair and covered her face with her hands for a few moments until she recovered her self-control. Harry patted her arm consolingly, not knowing what else to do.

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"I'm sorry," she said when she quieted, cupping Harry's cheek with her hand. "You're such a dear boy, Harry. I do love you so. Don't you feel bad about any of this. You saved my family today. Without your warning . . . thank you." She finger-combed his hair, then traced his eyebrow with her thumb before stroking the smooth expanse of his cheek again. "You look so different without your glasses," she mused. "Handsome either way, just different," she assured him. She sighed, then leaned down and kissed him on the forehead before standing again. "I don't know how to go on, Harry. I just don't."

He took her hand and squeezed her fingers sympathetically. "You'll sort it out, Mrs. Weasley. You always know the right thing to do."

She chuckled sadly. "No. No, I don't. But you're sweet to say so." She took a deep breath and fought to control herself again. "Well. I should be going. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Harry. Everyone else slept through my checking on them."

"I can be a light sleeper at times," he said with half a smile.

"I suppose so. I . . ." She seemed at a loss for words. She glanced across the room to where her youngest son was sleeping soundly, holding his girlfriend so protectively. All four of them still wore their school things, Harry and Ron with their ribbons still on their robes. The girls were both sleeping on the boys' right shoulders to avoid the ribbons poking them in the face. Molly moved to a cupboard near the window and pulled out two blankets, spreading one over each couple. She tucked in Ron and Hermione, then did the same for Harry and Ginny.

"Thanks," Harry said.

"You get some rest. You've earned it."

"You need to rest too," Harry reminded her.

"I'll do my best," she said as she moved to the door. "Don't forget . . ."

"I'll come and tell you as soon as Merlin brings me word, all right?"

"Thank you, dear," she murmured, then closed the door quietly behind her.

Ginny snickered. "Good thing we were behaving!"

"I thought you were asleep!" Harry said, kissing her on the nose.

"I woke up while you and Mum were talking."

"I'm sorry, baby, I tried to speak quietly."

"I love to hear your voice rumbling in your chest," Ginny said, smiling up at him for a moment. "It's such a comfortable sound."

He chuckled. "Then I'll talk all night to keep you comfortable," he vowed.

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"You don't have to. I like to listen to your heart beating, too, and to you breathing. I just love being in your arms, Harry," she said tenderly. "Thanks for staying with me."

"It's not too painful for me, y'know," he quipped. He ran his fingers through the length of her hair and then cupped her cheek in the heart of his palm. "How are you doing?"

"I'll be better when George is," she said in a small, sad voice.

"Me too. Go back to sleep," he said, kissing her softly. "I'll let you know when Merlin brings news."

"K," she murmured, already drifting off again.

Harry awoke sometime later when a flash of light burst over him. He opened his eyes to see Merlin perched on the headboard of the bed. Ginny woke up too, sitting up and rubbing her eyes tiredly. "Merlin's here?" she said.

"Yeah," Harry replied, sitting up and facing the magnificent bird. "How's George?"

Merlin crooned and chirped softly for quite a while, then finally fell silent and held out a leg with a note tied to it.

"Thanks, mate," Harry said with a heavy sigh. "I brought some food and water up for you. They're by the window there," he said, nodding toward two bowls on the windowsill. Merlin ruffled Harry's hair with his beak, then flew over to the window to get a drink.

"What did he say?" Ron asked from across the room. "He was talking for a long time."

"Is Hermione awake?" Harry said.

"No, she's sound asleep," Ron replied, smoothing her riotous curls out of her face.

"I'd rather tell everyone at once, but since you can't move," Harry said with a sigh.

Ginny looked terrified. "George is all right, isn't he?"

"He's better, love, don't worry," Harry replied sadly. He looked at Ron. "Ben Whittier died."

"Oh, no," Ron breathed despondently. "He was such a nice bloke."

"Yeah," Harry said heavily. "And there was a battle in the hospital. Death Eaters came in to try to get to Fred and George and the injured Aurors, but they were all killed or captured, and none of the patients were hurt – well, except for Whittier. He got up and tried to fight in spite of his injuries. He died fighting." He sighed, then lifted his hand showing Ron the parchment he held. "Fred's sent a note."

"What's it say?" Ron asked.

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"I should probably tell your mum first," Harry said, getting off the bed. "I promised her, y'know."

"Yeah. Tell me later, OK?"

"Right," Harry replied. He held his hand out to his girlfriend. "D'you want to come with me?"

"Yes," she said, trying to smooth down her frowsy hair.

Moments later, Harry was knocking on Arthur and Molly's door, while Ginny knocked on Bill and Charlie's, then Remus and Tonks's. Soon the two young men were seated in their parents' room, with Harry and Ginny standing between them. Remus and Tonks stood against the wall. Harry told everyone what Merlin had said, then handed Molly Fred's note.

Molly's hands were shaking terribly. "I . . . I can't," she said finally, pushing the note back to Harry. "Would you mind reading it for us, dear?"

"Erm . . . OK," he said reluctantly. Ginny pulled a chair over for him and he sat down, with Ginny curled up at his feet, leaning against his legs. "Um, OK, here goes." He opened the letter uneasily. He was the message bearer, not the message reader! He was quite uncomfortable to be in the middle of all this, yet here he was, and he had to make the best of it. He cleared his throat and began.

Dear Mum, Dad and everyone else. George is doing a bit better – I know that's the first thing you want to hear. He's still unconscious as I write this. The healers will be glad when he wakes up. They say that will be a good sign.

I'm having trouble writing this. I'm so used to George doing half my thinking for me, finishing my sentences or starting ones I will finish – doing this by myself is harder than I would ever have imagined.

I hope Tonks is OK. She was brilliant! What a fighter! I know she was injured, but she wouldn't stay at St. Mungo's to be examined. She was determined to get to you lot to tell you how George and I were, bless her. Please give her our best and thank her again for all she did for us.

I suppose you want to know why it took so long for us to get away from the shop. We were working on some new weapons for the Ministry and had cauldrons and pots full of volatile potions all over the work room. We had to cap all of those to prevent explosions. If even some of them had been left uncapped, half of Diagon Alley might have blown up. I suppose we should move the research functions to some place where there are fewer people to get hurt if something goes wrong, but we were making such good progress, we never thought about moving our research up there. I suppose we will once George is well enough to work again. We'd just capped the last potion when Tonks joined us and helped us close up the shop.

Merlin is so brilliant. Please thank Harry for sending him to us. Merlin worked on George for quite a while. He dripped tears into open wounds that were still healing and closed them up right away. Then he sat next to George's belly and sang the most beautiful music. George relaxed while Merlin was singing, you could see it. I relaxed as well, actually. The healers

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said that Merlin had done something to help George's internal injuries. He should heal faster now. I certainly hope so. This has gone on long enough!

Merlin just left us, flying out of the door and down the hall, not 'flashing,' as Harry calls it. I suppose he's gone to check on someone else. Harry must have given him a list of people to see or something.

I've been working on this letter ever since I read yours, but it's hard for me, so hard.

Harry stopped reading and swallowed. The words in front of him were blurred with tears. Fred had been crying while writing. Harry couldn't imagine either of the twins ever shedding a tear. Seeing those smears on the words was shocking, heart-wrenching.

"What is it?" Molly asked anxiously through her tears. "What's wrong? Why did you stop?"

"I . . . uh . . . just needed to," Harry cleared his throat unnecessarily, "clear my throat. Sorry." He went back to reading.

I noticed on Ginny's card (Thanks for that, baby sister – it's very cute, although I had to stop it singing after a while. I couldn't think to be able to write with it singing such a silly song. Nice charm, though!) that everyone's together except for Percy. Is he safe in the Ministry? What happened? Why did they come after all of us at once? Or did they? Tonks didn't have time to explain, and no one else seems to know. Percy's a prat, but I hope he's OK.

Tell Harry – I'm certain the warning must have come from him – tell him George and I said 'Thanks.' He and whoever passed along the warning saved our lives. We would have been in the shop surrounded by live explosives if they'd come in to attack us there. I doubt we could have survived a fire fight in the shop. I shudder to think of it, actually.

Tell Ron that it's a good thing George and I are in the Flying Squad. We're fairly useless as fighters on the ground. We just don't think on our feet as well as Harry does – but then again, who does? Ha-ha. I just know that I'd much rather be on my broom dropping bombs than doing hand-to-hand combat with experienced fighters the way we were today. Tonks, though – she's fantastic! I was amazed. I didn't pay much attention to any individual fighter in the Battle of Little Hangleton, except for Harry, of course, and an occasional glance at you, Mum and Dad and Ginny, to be sure you were OK. I was too busy dropping bombs. George and I learned a lot in D.A., and we're certainly glad we did! But this kind of fighting just isn't where our skills lie. Give us a broom and a bag of bombs and we can handle any fight.

I suppose I should tell you what happened. Writing is keeping me from staring at George and brooding too much anyway. When we were attacked, we'd just locked up and stepped away from the door. When the first spells came at us, George and I stood back-to-back, trying to protect each other. We didn't plan it, it just felt right to us. Tonks stood next to us, a few feet away, and fired spells so fast, her wand was a blur. We finally worked out a system so we were facing three directions, which was good because we were surrounded. I have no idea how many people attacked us – fifteen, twenty, maybe? Maybe more. Maybe less. I just don't know – it was all so confusing, and now it's all muddled in my mind. Anyway, when some of the ones we weren't aiming at started falling, we realized there were people behind the Death Eaters shooting at them! George had already been badly hit, but he was still upright for a while. When he fell,

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Harry stopped there and rubbed his eyes. He could feel Fred's heartache in his words, see the pain he was suffering in the many tear-stains on the parchment. Harry took a deep breath and made himself go on.

When he fell, I stood over him and Tonks stayed at my back. She was hit hard a couple of times and fell, but kept getting back up and fighting again. What a warrior she is! Finally, the Death Eaters still standing broke and ran. Some of the people who had come to help us chased them. I saw a few Order members there, and I suppose the others were Aurors. Tonks seemed to know some of them. A couple of people came and bandaged our worst wounds, then someone made a Portkey and the three of us went to St. Mungo's. Tonks stayed with us until she got Harry's favourite healer to look after George and me. She wouldn't let anyone else near us. Healer Pomfrey called Healer Bradford in to help him with George's injuries. Bradford said George had been hit with some Dark spells, but nothing as awful as the one that Hermione suffered. I was glad to hear that, since I remember what a hard time Hermione had after that fight on the Astronomy Tower last year. I wasn't badly hurt, but they took care of me, as well, don't worry. I'm doing fine. I'm just so damned lonely. I wish George would wake up!

Tonks wouldn't let anyone look at her until she was certain George was stable. Then she found some Auror friends to guard our door and finally left. We owe her so much. She has a lifetime supply of anything she wants from our shop – please be sure to tell her that.

Mum, I know all of this is very hard on you. I know you want to be here with us, but where you are, you're safe. Please stay there and don't try to come to us. Dad, same for you. We don't want any of the rest of you endangered. As soon as George is able, we'll join you. I'll stay with him until he's strong enough to leave here.

I don't have a way to send messages. I don't even know if Merlin's going to come back so he can take this letter to you. In case he does, though, and this letter actually reaches you, could someone let our employees know that we're going to keep the shop closed for a while? I suppose we need to wait for things to settle down a bit before re-opening.

If you have the chance to write back to me, could someone please tell me what the bloody hell happened? Why were we all suddenly targeted? And where's that prat, Percy? I hope he's all right. I would much prefer to hex him myself for being such a git to someone else hurting him."

Harry stopped again. Molly's sobbing and Ginny's soft crying were more than he could bear. He pulled Ginny into his arms and did what he could to soothe her.

When they'd quieted, Molly said, "Is there more?"

"A bit," Harry said reluctantly.

"Please, go on. I'm sorry we interrupted you," Molly said, her eyes still streaming, but her sobs under more control than they had been.

"OK," Harry said, steeling himself to finish the letter.

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I can't tell you how happy I was to get your letter. It's so lonely here, with George too quiet and motionless, just the occasional healer popping in to check on him. I don't know how to be still for long periods, you know that, but there's nothing else I can do. I can't help George, although I did give blood for him. He's pinked up a bit since they gave him my blood and the Blood-Restoring Potion. I feel so helpless.

Harry stopped again.

"What's wrong?" Molly asked anxiously.

"He, um, he scratched some stuff out here," Harry said. "It's a bit hard to read. His quill needs sharpening." The real problem was that Fred's tears had nearly washed the words away, and reading that bright, cheerful, funny, resourceful Fred was at a complete loss for what to do was horribly disturbing to Harry. He took a deep breath and dutifully went on.

"I'm scared. I'm so scared. I can't lose George." Fred had scratched that out, but not very well. Harry skipped that part and went on with his reading.

I hope none of the rest of you are injured. Please take care of yourselves and write back when you can. Your letter was a real boost to my spirits. I was so worried, not knowing how you were, if you were safe, if you were hurt, where you were.

Oh, Merlin's just returned, so I'll end this now and let him take it to you. Thank you, Harry, for sending him. And thanks to the rest of you for writing. My best and my love to all of you – and from George as well. I know he'd say that if he was awake, so I'll just say it for him. Take care of yourselves. I love you. Be safe. Oh, I'm rambling. I wish we were together. STAY THERE, MUM! I'll be fine. So will George. OK, I really am going to sign off now so Merlin can take this to you. Write back when you can.

Fred. And George – the quiet twin. Ha-ha

Harry let his hands holding the letter fall to his lap and stared at the floor, unable to look at the grieving family around him.

Finally, Bill said, "He sounded pretty good overall."

"Yeah!" Charlie said encouragingly. "And he said George is pinking up. That's good!"

"He liked my card," Ginny said with a watery smile.

"Of course he did, dear," Molly said, reaching out to stroke her daughter's hair. She blew her nose and wiped away her tears, then said, "Right! We need to write him a cheerful letter, fill him in on what's going on, and get it off right away! Where's some parchment?"

Soon the family was busy, all of them writing individual letters to the twins. Harry took Fred's note to the girls' room and showed it to Ron.

"Merlin?" Harry said quietly while Ron was reading Fred's letter. "Would you try to find Percy Weasley for me? The Aurors haven't been able to find him yet, and Fawkes has to stay at Hogwarts to help Professor McGonagall. I'll give you a note to give to the healers at St.

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Mungo's. If you find Percy, flash him there right away, OK? And make sure the healers see my note. Then wait to see how he is, if you can, and come back to me. OK?"

The beautiful bird chirped one liquid note and sat watching as Harry scribbled quickly on a bit of parchment and tied it to his leg.

As he flashed out of sight, Ron said, "I wanted to write a letter to Fred too. Why did you send the family's letters without mine?"

"I haven't sent them yet. I had an errand for him to do," Harry said dismissively. "If you want, I can hold Hermione so you can write your letter. You can take a break, go to the loo or get something to eat. I don't mind looking after her for a while."

"Yeah, thanks, mate," Ron said. "She's sleeping quite deeply, but she won't let me move at all."

Harry lifted her arms and put them around his own neck with a bit of difficulty. She was quite determined to not let go of Ron. Once she was settled in his arms, he lay down with her and tried to rest a bit while Ron wrote his letter and went to visit his family. Harry hoped he could keep the Weasleys occupied long enough for Merlin to succeed in his errand and bring them some good news.

"There!" Molly said with satisfaction some time later. "All ready?"

"Yes," Ginny said, rolling the letters into a tight package to make it easier for Merlin to carry.

"Um," Charlie said hesitantly, "did anyone tell Fred about Percy?"

"Do we really want to?" Ginny said nervously.

"He did ask," Charlie said.

"Where's Harry? We need Merlin," Molly said.

"He went to let Ron read Fred's letter," Ginny said. "I'll go see how they're doing."

"Ron may want to send a letter as well," Molly told her. "Be sure to ask him if he wants to."

Just then, Ron entered the room, Fred's letter and his own response in his hand. "Hi. I brought a letter to send with yours. How are you doing?" he said, sitting down next to his mum.

"I'm . . . I'm fine," she said, deciding to use Harry's favourite response to that question. "How's Hermione?"

"Sleeping like a rock," Ron said. "But she wants to be held all the time. Harry and I finally got me free of her arms, and then she latched onto him. He'll look after her until I get back."

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"He's such a good boy," Molly said with a small smile. "You have a letter to add to our packet?" she said, noticing the parchment in Ron's hand. He nodded. "We've all finished ours. Where's Merlin?"

"Harry sent him on an errand. He said he'd be back soon," Ron replied.

"An errand? I wonder what . . .?" Molly began, then shook her head. "Well, no matter. We're lucky to have any way to get messages out. If we'd known . . . well, we could have brought Errol." She stopped talking, then turned to Arthur in horror. "Oh no. Errol was in the house. So was the cat! Or maybe she was in the barn. I hope she was."

"We can't worry about them now, Molly," Arthur murmured, holding her closely as she began to cry again.

"I'm going to check on Harry," Ginny said, then left the room. A few minutes later, she entered her and Hermione's room.

"How's your family doing?" Harry asked quietly.

"I think we're all beginning to accept things a bit. There are fewer tears now, anyway, except that Mum just realized Errol and the cat may have . . . erm." She stopped and blew out a sharp breath, forcing her body to obey her and not fall apart. "They may have died when the Burrow was destroyed. But for the rest . . . I think Fred's letter helped a lot."

"That's good. I'm sorry about Errol and the cat, but they may have escaped. Owls and cats are good at getting out of dangerous situations."

"Yeah. Well . . . Ron said you sent Merlin on an errand. Do you have any idea when he'll be back? We have our letters ready to go," Ginny said.

"I don't know when he'll be back. It shouldn't take too long," he said hopefully. "It's really late and you look exhausted. Why don't you lie down?"

"Great! Budge over," she said, climbing on Hermione's bed on Harry's other side. Ginny smiled at him a bit and snuggled her cheek into his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her. He'd removed his robes and tie and now lay in his white shirt and black trousers, not nearly as comfortable as he'd like to be, but far more comfortable than he'd been in his robes. And now there were no ribbons on his chest to scratch a girl's soft cheek.

"I think I'm in heaven," Harry teased as he kissed Ginny on the forehead, "in bed with two beautiful girls!"

"One's in a drugged sleep, and the other's exhausted, but interested in play despite her weariness," Ginny said, tickling him a bit. She looked across his chest at her best friend. "She looks awful."

"She's having a hard time."

"Yeah. Losing both parents at once – how awful."

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"Yeah," Harry said grimly. He knew all about how awful it was. Before long, he and Ginny were dozing along with Hermione. Some time later, Harry and Ginny were awakened by a flash of Merlin's arrival.

"Merlin?" Harry said quietly. Ginny sat up, but Hermione still held on to Harry desperately. Harry was stuck. "Oh, come on, Hermione," he grumbled. "I need to get up for a minute."

Ginny sighed. "I'll take her for a bit," she said, then slipped between Harry and Hermione, pulling her friend into her arms and lying back against the pillows.

"Thanks," Harry said, bending down and kissing her forehead before getting off the bed. He took the note off of Merlin's leg and looked at the bird, who began chirping in a lower voice than normal.

"What's wrong with him?" Ginny asked in concern.

Harry lifted his hand, asking her wordlessly to be quiet so he could listen to whatever the bird was telling him. The longer the bird chirped, the more Harry's shoulders slumped. Finally, he dropped his chin to his chest as the bird quieted. He sighed heavily, then petted the phoenix. "Thanks, mate," he said in a low voice.

Ginny was truly frightened now. "Harry, what is it? Is George . . .?"

"George is fine – well, doing better, anyway," Harry said quickly. "Let me read this." He lighted his wand with a soft "*Lumos*," then stood quietly reading the letter Merlin had borne attached to his leg.

Ginny watched him closely. In the reflection of the wandlight, she could see the grave expression on his face, a frown line between his eyebrows, his mouth a thin line. The tension in her body must have gotten through to Hermione, because she suddenly woke up.

"Ron?" she said muzzily, rubbing her eyes and sitting up. "Ginny! What are you . . .? Where's Ron?"

"He's in our parents' room right now. He'll be back soon," Ginny said. "You seemed to need someone to hold you, so Harry was holding you and then Merlin brought him a message and I offered to hold you for a while. Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah, I guess," Hermione replied, still mostly asleep. "What time is it?"

"About four in the morning, I think," Ginny said, squinting to see her watch in the dim light.

"Why's Merlin bringing a message at four in the morning?" Hermione said, still not fully awake. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Ginny said honestly.

"I need to go see your family," Harry said suddenly to Ginny. "Hi, Hermione. Feeling better?"

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"I think so," she replied, looking confused. "I have a terrible headache, though. Have I been sick?"

"I'll get you some pain potion," Ginny said, avoiding the question. She got up to get the potion and stopped Harry as he was about to leave the room. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

"I need to speak to Professor Dumbledore, Remus, Tonks and your parents. And Mad-Eye and Kingsley if they're still here," he said in a quiet, anxious voice. "If you want to hear what's going on, be in your parents' room in a few minutes. Try to leave Hermione here. She doesn't seem to know what happened." Ginny nodded and Harry raced out of the room and pounded down the stairs.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked again, more awake now. "Harry seems worried."

"I don't know, he wouldn't tell me. He's on his way to see Dumbledore," Ginny said dismissively. "Probably some project of theirs – you know them, always sharing secrets."

"What are you not telling me? Why are we here at Grimmauld Place?" Hermione said, finally awake. "It's not the holidays. Have I been sick?"

"No, Hermione, you haven't," Ginny said with a sigh. "What do you remember?"

"Erm . . . you and I ran up to Dumbledore's office for some reason and were Portkeyed here with the boys," Hermione said, thinking hard. "We sat downstairs with your family for a while . . . and . . . *oh!*" Her hand flew to her mouth and tears formed in her eyes again. "It wasn't a dream, was it?" she asked desperately. "My parents?"

"I'm so sorry," Ginny said, embracing her friend. "You had Dreamless Sleep Potion, a good strong dose. That's why everything seemed a bit fuzzy when you woke up."

"Why am I awake, then? That should keep me asleep for hours!"

"You woke up when I tensed up while watching Harry read a message Merlin brought him. Apparently he was waiting for some news, and whatever it was, it's bad. I'm to meet him in my parents' room in a few minutes. He went downstairs to get Dumbledore and whoever else is guarding us."

"Don't leave me here alone!" Hermione said, getting off the bed.

"I didn't know if you'd want to hear more bad news," Ginny said, helping Hermione find her shoes.

"There can't be any worse news," Hermione said grimly. "Let's go."

Soon everyone, all of the Weasleys, Remus and Tonks, Dumbledore, Mad-Eye and Kingsley, Ginny and Hermione were gathered in Arthur and Molly's room. Harry had Merlin on his shoulder, the letter in his hand, and looked very gloomy indeed.

"Go on, Harry," Dumbledore urged him when the young man couldn't seem to begin.

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"Right. Erm . . . I, um . . . I sent Merlin out to find Percy," he began, afraid to look at the Weasleys and see the hope in their eyes. "He did find him, but it's not good news, I'm afraid." He finally lifted his eyes and looked from one dear face to the next. "Percy's . . . Percy's dead," he said flatly.

"*What?*" Ron gasped, as Molly burst into fresh tears.

"Tell us what happened," Dumbledore said gently. "Merlin's been talking to you continuously while we've been getting settled, and you have a rather long letter in your hand. There has to be more information. Start at the beginning. Where did Merlin find him?"

"He found him in a ditch out in the country in West Yorkshire. Percy's mind was gone. And after Voldemort finished torturing him into insanity," he said with disgust, "he apparently let some Death Eaters beat him and put all kinds of Dark spells on him. When they'd had their fun, they tossed him in that ditch to die. Merlin flashed him to St. Mungo's. I had tied a note to Merlin's leg to tell whoever Merlin found there who Percy was and what I thought might have happened to him, and asked them to treat him. Merlin stayed to watch them examine and treat Percy."

"He was still alive when they got there?" Arthur asked in confusion. "What did they find?"

"They . . . um" He swallowed hard. "Marcus Pomfrey started a letter to me," he said, waving it as he spoke, "and explained what they'd found while Healer Bradford was finishing up working on Percy. They found all kinds of internal damage. Loads of broken bones. Lots of other things, and then there was the spell damage."

"What kind of spell damage?" Bill prompted.

"The one Marcus mentioned in here that caught my eye was one where 'Head Boy' is spelled out across his forehead in purple pustules," Harry replied, shaking his head. "Marcus was explaining what they'd found and what they were doing for him when he stopped writing because –" He stopped, pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes tiredly, then went on, "because two staff members who were unknown Death Eaters charged into the room and attacked them. Healer Bradford was hurt, but he should recover. They . . . um . . . they killed Percy. Marcus was hurt too, but not too badly."

A heavy silence filled the room. Moments later, it was punctuated by soft sobs and sniffles as the news sank in and the Weasleys understood they'd never have a chance to reconcile their differences with Percy.

Harry waited for them to calm down a bit, then went on doggedly. "The Aurors in the hospital caught them, of course, but they were only part of an attack that happened all over the hospital. A lot of Death Eaters were killed or captured. Only a few got away. That's the good news. The bad news is, a lot of patients, staff and Aurors were killed or injured as well." He stopped and corrected himself. "That's not right. No Aurors died – but several were badly injured."

"I'm going down there," Tonks said determinedly, starting to stride out of the door.

"Oh, no, you're not!" Remus said, pulling her back.

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"Remus, I'm an Auror!" she cried.

"And you're pregnant!" he retorted, then glanced guiltily around. They hadn't told everyone yet.

"Oh, how lovely!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "Congratulations. How nice to hear good news in these awful times. Remus is right, Tonks. You can't fight now. You have a baby to consider."

"Bloody bad timing, that is," she grumbled.

"Harry, what else do you have to tell us?" Kingsley said in his slow, solemn voice.

"Fred and George are fine. George is awake now. The hospital's been put in a lockdown condition – I think that means nobody in or out, except phoenixes, of course," he said, patting Merlin affectionately. "The Aurors are inspecting all the staff and locking any other people who have the Dark Mark in a room in the basement, with Anti-Disapparating Charms on them." He sighed. "That's pretty much everything. You can read Marcus's letter if you want, but I've told you what's in it." He passed it around.

"I know you've written letters to the twins," Dumbledore said to the Weasleys as he suddenly stood up. "Get them together and give them to me. I'm going to see how things are down there."

A storm of protest met his statement.

"I'll go as a phoenix. If I see someone I need to talk with, I can change into myself, but as a phoenix, I can observe and flash out of there quickly if I need to. And I can deliver those messages to the twins. I'm sure they'd like to receive them."

"Why do you need to go there?" Harry asked, confused. "You shouldn't go alone. I'll go with you."

"No, dear boy, you won't. You are going to take some Dreamless Sleep Potion and go to bed and rest. So are the rest of you. Kingsley and Mad-Eye will guard the house, but you simply must get some rest, especially you, Harry."

"Why?"

Dumbledore placed a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder and looked deeply into his eyes. "Because it's time, Harry."

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"Time? *Now*?" Harry said, gulping hard.

"Not this minute. But later on today, I believe. That's why I need to go and do some research, get reports from certain people, and look at things for myself."

Harry steeled himself. "I'm ready. Where are we going?"

"I'll let you know when I know, dear boy," Dumbledore assured him.

"And the D.A.?"

"I'm going to enlist the aid of the Aurors as well as Order members. But yes, I believe we'll need the D.A. as well," Dumbledore replied. "We'll need Fred –"

"What are you talking about?" Molly asked suddenly, interrupting their quiet conversation. "What do you need Fred for?"

The old wizard turned to face her. "I will see how George is, and if he's well enough to travel, I will bring both him and Fred back with me. You and Tonks can stay here and look after George. I will need Fred to keep the Flying Squad supplied with bombs."

"Bombs?" she said, her face paling suddenly. "You're not taking my children into battle! I've just lost one son and nearly lost another! I won't let them go, do you hear me? NO!"

"Molly, dear," Arthur said sadly, "they're all adults now. They will make their own decisions. And they're far better trained than many other fighters."

"Ginny's not of age! She's not going!" Molly cried. "And Fred . . . you can't take Fred, he's still upset about George! And Ron . . . you can't take Ron! Or Bill! Or Charlie! Or Arthur!" By this time, she was hysterical, crying so hard her words were nearly unintelligible.

"Molly!" Dumbledore commanded. "Look at me!" She raised her head and he pointed his wand at her, doing a powerful Calming Charm. She calmed immediately, but still sniffled. "I know you've been through a tremendous ordeal, but you simply cannot fall apart now. I'm sorry to do a Cheering Charm on you without your permission, but time is of the essence here. Voldemort has made a tremendous tactical error by sending so many Death Eaters after Harry's dearest friends to punish him for what happened today."

"Why did he do all this?" Charlie said in confusion.

"Didn't Harry tell you about our meeting in my office this morning with the Ministry of Magic's Cabinet?" He saw nods all around, along with many confused looks. "Perhaps he didn't include all the details." He looked at Harry, who shrugged and hung his head. "It's all right, lad. You've done very well. Don't worry about it. I'll fill in the blanks." Harry glanced up and nodded, and Dumbledore went on.

"During the meeting, which Harry attended at my insistence, Harry identified three Death Eaters who were long-time members of Fudge's Cabinet and were held over into Madam

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Bones's Cabinet. They were summarily dismissed, their memories of all classified information erased, and then were sent back to London to clean out their desks. Others who were left over from Fudge's administration, but were not Death Eaters, were also dismissed because they've been so disruptive and have caused so much trouble. Percy was also dismissed – I'm sure Harry told you the details of that part, right? The Imperius Curse and all that?" He saw nods all around. "Right, then. Losing those Cabinet members and Percy himself was a tremendous blow to Voldemort's ability to collect information, to stay three steps ahead of the Ministry as he's done all along. Harry did us all a tremendous service by identifying the Death Eaters and helping Minister Bones clean out her Cabinet."

He raised a placating hand as Ron started to speak. "I don't know why the Ministry didn't simply make everyone push up their sleeves, Ron. I'm sorry I can't answer that. That's what you were going to ask, yes?" Ron nodded, his face grim and angry. "It's possible they have done such things in the past, but with more warning than Harry gave them today, the Death Eaters would have had time to cast a Glamour Charm to cover up the Dark Mark. Whatever the case, Voldemort sent Death Eaters into battle in several locations today that happened to be full of Aurors. He attacked Diagon Alley, trying to get to the twins, but, thanks to Harry's vision, we'd already alerted the Aurors that such a thing might happen, and Tonks and others were on their way to bring the twins to safety. As a result, many of Voldemort's forces were killed or captured. Then a band of Death Eaters attacked the hospital, which happened to be full of Aurors as a result of the attack in Diagon Alley. More of the enemy were killed or captured there. And some, or perhaps all of the unidentified Death Eaters on the hospital staff were killed or captured during tonight's attack.

"We have a fairly good idea of how many followers Voldemort has at his disposal. Once I learn how many have been killed or captured today, I'll have a better idea of what we'll face later. But Harry's identifying the Dementors' pattern, so that nearly every Dementor was captured before their next attack, and these Death Eaters being captured or killed in these battles, greatly depletes Voldemort's resources. This is the time to hit him, when he has fewer allies to call on. The giants and trolls are out of the picture. There are only Death Eaters and a very few free Dementors to deal with, and the number of Death Eaters is now greatly diminished. We have a very good chance of finally succeeding.

"Harry is ready. He's worked hard all year and knows spells I'd never even heard of before he started learning them. He has a plan of action. He and I have practiced fighting together many times. I will fight at his side. We will succeed this time, I feel it in my bones." He glanced around at the uncertain faces of Bill, Charlie and Arthur Weasley, at the frightened but determined faces of Ron, Hermione and Ginny, at Remus and Tonks who wore equally worried expressions, at Molly, who looked dazed, and, finally, at Harry.

Seventeen-year-old Harry Potter, he of the intelligent green eyes, impish grin and rosy cheeks, who bore the burden of destroying Voldemort for everyone in the wizarding world, sat with his shoulders slumped, his head hanging, his hands hanging limp between his knees, the very picture of despair. As the people who loved him watched, the young man clenched his fists, shook his head furiously and then looked up, the light of battle burning in his eyes. He straightened his shoulders, his face resolute, his entire body vibrating with fierce energy. "It ends today. And after that – either way, I'm free," he growled.

"Yes, dear boy, you will be free," Dumbledore promised softly, understanding what Harry was saying, and how much this idea meant to him.

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Everyone stared at Harry, all but the still-dazed Molly suddenly aware that he knew he might die, but that he was ready to die if he must to destroy his nemesis. The silence was palpable as all of those in the room pondered the coming battle and what it would mean for Harry, for the others in the room, and for each of them individually.

Tears slid down Ginny's cheeks. She'd known for months now that Harry was steeling himself to lay his life on the line deliberately this time. Every time he'd faced Voldemort before, he'd had to fight for his life and his main concern had been survival. But he was tired of the threat hanging over his and everyone else's life and he knew that he was the one who had to resolve things, one way or the other. That's why he was taking the battle to Voldemort, rather than waiting to be captured once more. Without him saying a word about it, those who knew and loved him best understood, and also knew that there was no way to keep him from this destiny that fate had set for him.

Ginny did her best to stay quiet, not even sniffing. She wouldn't do anything to get in Harry's way. That would just put him in danger as he tried to protect her while still trying to kill his enemy. She'd fight by his side when he would accept such help, but she would not, could not distract him from his mission. The best thing she could do for him was to love him for however long she had him. She took in a shuddering breath and blew it out quietly, steeling herself for the battle she had ahead of her.

Dumbledore let them think for a few minutes then stood up and pulled several small crystal vials out of his pocket. He moved to the table where he'd set the potions Shacklebolt had brought from St. Mungo's when he came upstairs and began pouring a dose in each vial. He handed one to each of his students, then to Remus, Bill, Charlie, Arthur and Molly. "You have all had a horrible day. I'm giving you a strong dose of Dreamless Sleep Potion. You must take it. When you wake up, I will be back with information and a plan in place. Do not fail me in this. You must be well-rested to face the day ahead." He turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, when we return from the battle, I will send Aurors with you to help you with the arrangements necessary for your parents. I'm sorry there's no time to deal with it before then."

"They can wait," she said, her eyes hard and fierce as she straightened her shoulders defiantly. "I want to fight. I've been training for this for years. I'm not going to let Harry down now!" She stopped for a moment, then gulped and choked back a sob. Taking a deep breath, she ground her teeth and growled, "Those bastards killed my parents! I'll do whatever I can to avenge them. Those . . . those other things can be dealt with later." Still struggling with overwhelming grief, she looked at Ron, at Ginny, and finally at Harry. He gazed into her eyes with sad determination and gave her a slight nod. She nodded back, just a slight acknowledgement, but one that strengthened her somehow. She turned her eyes back to Dumbledore, much calmer after her outburst.

"Good girl," he said approvingly. "Off you go. Get to bed first, then take your potion. I gave you each a strong enough dose that it will drop you in your tracks if you take it while you're still on your feet. Good night."

Everyone left the Weasley parents' room and went in their various directions. Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione waited until Dumbledore, Mad-Eye and Kingsley had gone downstairs, saying "goodnight" as they passed. The hallway finally empty, Harry pulled Ginny into his arms, as Ron did with Hermione, to kiss her goodnight.

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"Wait – you're not leaving me in there alone, are you?" Hermione said to Ron. "I can't sleep without you! I need . . . I need" Tears began streaming down her face again.

"I know," Ron said, holding her close.

"And I forgot – you've lost Percy! Oh, I'm such an idiot!" she said, crying harder.

"No, you're not. Stop that," he said, gently wiping the tears off of her face.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she said, burying her face in his chest. "I just can't bear it."

"You won't know what hit you after that potion takes effect," Ron assured her, smoothing her unruly curls and rubbing her back comfortingly.

"Please . . . please don't leave me alone!" she sobbed.

Harry and Ginny were snogging quite seriously. They couldn't seem to let each other go. Ron looked at them for a minute, then said, "Harry?"

Harry gently, reluctantly pulled back from Ginny, kissing the tip of her nose, then resting his cheek on top of her head, keeping her enfolded closely in his arms. "Yeah?"

"What d'you reckon?" Ron said uncertainly.

"What I reckon," Harry said slowly as he gazed deeply into Ginny's eyes, "is that I want to celebrate life a bit before taking that potion."

"Celebrate life?" Ron said, a slow smile crossing his face.

"Yeah. We've had a horrible day. People we care about have . . . well, I just think . . ." Harry said, suddenly unable to articulate what he was feeling.

"That we need to celebrate still being alive," Ginny finished for him.

"Yes," he said, rocking her in his arms. "That's it exactly."

"It's already nearly five o'clock," Ron said, glancing at his watch.

"See you in an hour, then," Harry said, leading Ginny to his and Ron's room.

"Got it," Ron replied seriously. "An hour." He led Hermione into the girls' room and closed the door behind him, remembering to add the Impervious Charm as well as the Colloportus and Silencing Charm.

"What . . .?" Hermione said in confusion as Ron pulled her into his arms. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to remind you how good it is to be alive," he said gruffly as he nuzzled her neck. "Harry and Ginny are right. We need to celebrate life right now. Come on." He swept her up into his arms and deposited her gently on the bed, then began slowly, tantalizingly undressing

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her. He nibbled and kissed his way down her neck as his hands busily divested her of her clothes. Ron suddenly noticed that she didn't seem to be responding much. Troubled, he leaned on one elbow and looked at her seriously. "If you don't want to—"

"No, that felt so good!" she said, tears still in her eyes, lifting her arms to reach for him. "I need you, Ron. Please."

"Are you sure?" he said seriously. "I thought it might help you feel better."

"Yes, please, yes," she said, embracing him tightly. "I don't want to think. I just want to feel safe in your arms."

"OK," he said hoarsely, his heart aching for her grief over her terrible loss, and for his lost brother, as well. He needed this as much as she did. Slowly, tenderly, he made love to her, celebrating life in the best possible way as they reminded each other how good it was to be alive and in love.

Harry and Ginny started pulling each other's clothes off with unusual roughness as soon as the spells were on the locked door. They fell on Harry's bed together, making love urgently, frantically, as if they'd never have the chance again – which was the thought in the back of both of their minds. As they lay together afterwards, their arms and legs still in a tangle, Harry tipped Ginny's chin up so he could look into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured miserably. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

Ginny put her fingers gently on his lips. "No, baby, I didn't either. That was . . . it was . . . amazing, but I like the normal way we do it better."

"Shall we have another go, then?" he said tenderly, lacing his fingers in her thick hair and lifting her face to his for a long, lingering kiss.

"Mmm, yes, please," she breathed into his mouth between kisses. She rolled on top of him, her hair curtaining their faces, and explored the depths of his mouth while enjoying the feeling of his hands on her back, her bum, her breasts.

Harry flipped her onto her back and continued his more leisurely explorations of her anatomy. "You taste good," he chuckled as he nibbled on her ear lobe.

"Mmm, you too," she murmured, kissing the heavy muscles of his shoulder. "I feel so safe here."

"In this house?" he asked as he paid careful attention to each beautiful breast.

"In your arms, silly," she chided him. She tangled her fingers in his hair, relishing the soft silkiness of it, the warmth of his body over hers, the feeling of skin against skin, the steady, strong beat of his heart as his chest pressed against hers. Thoughts of her lost brother tried to surface in her mind and she forced them back, concentrating on Harry and the fact that he was *here*, he was *alive*, he loved her and was loving her. She couldn't allow her thoughts to go any further. Tears began to escape her control.

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"What's wrong, baby?" Harry asked in concern when he noticed her tension. "Am I hurting you?"

"No! Please don't stop," she begged. "Please, Harry. Love me."

"I do love you," he said, going back to doing his best to make her forget the things that were troubling her.

Soon they lay, sweaty, exhausted and comforted, holding each other closely. "That did help, love," Ginny said, running her hand over the well-defined muscles of his chest, her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder. "Thanks."

"Mmmm, thank you," he said sleepily. He raised his arm to lay it across his eyes and his watch caught his attention. "Bloody hell."

"Time to go?"

"Yes."

"OK," she said, reluctantly getting to her feet, picking up her clothes and dressing. When she was dressed, she looked at him, her heart in her eyes as she gazed at him sitting on the side of the bed. "I can't."

"You can't what?" he said, getting up and pulling her into his arms.

Ginny began crying. "I can't bear the thought of being alone tonight."

"Hermione will be there," he assured her.

"Please, can't you just sleep with me in there? Then Ron can stay with Hermione, and we won't have to be alone," she begged.

"We'll all be sound asleep from the potion," he said reasonably. "We won't know who's in the room."

"Please, Harry," she insisted.

Harry thought about it a moment. "All right. If your mum decides to skin us for it, at least she'll have to skin all four of us," he said with an attempt at his usual cheeky grin. He got dressed quickly and they crossed the hall, removing the spells on their door before they left the room. Harry tapped quietly on the door to the girls' room, hoping Ron and Hermione weren't still busy.

"Be right there," Ron's deep voice rumbled. They heard some movement in the room and muttered incantations as Ron removed the spells. The door opened, revealing Hermione already sound asleep and Ron dressed, ready to go to bed in his own room. "What's up?" he said, surprised to see both Ginny and Harry at the door.

"Ginny wants me to stay with her," Harry explained. "D'you think you can bear to sleep in Hermione's bed?" He grinned.

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"Yeah! No problem," Ron agreed, moving back into the room. He started to put the spells back on the door.

"No spells," Harry said. "We need to look as innocent as possible, right?"

Ron blushed and chuckled. "Yeah, right!" he agreed, then climbed into bed with Hermione. He put his arm around her and pulled her head onto his shoulder. "Ah, this is the life," he murmured as he settled in.

"You're right," Harry said as he and Ginny settled in.

"Time for your potion, Mr. Potter," Ginny said, handing him his flagon.

"Ladies first!" he offered, teasing her.

"Nope. I don't trust you! I will watch you take that potion, swallow it and go to sleep, and then I'll take mine!" she said, giving him her best evil eye. "If I take mine and go to sleep, you're liable to stay up making plans or go off somewhere by yourself to do Merlin knows what."

Harry looked highly offended. "Who, me? You're wounding me, woman!" He grinned and kissed her. "You know me too well, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Take your potion!"

"As you wish, m'lady," he said softly, then kissed her on the nose, raised his flagon to Ron and said, "Cheers!" and downed it in one gulp. He fell back against the pillows, just awake enough to hand Ginny the empty flagon before his hand dropped to his chest and he started softly snoring.

"Good one, Gin," Ron commented.

"Thank you. Now you!" she insisted.

"Together, then?" he countered.

"All right. Good night, Ron."

"Good night, little sister. Cheers!" With that, they both drank their potions and were quickly sound asleep.

"The boys are gone!" Molly cried in a panic several hours later, rushing downstairs. "They're gone! They're not in their room!"

"Relax, Molly," Mad-Eye said calmly. "They're in the girls' room."

"*What?*" she cried, then raced back up the stairs.

"Molly! Stop!" Dumbledore said sternly.

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"Those children—" she began indignantly, stopping halfway up the stairs.

"Are adults," Dumbledore reminded her, "and very responsible people. The girls were distraught. I imagine they didn't want to be alone. Let them rest. They don't need to be up for a while yet."

"They're fine, Molly," Mad-Eye added with a smile. "I've kept the shifty on them from time to time. They haven't moved for hours." When Molly turned her back, Mad-Eye winked at Remus, who smiled a bit in response.

"Let's have some breakfast," Dumbledore said serenely. "Dobby and Winky have outdone themselves this morning." He made certain Molly went to the kitchen with the rest of them and stayed there, so the young people's rest would not be disturbed.

It was nearly lunch time when the four students finally woke up. Hermione woke first, since she'd taken her potion first. She stretched luxuriously, then nestled her head back in Ron's chest. He wrapped his arm around her as if it was an automatic thing – as if her head on his chest signalled his arm to embrace her. She sighed happily. Was there a better pillow in the world? She didn't think so. She didn't know how or why he'd decided to stay the whole night with her, but she was glad he had.

Hermione smiled as she looked up at his sleeping face. His mouth was slightly open, soft snores rattling in the back of his throat, his long, pale, red-gold lashes just barely visible against his skin. She pushed his ginger hair away from his eyes, then cupped his cheek in her hand, enjoying the prickliness of his beard stubble. They'd been friends forever. She couldn't really say when it was she began to love him, but now she couldn't imagine loving anyone else. She'd made mistakes in the past, but she was determined that she wouldn't make any more horribly bad decisions in her relationship with Ron. He was the love of her life, she was sure of it now. He'd loved her through the worst pain of her life, even though he had to be in similar pain from losing his brother, yet somehow he'd managed to make her feel better. Was there a sweeter, kinder man in the world? She raised up on her elbow and kissed him, loving the vulnerability of him as he slept, and savouring the delicious feeling when he began to wake up and kiss her back.

"Good morning," she said when he opened his eyes.

"Mmmfph," he mumbled, then closed his eyes again, making Hermione laugh. She heard an amused answering chuckle and looked up to see Harry watching her.

"Hi. How are you?" he said quietly. Ginny was still asleep, cuddled up tight against his side, her head nestled snugly in the crook of his shoulder.

"Better, thanks," she said honestly. "You?"

"Better," he said. He looked down at Ginny, her sweet face soft and young-looking in sleep, her russet lashes a rich contrast with her ivory skin. He kissed the top of her head and tightened his arms around her, loving the feeling of waking up next to her. He raised his eyes to Hermione again. "I could get used to this quite easily," he said with a tender smile.

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"Yeah, me too, but it would be nice if we had separate rooms," she teased.

"Yeah," he agreed.

Someone tapped at the door. Hermione and Harry exchanged panicked looks. Hermione cleared her throat, poked at Ron a bit trying to wake him up, and said, "Come in."

"Are you lot all right?" Molly asked anxiously. "Albus told me not to bother you, but I thought I heard voices just now. . . ." She looked from one bed to the other and sighed. "I suppose it never occurred to you that you girls could share one bed, the boys another?"

"That would have defeated the purpose of staying together," Hermione said with a tremulous smile.

"Which was?" Molly said suspiciously.

"We didn't want to sleep alone, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said simply, her eyes dark and sad. "I needed Ron to hold me. I couldn't bear it otherwise, and Ginny—" Her voice faded away. She didn't know what to say.

"I know you're all grieving," Molly said sadly. She sighed, determined not to cry again. She'd wept enough for now. It was time to be strong. "I slept on Arthur's shoulder all night too," she said sympathetically. She forced herself to speak in a brighter way. "It's nearly lunch time. Are those lazy Weasleys going to wake up soon?"

"Ron's trying to," Hermione said, smiling at him fondly. She nudged his shoulder and he snorted and swatted half-heartedly at her hand.

"Ginny's still sound asleep," Harry said after shaking her shoulders a bit to try to wake her. "She had the same dose as the rest of us, but she's so much smaller, maybe she should have had less."

Molly sat on the edge of the bed and reached across Harry to cup her daughter's cheek in her hand, stroking her thumb gently across its soft surface. "Ginny? Wake up, dear. It's time to get up. Come on, lazybones! Wake up!"

Ginny began to stir, finally opening her eyes and stretching. She started, her eyes flying open in horror when she realized her mother was right there sitting on the bed, leaning across her boyfriend's reclining body to reach her. "Mum! What are you doing here? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is an apparent lapse in judgement in you four," Molly chided them gently, "but given the circumstances, I'll forgive it – this once."

Ginny stared at her mum with huge eyes and nodded mutely. Ron was awake by now as well. His sleepy blue eyes peeped out from behind the fall of his ginger hair. "Do I smell food?" he said, brightening visibly.

"Yes, you do. Get up now, all of you. We're holding lunch for you," Molly said, then got up and walked to the door. She looked at both boys expectantly. "Well?"

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"We're coming," Ron said, struggling out of bed, still half-asleep. Harry got up, put on his glasses and slid his feet into his trainers. All four of them had slept in their school clothes.

"Your clothes are a sight. It's a good thing Minerva sent your trunks. Yours are in your room, boys. Girls, yours are just outside."

"We'll bring them in for you," Harry offered, going into the hall and lifting Ginny's trunk easily. Ron followed suit with Hermione's trunk.

When the four young people arrived in the kitchen, they found food piled high at one end, and the rest of the table taken up with maps, notes, diagrams and parchments of various kinds. Dumbledore, Mad-Eye, Kingsley, Remus, Tonks and all the older Weasley men were bent over the map and listening to Dumbledore.

"Ah, there you are!" Dumbledore said with a smile when he noticed Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione. "Did you sleep well?" His eyes twinkled as he asked this.

"Yes, thanks," Harry replied, blushing at look in the headmaster's eye. He grabbed a sandwich and stood by his mentor, his attitude all business. "What's all this?"

"We have a location for Voldemort's new headquarters," Dumbledore said. "His forces, as we surmised, are rather low at present. This will be the perfect time to take the battle to him." He looked at Harry seriously. "That's what you said you wanted to do."

"Yes. I don't want him in control of the situation this time," Harry agreed sombrely. "What's the plan?"

"We needed Ron here to get things sorted," Dumbledore said. Ron's posture suddenly straightened and he leaned in to study the map. "Ron, we need to decide how to use the Aurors and Order members. Madam Bones is already gathering the Aurors. We only have to tell them when and where to meet us. What's your plan?"

"Aurors have experience at getting people to come out of hiding places, don't they?" Ron asked Kingsley, who nodded. "Then I think the Aurors should be the first to attack." He stopped and thought a minute. "Wait a minute. Did you say you were going to bring Fred here?" he asked Dumbledore.

"Yes, I'll be bringing him and George both shortly. George needed a bit more time in the hospital before he could be released, but he's doing quite well now."

Ron and Ginny both sighed with relief. "That's good to hear," Ron said, smiling a bit. "OK, if we'll have Fred with us, here's what I'd like to do."

An hour later, Merlin flashed Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Remus and Dumbledore back to Hogwarts. Ron assembled the D.A. and gave them their orders. Merlin was sent to Remus's home to retrieve the Firebolt Harry had given him. Harry and Ron talked quietly with D.A. members while waiting for Dumbledore to pass out Portkeys that would take them to a

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vantage point near the house where Voldemort was holed up. Hermione helped Ginny with the medical packs the Healer Squad members would be carrying.

"Right, then, you lot. Pay attention," Ron said when Dumbledore returned with the Portkeys in hand. As the Portkeys were passed out among the D.A. members, Ron continued, "We will arrive about half a mile from the target area. We will be meeting Aurors and Order members there. Try to remember what they look like so you don't hex the wrong people, all right?"

"We have an operative inside the house who will come out and give us a signal to assure us that Voldemort is, indeed, inside," Dumbledore said. "Please don't shoot our operative. You will know him when you see him."

Ron spoke again. "Once that operative is away from the house, the Flying Squad," he nodded toward Madam Hooch and her group of fliers, "will bomb the house. Fred will meet us there with a supply of bombs for you, so load up as soon as you see him. Those who come out of the house will be attacked by Aurors, who will surround the house and be the first wave of attack. D.A., we will be held in reserve and will attack only when I tell you to. Listen for my signal and don't do anything until you hear it! Pay attention to Harry. When you see him engaging Voldemort—"

"*CLEAR AWAY!*" the D.A. chanted.

"Right," Ron said with satisfaction. "You know your assignments. Good hunting! *Today we end this war!*"

Just outside the peaceful little village of Wimbish Green in Cambridgeshire, a lonely house stood on a hill. It had been abandoned many years before. Its shutters hung crooked and broken, its windows blank eyes in a ravaged face. Something was odd about the air around the house. It seemed to shimmer at times with a weird, greenish light. Strange sounds could be heard coming from it at times. The locals had long since considered it haunted and stayed away from it as a result, but lately, it truly did seem to exude an otherworldly feeling.

Across the wide meadow from this house stood a lovely old-growth forest. The quiet peacefulness of the forest was suddenly disturbed by the appearance of warriors ready to face the battle of all battles. Aurors, Order members and D.A. members mingled and learned to recognize each other as the Flying Squad loaded their bags with bombs.

"Wait a minute," Auror Dawlish whinged when he was told Ron would be directing the battle. "We're takin' orders from kids?"

Rufus Scrimgeour, head of the Auror Office, gave him a stern look. "I've gone over the plans with Dumbledore, Weasley and Potter. They should work quite well. Ron Weasley and the Granger girl will do aerial surveillance and pass intelligence to us on the ground," he growled. "Having them in the air leaves more of us available to fight on the ground. I'm in charge of you lot. Just do what you've been trained to do, when I tell you to do it, and you'll be fine."

Dawlish subsided with a grumble to his mates.

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"I heard that, Dawlish," Scrimgeour growled. "Step out of line and I'll hex you myself." With that, the grumbling subsided.

Fred Weasley looked haggard and exhausted, but was at his manic best, passing out bombs and advice with cheeky aplomb. Madam Hooch gathered her Flying Squad and made sure they were all fully loaded and prepared for the task ahead.

"I'm going with you," Fred announced. "I have a special treat for those blokes. When you need to reload, pop back here and help yourselves. Just be careful. The bombs with the red stripe are particularly touchy. Don't go bouncing them around any more than you have to, OK?" He received nods all around.

"Is everyone ready?" Dumbledore said quietly when he joined Harry and Remus at the edge of the woods.

"Yes, as ready as we can be," Harry said, glancing at his headmaster. "You look tired. Did you sleep at all?"

"I napped a bit, yes," he assured his apprentice. "I don't seem to need as much sleep as you youngsters," he added with a smile. "How are you feeling, Harry?"

"I want to get this over with," Harry said grimly.

"Me too," Dumbledore agreed.

"You'll get no argument from me, either," Remus said, smiling grimly at them and giving Harry's shoulder a squeeze.

"Wait. Someone's coming out," Harry breathed. "It's Snape!"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied quietly. As they watched, Snape stretched his arms above him as if he'd just awakened from a nap, then walked toward the distant village with an unhurried stride.

"That's the signal. Time for the Flying Squad and Aurors to go," Dumbledore said.

Harry turned and noticed that Ron had seen Snape's signal himself and was getting the troops moving.

Moments later, the Flying Squad was circling the house, two ranks deep, one above the other. On Madam Hooch's signal, they tossed their first load of bombs through the windows and down the chimneys. The house shuddered with the concussion of all the bombs going off at nearly the same moment. The Flying Squad flew higher, getting out of range of any potential spell fire and the gas Fred was about to drop into the house in his "special delivery" bomb, which he threw through the biggest first floor window. Green smoke spilled out of the windows and people poured out of every opening in the house as Fred's Lethal-Version Garrotting Gas Bomb went off, killing or disabling those who were closest to it.

The Aurors surrounding the house began capturing or killing the escapees. The fighting became nasty as the Death Eaters who had been at a distance from the Garrotting Gas bomb

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got a breath of fresh air and began fighting in earnest. Suddenly, more Death Eaters Apparated into the clearing, joining the fighting with a will. The Order members went forward to reinforce the Aurors, who were now outnumbered. The D.A. stayed in the trees, waiting nervously for the order to advance. Ron and Hermione soared above the battle, sending information to the Aurors and Order members as they saw battle lines weakening or a need for reinforcements at various points.

The Flying Squad wheeled overhead, dropping missiles on Death Eaters as carefully as they could to avoid hitting their own forces. Some Death Eaters broke away from the wand-to-wand combat on the ground and began attacking the fliers. Madam Hooch zoomed beneath her fliers, urging them higher, rushing to the fringes of the fighting to bring back some who had strayed too far away from the squad in the heat of battle. Two Death Eaters aimed spells at Madam Hooch that looked like purple flame. She fell silently from her broom and landed in the midst of the battling forces on the ground. Someone shot a green spell at her and she moved no more.

The Flying Squad clustered around Fred, who had no real desire to lead them, but saw no other choice.

"Right. Do you still have ammo, or do you need to reload?" he asked the white-faced students around him. "Come on, then, let's go and reload." When they neither answered nor followed him, Fred became uncharacteristically stern. "This is not the time to lose it! Madam Hooch would want you to keep fighting until the battle's won! Let's go!" They shook themselves out of their shock and followed him back to the woods where their supplies waited for them. While the students were filling their bags, Fred sent an Adfero to Dumbledore and Ron.

"We lost Madam Hooch," Fred said in his message. "They shot her off her broom. I think she's dead. The Flying Squad has lost heart, but we're going back in anyway."

"I saw it," Ron responded. "Keep them moving. Make sure those who are injured get treatment."

"Right," Fred returned.

Dumbledore sighed when he heard the news about Madam Hooch. She'd offered to help the D.A. after learning she'd been responsible for turning the Snitch into a Portkey that took Harry to Voldemort in the previous term's final game. She'd been placed under the Imperius Curse by Bellatrix Lestrange. She felt quite guilty over nearly causing Harry's death, and being the inadvertent cause of so many people being injured or dying in the ensuing battles, and threw herself into training the Flying Squad with a will. And now she was down, and probably dead. He shook his head sadly.

"What is it?" Harry asked. He, like the D.A., was being kept in reserve, allowing the adults to fight until they tired or needed replacements. Harry was bouncing on the balls of his feet, anxious to get into the battle, but knowing he needed to save his strength to deal with Voldemort. He rubbed impatiently at his scar, which was burning constantly with Voldemort so close by. At least his Occlumency was keeping the monster out of his head, but the scar pain ranged from irritating to nearly unbearable at times.

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"Madam Hooch," Dumbledore said sadly. "She was shot off her broom and landed right in the thick of things."

"Oh," Harry said, then swallowed hard. The woman who'd taught him to fly was gone. They hadn't been as close as he was with some of his professors, but they did have a special bond, the shared love of flying. "Does she need to be rescued?"

Dumbledore squeezed Harry's shoulder comfortingly. "No, lad, it's too late. I'm sorry. But she was doing what she felt she should, Harry. She was taking care of her students."

"I know," Harry said quietly, his face tense. "The Healing Squad isn't trying to get to her, are they? Not if she's in the thick of things."

"No. They saw her take a Killing Curse, I believe," Dumbledore replied.

"Where's Voldemort?" Harry said, suddenly noticing the pain in his scar had lessened. The monster must have moved farther away. "The house is bombed to pieces now. Nobody could stay in there. Where is he?"

"I suspect he's found someplace to watch the action," Dumbledore replied, turning to watch the action himself.

Suddenly Harry's scar seared with pain, making him fall to his knees.

"What is it?" Dumbledore said in concern.

"He's . . . he's" Harry was gasping for breath. He stood and sent an Adfero to Ron and Hermione. "He's furious. He's going after them," Harry said when he could speak again. "Ron and Hermione. So they can't direct the battle."

"Yes, I expected that," Dumbledore said.

"So did I. I just warned them. They're taking the evasive actions we planned," Harry said, his face stony. "Where is he? I want to get this over with!" His eyes searched the area around the house, the meadow between the house and the woods, and the edges of the woods as far as he could see. He activated the search function of his glasses and searched for Voldemort that way, as he'd done several times already. "There! I found him!"

"Where?" Dumbledore said.

"Behind the house – on that hill," Harry said. "He's put an Invisibility Charm on himself."

"Well done, Harry. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely. Let's go."

Dumbledore and Harry Apparated to the hillside behind the house, both of them slightly to one side of Voldemort.

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"Did you miss me?" Harry said as he shot an Anti-Disapparating Charm at Voldemort, then a Revealing Charm, dodging the spells the evil wizard was already firing his way. Dumbledore and Harry kept a certain distance between them, staying on the same side of Voldemort so they wouldn't accidentally hit each other with their spells. Soon the air was full of multi-coloured spell fire and the sounds of the grunts and moans of the three combatants as their spells hit their targets with at least glancing blows.

Ron and Hermione had Disillusioned themselves before taking flight, but the setting sun was glinting off their broom handles and giving them away. They switched to Invisibility Charms, which were more difficult to sustain, but also more effective in such circumstances.

"Time to send in the D.A.," Ron said grimly. Hermione sent the messages to the squad leaders, giving them their assignments so they would reinforce the Aurors and Order members where they were needed.

Severus Snape hovered just past the edge of the forest listening to the sounds of battle: the shouted incantations; the zing of spell fire; the cries, groans and shrieks of the wounded. He was tired of the double life he'd been leading for so long. He knew Potter and Dumbledore were determined that this would be the last battle. He also knew that this was the very best chance they would have of defeating the Dark forces, with so many of them already jailed, nearly all of the Dementors captured, the giants and trolls not even in contention. He looked down the road toward the village, knowing his orders were to go to Order Headquarters and wait for further instructions, but he wanted out of the situation. He wanted to be free. He was sick of the life he'd led for so long. With a heavy sigh, he turned on his heel and headed back toward the battle, determined to do what he could to help and not caring much anymore if he survived or not.

He turned into the clearing where he knew Ron had planned to have the triage area set up. Neville Longbottom was in charge there.

"Professor Snape!" Neville said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to help, Longbottom. I do have some knowledge of medical procedure. What can I do?" Snape said.

Neville handed him a medical kit and explained the methods they were using as well as the pre-programmed Portkeys, and Snape set to work. He, Neville and Alex McCullough, the other Healer Squad member who was assigned to this area, worked as quickly as they could, binding up wounds, giving potions when necessary, sending the lightly wounded back into battle, and transporting the more seriously injured to either Hogwarts' hospital wing or to St. Mungo's hospital.

Time passed slowly, yet seemed to be racing by. All of them were weary now. The Fifth Year Ravenclaw girl set as one of the sentries for their area cried out in pain, then was suddenly silent. Snape, Neville and Alex stood with their wands at the ready, watching nervously for approaching enemies.

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"Oh, for Merlin's sake," came a snide voice they all recognized. "What are you doing here, Snape?" Draco Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, came through the trees, wands at the ready.

"There are injured students here," Snape replied with feigned patience. Malfoy, like all the Death Eaters, thought Snape was a loyal member of their group. Snape watched Malfoy carefully, waiting for the boy to make his move. "I'm doing what I can to take care of them." He gave Malfoy a look that said, *"Don't blow my cover."*

Alex watched the bullies in front of him nervously. He'd told Harry last term that he wasn't brave at all. He'd spent the Battle of Hogwarts hiding in the library rather than trying to fight. Harry had invited him to join the D.A. and told him he believed Alex could be brave when he had to. Alex had taken Harry at his word and given his best Ravenclaw efforts to D.A. He was a whiz at research and had found quite a few remedies that students would be capable of using on each other in the field, remedies so simple that Madam Pomfrey had not thought of them when she'd first instructed the Healer Squad. Now he stood with his wand at the ready, facing boys who had bullied him and his friends, as well as Harry and his friends, for years. He still didn't believe he had the courage for combat, but it appeared that he wasn't going to be given a choice.

What would Harry do? Alex thought, fighting back his fear. The answer came to him in an instant. *Harry would cheek these boys! He'd attack them! He'd defeat them! That's what Harry would do!*

Holding that thought like a shield before him, Alex said, "Go away! We have injured people to take care of. If you want to fight, go join the battle."

"Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!" Malfoy chortled, moving toward the younger boy. Crabbe and Goyle laughed sycophantically behind him. "What have we here? A brave little soldier? If you're so brave, why are you hiding back here with the cowards like Longbottom?"

"Neville is not a coward! He's a decorated war hero!" Alex declared vehemently.

"Malfoy, leave us. Your battle is elsewhere," Snape said smoothly.

"No, I think it's here. This boy has cheeked me once too often," he said, raising his wand and pointing it at Alex.

Alex froze, then remembered the shield of Harry's courage. The shield. The Shield Charm! *"Protego!"* he said just as Malfoy shot a spell at him. Finally remembering his training, Alex ducked and rolled, shooting spells as he did so, trying to aim well, but doing his best to draw the fire away from the injured students lying helpless on the ground.

"Oh, *bloody* hell," Neville grumbled as he joined the fray. He and Alex were soon fully involved in battling Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle.

Since the two D.A. members seemed to be doing well in combat for the moment, Snape busied himself with protecting the injured. He Portkeyed all of the casualties out of the clearing as quickly as he could while Alex and Neville battled the three young Death Eaters.

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Once Snape had all the injured students transported out of harm's way, he crossed the clearing swiftly, his cloak billowing behind him like a dark cloud. Neville managed to hit Crabbe with a Petrificus Totalus. Snape bound him with unbreakable magical bonds, then went after Malfoy himself. Alex was fighting with Malfoy and doing fairly well, but he was injured and his strength was fading. He tripped and fell, his wand flying out of his hand. Malfoy raised his wand and said, "*Avada Kedavra!*" just as Snape threw himself between Malfoy and Alex's prone body. The spell hit Snape full in the chest. His limp body fell and lay still, Alex pinned under him.

"You killed *Snape!*" Goyle cried, aghast. "The Dark Lord will *kill* you for that!"

Shocked by what he'd done, Malfoy stood motionless until Goyle's voice broke through the whirl of incoherent thoughts in his mind. "Let's go!" he cried, racing away, Goyle hot on his heels.

Neville, injured himself and stunned by the scene he'd just witnessed, pointed his wand at their retreating backs and cried, "*Stupefy!*" Goyle fell like a huge tree, the sound of his body hitting the ground reverberating through the forest. Malfoy ran like a scared rabbit. Neville ran after him for a short distance, then came back and tied Goyle up, breaking the bully's wand in two. He Levitated the Stunned boy back to the clearing, depositing him none too gently next to Crabbe, then set a Portkey for Azkaban. "This is too good for you, you pieces of filth," he said as he activated the Portkey. Crabbe and Goyle rolled their eyes frantically, unable to move anything else, as the Portkey took them away.

Neville raced back to see how Alex and Snape were. Alex was struggling, trying to get the man's body off him. Neville Levitated Snape's body a bit so Alex could get up.

"You OK?" Neville asked the younger boy, who nodded.

"Is he . . . is he dead?" Alex asked nervously. "He saved my life!"

"I know. I guess he wasn't such a git after all," Neville said as he examined his most-hated professor. "Get me another Portkey, I've run out." Neville reset the Portkey for the proper location, and soon, Snape was transported to the morgue at St. Mungo's. Neville and Alex spent a long, silent moment looking at the spot from which their professor's body had just disappeared, then got back to work, treating each other's wounds, checking on their injured sentries and taking care of the wounded fighters who continued to be brought to them.

On the ground, the Death Eaters, Aurors and Order members were fighting furiously. The battle went on for hours. D.A. members fought alongside Aurors and acquitted themselves magnificently, earning the respect of the adult wizards. Slowly but surely, the number of Death Eaters was being reduced.

Voldemort managed to break the Anti-Disapparation Charm Harry had put on him and disappeared. Harry growled in disgust, then turned with Dumbledore to help their forces.

Through the multicoloured flashes of spell light, Harry could see his godfather across the clearing. Remus was bleeding from numerous wounds, and beginning to stagger, visibly weakening. Harry started toward him, then saw Remus standing over the fallen Kingsley

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Shacklebolt to protect him, his wand at the ready but shaking in his hand as his strength failed. Remus went down under a hail of spell fire and lay far too still.

Harry raced toward them, shooting spells as he ran. Soon the way was cleared and Harry knelt by his godfather's side.

"Remus? Remus, can you hear me?" Harry thought he would choke from the lump in his throat. Remus had to be all right, he had to!

"Yes," Remus said, coughing weakly. He tried to move off of Kingsley, who was stirring under him. "Leave me. You have . . . work to do."

"Yes, I do. Right here. Relax, I've got you," Harry said, Levitating his godfather just enough to help the Auror out from under him. "Kingsley, you OK?" he asked as he settled Remus back on the ground.

He was gasping for breath. "Fine," Kingsley said grimly as he tried to sit up. He was bleeding profusely from numerous wounds. He collapsed next to Harry, unconscious.

Harry had to choose. Should he treat his godfather or Kingsley first? He placed his hand on Kingsley and decided Remus was in worse shape despite the Auror's unconsciousness. "We need to get both of you to St. Mungo's," Harry told his godfather. He glanced around. The battle had moved away from them for the moment. All of Ginny's Healer Squad workers were busy helping other people. "Hang on, I'm going to see what I can do for you."

As his godfather gazed trustingly into his eyes, Harry laid his hands on the man's chest, over the worst of the visible wounds. He sensed inside – Remus had a number of badly damaged organs and was bleeding internally in addition to the numerous wounds visible on him. "Merlin!" Harry cried softly, "I need you!"

The phoenix flashed to him, landed next to Remus and quickly began pouring tears into open wounds, which closed up magically. Harry and Merlin worked feverishly. The battle could swing back their way at any moment.

As Harry and Merlin worked on him, Remus pressed the small ruby in his wedding ring and said "Tonks." Her face appeared above his ring a heartbeat later. "Hi," he said wearily. "I'm sorry. I picked the . . . wrong time . . . for the lycanthropy cure," he gasped.

"Remus! Remus, where are you? Where's the Healing Squad?" Tonks cried, her heart breaking. She could see he was wounded and fading fast.

"I'm . . . in a gully . . . behind the house," Remus gasped. "Dunno where . . . squad is." He coughed. "Harry's here. Tonks, I love you. I've . . . always loved you. I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare give up, Remus!" Tonks said fiercely. "I'll be right there!"

"No! The baby—" he cried, coughing hard.

"We can have another baby, but I can't find another you. You hang on, I'm coming to get you." Her face disappeared from above his ring and then Tonks herself was bending over him.

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"Oh, love, I'm so sorry," she said. "And Kingsley." She glanced up at Harry, who was working his magic on his godfather as quickly as he could. Merlin had moved to Kingsley, healing all the open wounds he could find. Tears streamed down Tonks's face as she tried to find some way to help Harry heal her husband's wounds. Ginny landed next to them just as Harry was finishing what he could do for his godfather.

"I'm sorry, I've been so . . . oh, no! Remus!" Ginny said as she knelt next to Harry. "What can I do?" She was already checking Remus over.

"I've stabilized him as much as I can quickly," Harry said, sitting back and letting her examine his godfather. He moved over to Shackbolt and did what he could for him.

"You've done a good job, Harry," she said, smiling at him briefly. "Tonks, how did you get here?"

"He called me on his ring," Tonks sobbed suddenly helpless as she felt her husband slipping away from her. Remus was fading in and out of consciousness. "We have rings like yours and Harry's. He needs to go to St. Mungo's."

"Yeah. Here," Ginny said briskly. "Pre-programmed Portkey. I'll put it on his chest and you touch it. When I activate it, you'll go to St. Mungo's. Tell him to get well! Harry needs him!"

Remus woke up again when Ginny placed the Portkey on his chest. "Harry?" he murmured. Harry turned back to his godfather, taking his hand in his. "Take care of yourself, lad," Remus murmured, patting his godson's hand weakly with his free hand.

"I'll do my best," the boy replied.

"That's all any of us can ask," his godfather said, his eyes grave. "I love you, Harry. Don't ever forget that."

"I won't," Harry vowed. "I love you too. Now you get well. You have a baby to raise, and you'll have to give me and Ginny pointers when we have our kids," he teased, with a hint of his cheeky smile.

Remus studied the boy's battle-weary face hungrily. He didn't know if he'd ever see Harry again. Remus knew he was in very bad shape, and that Harry still had a terrible battle to finish. His eyes roved over the beloved face of his godson, memorizing every detail, from the exhaustion in his posture, to the sad resolve in his eyes, to the cuts and spell burns covering nearly every exposed inch of skin.

"I'll see you soon," Harry said, patting his godfather on the arm.

He sat back as Ginny tapped both Portkeys and counted down, "Three, two, one." In an instant, Remus, Tonks and Kingsley were gone

Harry and Ginny sat side by side watching the chaos around them. For the moment, they were in a tiny space of perfect peace while the battle raged a short distance away. Harry took Ginny's hand in his and turned it over, studying its small, neat nails, the wrinkles at her knuckles, the calluses on her palm from playing Quidditch. He lifted her hand and kissed her

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palm, nestling his cheek inside it. "This isn't the time or place or how I wanted to do this, but I need to ask you something," he said, his voice low and serious.

Ginny tore her eyes from the battle spread out before them and stared at him, her brow furrowed in confusion. "What?"

"Will you marry me? I want to know we're going to spend our lives together forever," he said, gazing earnestly into her eyes.

Ginny cupped his cheek with her hand, tears glistening in her eyelashes. "This isn't the time or place or how I wanted you to do this, but yes, Harry. I would love to be your wife. And the sooner the better. I don't care about extra study. I don't want to be a healer anymore. I just want to live with you forever."

A slow smile crossed Harry's weary face. "I'll hold you to that promise, you know."

"And I'll hold you to yours," she said, leaning in to kiss him. The kiss was brief but heartfelt and deep. "Come back to me, Harry."

"I will," he promised. He kissed her palm once more and stood up, said, "I love you, Ginny," then strode determinedly across the battlefield into the thick of the fray. He soon disappeared over the ridge of the hill, leaving felled Death Eaters in his wake.

"I love you, Harry," Ginny said quietly as she watched him go, her heart in her throat.

After a moment, Ginny swallowed her tears and jumped on her broom, then took to the skies again, searching for more injured people while trying to keep an eye on Harry. She growled in sudden fury. There were photographers filming the battle, just sitting on their brooms taking pictures and filming! She sent a furious Adfero to Dumbledore and Ron, then quickly changed positions before the Death Eaters could fire at the spot where the Adferos had originated.

Ron sent her a quick reply. "They're Ministry people recording the battle. Can you believe it? Are you OK?"

"I'm fine, but Remus is in a bad way. I had to send him to St. Mungo's – Kingsley too. I don't know if either of them will make it," she sent back to her brother. Suddenly she saw why Dumbledore hadn't answered her Adfero. He and Harry were fully involved in battle with Voldemort. When Harry had gone over the hill, Voldemort must have reappeared, or else he'd already been fighting with Dumbledore when Harry rejoined that battle. Their fight was why most of the cameras were aimed over that little hill – the main battle was taking place in the clearing between the back of the house and the woods. She hovered high enough to be safe so she could watch the battle. Harry was still fighting strongly, but Dumbledore seemed to be hurt, or tiring.

Harry had noticed Dumbledore stumbling a bit, but kept his distance from his mentor. He knew that if he moved toward him, Voldemort would have his two targets close enough together to do far more damage. Staying apart kept Voldemort busy, kept him guessing, kept him so occupied that he might, at some point, make a mistake. If nothing else, he was beginning to tire. Harry and Dumbledore had both unleashed their full power. The ground shook with the magic filling the air in that small clearing.

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"You didn't learn your lesson the last time, you young whelp," Voldemort snarled as whip lashes appeared out of the end of his wand.

"That trick won't work this time," Harry cried defiantly, sending a Severing Charm at the whip, cutting the lashes off near the wand's tip.

"I can always make more," the evil wizard growled as more lashes emerged from his wand.

"Seems like a waste of a perfectly good wand to me," Harry quipped, severing the lashes again and casting a Bone-Removing Hex an eye-blink later. Voldemort managed to evade the hex and cast another spell Harry's way. Their taunts stopped as they got down to the serious business of trying to kill each other.

Ginny glanced over her shoulder at the battle between the Aurors, Order members, D.A. and the Death Eaters. *Looks like the tide has finally turned in our favour*, she thought as she saw more Death Eaters fall and several D.A. squads advancing rapidly.

She looked back toward Harry and his battle. She knew that he would die today if that's what it took. He was not going to let this war go on any longer, no matter what it required of him. He was magnificent. His hair crackled with magical power, blowing around as if in a stiff breeze, but it was his own magic causing the movement. She'd never seen him with his magic fully revealed. Now his body was enveloped in a golden aura. Gold sparks leaped out of the ends of his hair. She suddenly understood why it would never lie down neatly and always seemed to have a life of its own – it did. His magic was so powerful, his hair couldn't simply lie flat on his head. Gold sparks flew from the ends of his fingers as more powerful spells than she could ever imagine poured out of his wand. Voldemort was visibly weakening. *Go, Harry! You've got him! Go!* she thought eagerly. A glance at her headmaster showed her Dumbledore was also weakening.

Suddenly, a group of Death Eaters surged over the ridge and down into the small clearing where Harry's battle was raging. D.A. members streamed after them, firing spell after spell, trying to stop and turn them before they got too close to Harry, Dumbledore and Voldemort.

Voldemort saw his opportunity and began firing spells at the D.A. members. Several fell before Harry was able to distract the evil wizard again. Death Eaters took the advantage Voldemort had given them and turned to fight at close quarters.

Dumbledore was near the D.A. and Death Eaters' battle. He glanced at Harry and saw the boy was still fighting well, in good control of his abilities and fully concentrated on his nemesis. Dumbledore turned to protect his students, shooting down Death Eaters as quickly as he could manage. He kept fighting, trying to help the D.A. members.

"Send reinforcements to Dumbledore," Ron told Hermione.

"We don't have any left!" she cried. "They're scattered all over the battlefield."

"Then send the Flying Squad. They need something to break the enemy's momentum," he said grimly. The Flying Squad was soon soaring over the clearing, doing their best to bomb the enemy and not their own people. The battle surged back over the hill toward the house again

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as the D.A. finally managed to do what they'd been trained to do, and "clear away" when Harry was fighting Voldemort.

The Flying Squad turned the tide. Dumbledore followed the action over the hill and helped overcome the remaining Death Eaters. Other skirmishes were still ongoing in various areas around the house, but the Death Eaters were definitely losing now.

Meanwhile, Harry and Voldemort were fighting even more furiously than before.

"Why aren't you dead yet?" Voldemort snarled at one point.

"I'm too busy having fun to die," Harry snapped.

"Fun, is it? How are you enjoying this?" Voldemort snarled, his green eyes flashing.

"You know, green really isn't your colour," Harry quipped, sending a Conjunctivitis Curse at the dark wizard's face.

Voldemort managed to dodge part of it, but some of the spell hit his eyes and made it hard for him to see. Add the growing darkness of nightfall to the mix and he was having serious trouble aiming his spells properly.

The battle raged on. The tide had turned again. A group of Death Eaters had the D.A. squads nearest Harry and Voldemort surrounded. Voldemort tired of playing with Harry and Disapparated, giving Harry time to help his friends fight the overwhelming force. Harry and Dumbledore fought side by side for a while, but then the fighting separated them again.

Harry was doing his best to disable, not kill, his opponents. There had already been enough killing in his life, and he was sickened by it. He knew that the Bone-Removal Curse worked well if he did on the limbs, not the torso, of his enemies, but it was tricky to aim that well in battle conditions. He wound up removing all the bones from several Death Eaters in the heat of battle and knew they would die a horrible death if no one got to them in time to replace the bones of their torsos so they could breathe. *They made a choice. They're dying with it*, he told himself sternly. The Knee-Reversing Jinx was working well when he could aim it properly, but it had to actually hit the person's knees to work. Aiming with that kind of precision was very difficult in the heat of battle, but he was hitting his targets successfully more than he was missing. Not one person hit with it could manage to move once their knees worked in the opposite way from normal. They soon fell over and were then relatively easy to subdue.

As the Death Eaters' number steadily diminished, the tide of the battle finally turned again. Harry and his friends were winning – but at that moment, Voldemort chose to return.

"I've tired of playing with you, Harry," Voldemort snapped. "It's time to finish this."

"Yes, it is," Harry said grimly, knowing the monster had retired from the battlefield again simply to allow Harry time to get exhausted from continuing the battle. Here he was, injured, fatigued, heartsick, and facing a rested and refreshed Voldemort. Life just wasn't fair sometimes.

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They threw spell after spell at each other, Harry ducking and rolling to get away, Voldemort leaping with surprising agility, or each of them Disapparating just as a spell was about to hit. Many of Harry's spells were getting through the Dark Lord's defences, though, and he was beginning to tire again, at long last.

Harry glanced around quickly. His friends were doing their best to keep the remaining Death Eaters away from him and Voldemort so he could concentrate on his battle. A large enough space had just opened around them so that he finally felt safe doing his Sphere Shield Charm. As powerful a spell as it had become for him, if anyone inadvertently got too close to the outside of it before he had it properly stabilized, they could get sucked into it and quite possibly die, so he'd had to wait as the battle raged around him until the proper amount of space cleared out.

Using both his wand and his other hand, Harry cast the spherical shield over Voldemort, and started condensing the sphere to make it both thicker-walled and smaller. The smaller and denser it became, the harder it was for him to manage it. He felt the griffins and phoenixes on the wand's handle doing their tap-dance in his palm as they added their power to the wand.

Harry heard himself moaning, "Help me, help me," as he fought to control the sphere. The most powerful Dark wizard in the world was inside it, fighting madly, throwing spell after spell, many of which nearly breeched the delicate shield. Harry ignored the glare of those weird eyes, so hauntingly like his, and the spells the monster was casting, and concentrated on increasing the thickness of his shield. "Help me," he moaned once more, then saw Ron, Ginny and Hermione all racing to join him. They cast their spheres over his and condensed them, as Harry had taught them, their spheres converging over Harry's. Swirls of golden light shimmered as the three new spheres covered Harry's deep gold one, the colours pulsating strongly as they wrapped around each other and began to blend together.

Harry gave a big push of magic and the various sphere shields merged with a deep gong-like sound, the sphere itself turning crystal clear and glowing like a star. They could see Voldemort struggling inside, shooting spells and blocking them as fast as he could, but weakening, falling down in exhaustion as often as he dodged his own spells.

Harry was shaking now, the fiddly, difficult charm taking every ounce of strength he had. He moaned "Merlin! Help me!" Both Merlin and Fawkes left their healing tasks, landed on his shoulders and began singing their strengthening songs. Harry's heart lifted at the phoenix song, but he was injured, weakened by blood loss, and so weary he had no idea how much longer he could hold out.

"You can do it, Harry!" Ron cried, seeing his friend's distress.

"Keep it up, Harry, he's weakening!" Hermione encouraged him.

"I love you, Harry," Ginny said, her voice weaving a spell inside him. "You can do this. Let's get this over with. Then we can go to Godric's Hollow and build our home." She continued to tell him stories about their future together, heartening him as only she could. Ron and Hermione called their encouragement repeatedly.

Harry felt refreshed, if not renewed, by his friends' encouragement and the phoenixes' song. He knew they were all putting their lives at risk to help him. No one could show greater love

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than that. His heart swelled with tenderness and gratitude, as well as tremendous fear for their safety. He tried to concentrate even more, tuning his ears to Ginny's words, which spun a web of peace and love around him.

She loves me, Harry thought as she spoke. They'd told each other "I love you" so many times in recent months, but somehow it wasn't the same. Harry's heart began beating wildly, pounding with joy and power. He felt a burst of incandescent golden light inside his very soul as he suddenly glimpsed a peaceful, carefree future. *Ginny and I are going to marry and have loads of children and be happy together forever. I'm going to have a family of my own at last! I love her so much!* his inner voice cried triumphantly. The golden aura around his body re-emerged and increased in brightness, sparks coming off his hair and hands in continuous streams now, his hair moving wildly in a wind of his own creation, caused by the magic flowing fiercely from his body.

The sphere was as dense as he could make it. It was time. Now or never. Holding tightly to the warm embrace of Ginny's love, Harry grunted and poured every ounce of magic in his being into his wand, then shouted "*EXCOLO!*"

Within the sphere, Voldemort began spinning in place. An unearthly scream ripped from his throat as he spun faster and faster. The blood he'd stolen from Harry pounded in his veins as Harry's magic took control of it. A golden cloud like the aura around Harry's body coalesced around Voldemort, then rose to the top of the sphere's interior and hovered there. Tendrils of glistening light lowered to touch the evil wizard, briefly envelope him, then rise away from him again, over and over. Voldemort's heart beat faster and faster as Harry's magic drew the blood through him in an ever-increasing tempo. The blood raced through his heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, spleen, limbs, every artery, vein and capillary, the goodness of Harry's blood, now under Harry's control, purifying all the evil it encountered.

The exterior of the sphere began to smoke, a smoke that became a grey mist surrounding the group holding the crystalline sphere intact. Ghosts could be seen within the mist, ghosts who spoke quietly to Harry and then walked right into his back, coming out of his wand and into the sphere to surround Voldemort, who had stopped spinning and now stood quaking before them.

Harry's body shuddered violently as each ghost passed through it, but he fought to hold the spell steady. He began to glow, his skin shimmering brighter and brighter with each ghost that moved through him, as if he was taking on their phosphorescence. There were so many ghosts: James and Lily Potter, Sirius, Casey and her family, Seamus, Cho, Katie Bell, Ben Whittier, Percy, Cedric Diggory, others who'd died either at Voldemort's hand or by his orders, people who Harry had loved or been good friends with, people whose memories he cherished. Harry's ghostly army, all loyal to him, were there for him at his hour of greatest need, there to refine the evil out of Lord Voldemort forever through Harry's Excolo Charm.

Voldemort shrieked and shrank away from the ghosts, who clustered around him and hid him from view. His screams were ear-shattering and seemed as if they'd never end.

Harry glanced up at Ron and nodded toward Hermione, then stepped toward Ginny, trying to get between her and the sphere. "*MOVE!*" he shouted as he gave another push of magic with the very last of his strength, shoving the sphere away from his friends. The sphere burst into light and imploded, the shock wave knocking everyone down.

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Harry's friends lay where they'd landed, stunned and injured by the implosion. Hermione was the first to wake up. She sat up and glanced around. Nearest to her was Ron, his right leg shattered and torn, bleeding profusely. On her other side was Ginny, who was just waking up and turning over, looking for Harry.

Harry had been the closest to the sphere when it blew, and the blasting force had tossed him the farthest away. He looked like a broken doll, his body in an unnatural position, bleeding freely from numerous wounds. Merlin was already working on his master's wounds. Fawkes had gone to help Ron.

"*Harry!*" Ginny screamed, crawling to him, still too dizzy to stand up and walk. "Harry! Wake up!"

"Ah, that's a beautiful sight," said a familiar, drawling voice Ginny hadn't heard in months.

"Malfoy!" she cried, turning her wand on him. He'd just aimed his wand at Harry and said, "*Avada—*" when Ginny and Hermione both hit him with hexes. Ginny's turned him into a cow pat. Hermione's gave him explosive boils. Both girls got to their feet, absolutely furious with the boy who'd tormented them for so many years.

"What shall we do with him now?" Hermione growled.

"My mum says filth should always be cleaned up as soon as possible," Ginny snarled. "Shall we clean house?" Hermione nodded. They pointed their wands at the steaming pile and the two most powerful student witches at Hogwarts poured every ounce of their magic into their wands and cried, "*Scourgify!*" at the same time.

With a wailing cry of anguish, the pile of cow manure with bubbles popping all over it whirled up into the air for a heartbeat and then suddenly Vanished with a loud *crack*. The girls stared at the spot where it had been for a moment with tremendous satisfaction, then turned back to their boyfriends.

Ron was just waking up. He moaned and tried to sit up. "Did we get him?"

Hermione pointed to the emaciated body of a wizened old man in the centre of what had been the sphere. "Yes. That's him."

The ghosts were still there, swirling around the body, staring at it.

"Is he dead?" Ron said with a groan.

"Nearly, I think," Hermione said, glancing over at Voldemort.

The old man's breathing was ragged and shallow. He had scarred craters where he should have had eyes. His nose was a hacked off ruin. His face bore innumerable scars and wounds. He was so thin, his robes engulfed him like a shroud. A small wand-shaped pile of ash lay beside him, all that was left of the wand that had helped the man lying there cause so much evil in the world.

Ron glanced at the body, nodded once and promptly lost consciousness.

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"Ron!" Hermione cried, bursting into tears. She sat cross-legged and cradled his head in her lap, wiping the blood and dirt off of his face with her hands, smoothing his sweaty hair back from his forehead. "Ron, please be all right! Please!"

Dumbledore came stumbling up the hill toward them, badly injured himself. The last time anyone had seen him, he'd been surrounded by Death Eaters and was fighting like the very wrath of God, his countenance fierce, his wand a blur, his long white hair and beard flying in the windstorm created by the massive amounts of magic he was using in battle. Now he simply looked like a weary, heartsick old man.

"How are you all?" he gasped, concerned but needing to catch his breath. He stood weaving in place as he wiped blood from his eyes with the end of his beard.

"Ron's hurt pretty badly, and Harry . . ." Hermione began, then broke down in tears.

"*Harry's dying*," Ginny whispered in shock, too agonized by the thought to give full voice to her grief.

"No. He can't die, not now!" Hermione sobbed.

Dumbledore took a deep breath and blew it out, seeming to gain strength and at least a bit of energy from the exercise. He leaned over the injured young man and said, "He's seriously injured. We'll have to get him to St. Mungo's soon." He patted Ginny on the back. "Do you have your medical kit?"

"Yes," she muttered, still numb.

"Then do what you can for him. The phoenixes have stopped the bleeding, at least. We'll send him on as soon as he's stabilized." He pulled a roll of gauze and some sterile pads from Ginny's kit and handed it to Hermione. "You can bind up Mr. Weasley's leg, Miss Granger. Do it tightly to help stop the bleeding and support the leg. It looks badly broken, and that wound's too big for a phoenix to be able to heal it completely. I'll look at both of them once you girls have finished, and then we'll send them to St. Mungo's." He watched to make sure the girls were taking care of the boys' injuries, then moved to the withered body on the ground. "Tom? Are you still there?"

"Yessssssss," the old man hissed through the horrible gash in his face that was a travesty of a mouth.

"He won, didn't he?" Dumbledore said quietly. "Harry Potter beat Lord Voldemort. Surprised you, didn't he?" He smiled wistfully at the wreck of a man before him. "Tom, you were a good boy once, very much like Harry. What happened?" he said, shaking his head sadly.

"What . . . did he do . . . to me?" the man groaned.

"He refined the dross from your spirit," Dumbledore said. "He didn't kill you. He purified you. All the evil is gone from your soul. That's why your body is different, because so much of it was created by evil methods. All of that has been stripped away. You are simply Tom Riddle once more."

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"Tom . . . Riddle" the man gasped as he breathed his last.

Dumbledore sighed sadly and slid the man's eyelids over his empty sockets. "Rest in peace, Tom – if you can." He glanced at the girls for a moment. "I saw what you did with Mr. Malfoy. I think that was an excellent choice of charm. We do want to cleanse the world of evil, don't we?" he said mildly. The girls nodded briefly. He turned back to the body on the ground before him and said, "*Scourgify*." The remains of the most evil wizard of the age disappeared in an instant.

Dumbledore turned to the ghosts, who were milling around uneasily, staring at Harry's still form. "Thank you so much for your help. You can rest easy now. Lord Voldemort is no more."

The ghosts lined up one by one and walked by Harry's body, James and Lily first in line. They knelt next to him. James ruffled his son's unruly hair, so much like his own. "Well done, lad," his father said.

"We're so proud of you," his mother added, tenderly smoothing the ruffled places James had made in their son's hair. She leaned down and kissed his scarred forehead. "I love you so much, my precious boy." She sat back and leaned against James, who put his arm around her. Each of them kept a loving hand on their son as they watched the procession of ghostly visitors pay their respects to their fallen hero.

"Good work, lad," Sirius said with a rakish grin as he joined James and Lily by Harry's side. "Get well quickly. Ginny needs you. So does Remus. Tell him I'm glad he found Tonks. Enjoy that bike."

It seemed as if the ghostly procession went on for hours, but in reality, only a few moments passed. Percy bent down and looked at his sister, who was still occupied with binding up Harry's numerous wounds. "Ginny?"

"Huh?" she said, startled. "P-P-Percy?"

"I don't have long. Tell Mum I'm sorry. Tell the boys I wish I hadn't been such a prat to them. Tell Dad I'm proud of him. I'm sorry about all those things I said. Tell them for me, will you?"

Ginny nodded, her eyes huge as she stared at the ghost of her third brother.

"And tell Harry I was glad to know him. I'm happy you two got together. Take care of each other. Goodbye."

Ginny simply stared, finally managing to say "Goodbye, Percy," just as he vanished.

The Asher family was near the end of the line, four Muggles still confused by all the magical things they'd seen and experienced, but there because of their feelings for Harry. Little Patricia leaned down and kissed Harry's cheek. "I love you, big brother," she said simply.

Doug and Margaret looked across Harry's body at James and Lily. "He's your son, then?" Doug asked James. "He must be – he looks just like you." James smiled and nodded. "He's a fine young man. It was an honour to know him."

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"Thank you," James said.

"Thank you for looking after him so well," Lily added. "We keep watch over him, but there's so little we can do. You were so kind to him. Thank you."

"It was our pleasure," Margaret said, smiling sadly at Lily. Her heart went out to the other woman, who had been ripped from her son's life far too soon. "He's a wonderful boy."

Casey floated over Harry's body and knelt by Ginny, who was leaning over Harry, tying off the last of the bandages she'd applied, her body rigid with fear until he took his next breath, then relaxing for only a moment before she tensed again, praying for the next breath to come. Ginny glanced up at the ghost beside her.

"I'm glad he has you," Casey told her sincerely. She looked at Ginny a bit longer. Ginny barely nodded, and then Casey merged with her, leaned over and kissed Harry tenderly, a lifetime of love and longing in that kiss. She gazed at him a moment longer, then pulled out of Ginny. "Thanks for that," Casey said sincerely. "Bring him back – he's almost at the border, but he needs to live. You two have a Quidditch team to raise," she said, then joined her parents and sister in the line. She turned back to Ginny and said "Be happy together," before disappearing.

As the last of the ghostly host vanished, James, Lily and Sirius began to fade. Lily turned to Ginny. "You're so good for him. Thank you for loving him. Thank Ron and Hermione for being such good friends to him, too, would you?" Ginny nodded. Lily bent to kiss her son one last time. "I love you, my darling. Be strong. Ginny needs you." With Sirius's last pat on Harry's shoulder and James's last caress of his son's hair, the Potters and Sirius disappeared.

Tears ran down Ginny's cheeks unheeded. Lily Potter had said Ginny was good for Harry, and that she needed him. That meant Harry's parents had given her and Harry's relationship their approval. Ginny's heart filled with joy tempered by sadness that Harry had not been awake to see his parents, to hear what they'd had to say. *I'll have to use his Pensieve so he can see what happened here*, she thought.

And then there was Casey. Casey's blessing on her and Harry's relationship meant a lot to Ginny, unexpectedly so. And how did Casey know about the Quidditch team Ginny and Harry had talked about giving birth to? She almost smiled at the thought, but looking at Harry's motionless body brought her thoughts crashing back down to his present reality.

Please, oh please, make him well! Let him live! He's had such an awful life so far. With Voldemort gone, he can enjoy life. Please give us a chance! Please! she prayed, her fingers interlaced with Harry's. She picked up his wand and pocketed it, then went back to smoothing the hair off of his forehead and willing him with everything in her being to keep breathing, not knowing what else to do. She had no more pre-programmed Portkeys. Even if she'd had one, now that she'd bound up his wounds as well as she could, she was beyond conscious thought or action, feeling suspended in a deep well of grief.

Dumbledore picked up a rock, turned it into a Portkey and sent Harry to St. Mungo's, Ginny holding the rock tightly so she'd go with him. Dumbledore soon sent Ron and Hermione to St. Mungo's as well. All of them were injured by the blast to some extent, although Ron's leg was by far the worst of the lot next to Harry's.

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Harry woke up to find his parents standing beside him. He was in a place of golden light, lovely phoenix song and soft breezes. His parents pulled him into hugs as soon as he noticed them.

"We're so proud of you!" Lily exclaimed, pulling on his shoulders so he'd bend down, then smoothing his hair back and kissing his unscarred forehead.

"You were magnificent, lad," James said, ruffling Harry's hair and clapping him firmly on the back.

"Mum! Dad! Is it really you?" Harry asked, running his hands up and down his mother's back as she held him, reaching over to squeeze his father's shoulder, delighting in the solid feel of both of them. His father was muscular and fit, not as tall or broad-shouldered as Harry, but with equally messy hair and hazel eyes. His mother was petite, a bit taller than Ginny but still dainty and elegant, her long red hair a different shade from any of the Weasley colours. It was strange to see his own eyes in someone else's face. None of the photos he had did her justice. She was quite simply a beautiful woman. Harry hugged her again, breathing in the scent of her. Honeysuckle and roses, fresh air and sunshine, warmth and love. He knew that scent. He remembered it from long ago.

Reluctantly, he released his mum and turned to his dad, hugging him with equal abandon, relishing the feel of the man's strong muscles under his hands, the warmth of his embrace, the rush of love that was palpable between them. He looked at his dad's face, amazed at their resemblance. Except for the shape and colour of the eyes, and Harry's hair being a good bit longer, it was very much like looking in a mirror. They were even close to the same age. Harry wondered for a moment why neither of them were wearing glasses, but he could see perfectly well. He dismissed the thought and revelled in the joy of the moment. Finally, he stepped back and looked from his dad's beloved face to his mum's, holding his father's shoulder with one hand, his mother's hand with the other. He was afraid to let go of them. He couldn't remember being happier.

"It's so wonderful to see you! It's a dream, though, isn't it?" he said cautiously.

They both shook their heads solemnly, their eyes suddenly sad.

"Then . . . I'm dead?" he said, wondering how he felt about this. Harry knew he was excited to be with his parents at last, but he also knew he'd left a lot of loved ones behind, one little redhead in particular. "Am I dead?" he repeated slowly.

"Not yet," James said quietly. "You're 'between.'"

"It's so good to see you, to be able to hold you, Harry, we can't tell you what a thrill it is for us!" his mother said running her hands over his heavily muscled arms and chest. "You're so tall, so muscular, so handsome! You look wonderful!"

"Thanks," he told his mother, noticing that her eyes crinkled just like his when she smiled. He stood quietly a moment, savouring the experience of finally being with his parents, able to touch them, to talk with them, to hear their voices, to be held by them. He finally sighed and asked the necessary question. "What's 'between?'"

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"You're not dead yet, lad," James told him gravely. "You have to make a choice."

"Is Sirius here?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Yes," James replied, and beckoned Sirius over.

"Sirius! I'm so sorry! If I hadn't been so thick—"

"It was my time, Harry. Don't you worry about it," Sirius said, punching him lightly in the shoulder. "Remus had the right of it – I would've wanted to go in battle or while doing something else equally exciting or stupid." His bark of a laugh rang out. Harry had missed its sound. "It's great to see you! You've grown up quite a bit!"

"Yeah, I have," Harry said with a laugh. "Good to see you too!" he added, pulling the man into a hug. "I've missed you."

"And I you."

"Remus and I got your motorcycle running," Harry said excitedly. "It's brilliant!"

"That's great!" Sirius said with a rakish grin. "Chicks love a man on a motorcycle."

"Harry, we need to talk about your choice," James reminded him. "You don't have much time left."

"We're all so glad to see you, but it's not your time yet, sweetheart," his mother said, her heart in her eyes as she ran her fingers through his thick, glossy hair.

"I don't know what to do! I love you! I want to stay with you!" Harry said, knowing in his heart he also wanted to go back to the other people who loved him. "There's so much we need to talk about! I want to spend more time with you!"

"You have friends who love you and want you back. You have a life to live," James replied simply. "We'll have plenty of time to talk later."

"We're delighted you and Remus became close," Lily said, stroking his cheek gently and studying his face with eyes full of love. "And Ginny is perfect for you, sweetheart. She needs you."

"I'm glad you stopped being so thick and recognized what a little gem she is," Sirius teased. "Looks like you two are having a *pretty good time* together." He winked and gave Harry a leering grin. "We've enjoyed watching you two learn to love each other."

Harry was horrified. "You *watched*?"

Sirius, James and Lily just laughed merrily.

"We were young once ourselves," James assured him.

"Then you don't mind?" Harry asked nervously.

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"Why would we mind? You aren't perfect, but you've been as responsible a young man as we could have asked," Lily said. "We might have wanted you to wait a bit longer, but the way your life has been, I don't blame you for embracing whatever happiness you could find."

Sirius chuckled and added, "And you would've been a bloody boring ponce if you'd been perfect!" James nodded his agreement.

Harry smiled, his face radiant as his soul flooded with more love than he'd ever thought possible.

Lily smoothed his hair off his forehead and kissed him once more where his scar had been. "It's time, sweetheart. You must choose now."

Harry's head spun around, suddenly noticing a voice in the distance calling him. He saw a hazy image of Ginny calling desperately to him. "But I want to stay," he said plaintively, turning back to his parents and Sirius.

"You have to choose," Lily said, motherly concern in her eyes. "You need to live a full life, sweetheart. Life passes so quickly. The afterlife goes on for eternity."

"I believe you and Ginny have a Quidditch team to raise," James added with a grin.

Harry gazed sadly at them, memorizing their faces as much as possible. "I love you. I love you all," he said.

"We love you too, sweetheart," Lily replied with a smile. "We want you to have a long and happy life. If you're going to go, it has to be now."

He nodded, sighed, and took one step back from them, and then everything went dark.

In St. Mungo's, the healers worked feverishly over Remus. Tonks hovered nearby, refusing to leave no matter how awful the procedure they were doing on him.

"You say he recently started taking some kind of cure for lycanthropy?" the healer in charge asked her sharply. "Do you know what's in it?"

"No, but it should be in his pocket. He has to take some every eight hours," she said, digging into the pockets of his discarded robes. "Here. This is it."

The healer read the label and snapped new orders to his assistants. "We need to change the medication. We need Clotting Potion and Blood Restoring Potion, as well as the others I mentioned. He may be a werewolf, but with this stuff in his system, he's not going to heal himself, not quickly enough, at any rate." He moved his wand and crystal over Remus's body, cataloguing every injury as he came to it. "Who treated him at the battlefield?"

"Harry Potter," Tonks replied.

"Harry Potter? He's not a healer," the man snapped.

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"You don't know him the way we do," Tonks snapped back. "He has a special healing skill. He can sense injuries and concentrate his magic to heal quite a few of them. Ask Marcus Pomfrey if you don't believe me."

"Marcus mentioned some teenager with such a skill, but he never said it was Harry Potter," the man said, studying Tonks's face momentarily.

"Harry doesn't advertise his skill," Tonks replied testily. "How's my husband?"

"Borderline," the man muttered, still working frantically to catch all the bleeders. Remus was whiter than the sheets now. Blood-Restoring Potion wasn't working fast enough to help him.

"If he needs blood, he can have mine," Tonks offered through her tears.

"Check Mrs. Lupin's blood to see if she's a match for him," the healer ordered his helpers absently. He glanced up at Tonks. "We're bringing blood up from the store room now, but with the number of casualties we're treating due to this battle, your offer is most appreciated."

Fortunately, Tonks's blood was a good match for Remus's, and the transfusion began. She lay on a bed beside his, looking at the blood going from her arm into his, and pushed some of her magic into the blood as well, hoping it would help him heal faster. His colour improved with the infusion of blood, but he remained unconscious.

A flurry of sound erupted just outside their room.

"*Help! Please, somebody! Healer Pomfrey! Help!*" a young woman shrieked.

Tonks recognized the voice as Ginny's and heard the sound of running feet. The desperation in Ginny's voice frightened Tonks more than she cared to admit. She couldn't help them right now, but she could and would help Remus. "Harry must be here, Remus," she said. "You need to wake up so you can see him. Come on, handsome, wake up. I want to see those pretty eyes and that wicked smile of yours. Wake up, babycakes. Please!"

Mayhem reigned in the corridor as numerous healers and nurses rushed to Harry's aid, pushing Ginny aside. Healer Pomfrey strode into the mass and took charge.

"He's my patient. Take him in here," Marcus said, directing them to a treatment room across from Remus's. As soon as they got Harry settled, Marcus started examining and treating him.

"Where's Remus?" Ginny asked through her tears. "Is he all right?"

"He's in there," Marcus said, pointing to Remus's room. "I don't know how he is. I'm sorry. I've been working on other people."

"That's all right. Harry will just want to know when he wakes up," she said in a small voice. She had done everything she knew how to do for him, and it wasn't enough, it wasn't *nearly* enough. She could feel him slipping away.

Marcus looked at Ginny and stopped what he was doing for a moment as he bent down and said, "Scar on my sister's elbow." She smiled up at him tremulously, appreciating his effort in

giving his password. As he went back to work, he went on, "I should tell you, Ginny, that since the attacks last night, the hospital has been in a lockdown situation. No one in or out but patients, and we're being very careful about them. Every staff member left has been carefully screened. We're working double and triple shifts, since some of the staff turned out to be Death Eaters and our next shift workers haven't been allowed to come in. Every staff member left is trustworthy, I'd stake my life – and Harry's – on it. I don't think we'll need the password system while the hospital is so tightly sealed up. It will slow things down considerably, anyway, and we're racing to treat people as quickly as possible. Is that all right with you?"

"To not use passwords?" Ginny asked, a bit confused. She was under such stress, her brain simply wasn't working as well as it normally did.

"Yes," Marcus said, hoping she understood. With everyone racing around so much, it would be impossible to ask each staff member for a unique password.

"Yes, if you think it's safe for Harry," Ginny said quietly.

"I do. Thanks for understanding. I'll do my best to give him each of his medications myself, and be available for you whenever you need me. Just send me a message and I'll be here as quickly as I can, all right? Harry is my primary concern," Marcus said sincerely.

"Thank you," Ginny replied.

"We need to take you to a treatment room, miss," a nurse said kindly.

"I won't leave him!" Ginny said, frantic. She pulled her wand and pointed it very seriously at the nurse who was trying to lead her out of the room.

"Leave her where she is. Get someone to examine her here," Marcus said. He looked at Ginny for a moment. "You're injured. Harry would want you to be treated. Just cooperate with the healer when he examines you, all right? Then you'll be taken care of quickly and can go back to doting on Harry." He smiled at her briefly and went back to work on Harry.

The ward erupted in commotion again as Ron and Hermione arrived. Soon they were each in a treatment room, and Merlin, who had stayed with Ron to keep working on his wounds, flew into Harry's room and perched on a curtain rod where he could observe what the healers were doing for Harry.

Hermione was quickly treated and released. She immediately went to find Ron. He had shielded her from the blast at the last moment, putting his big body between her and the pulsating sphere he knew would blow at any second. He'd braced his right leg and shoved her away, so his leg took the majority of the blast. He was in bad shape. Ginny had been shielded by Harry. When he'd done the final thrust of magic into the sphere, he'd pushed it away from his friends and stepped in front of Ginny to protect her from the explosion.

Casualties from the battlefield arrived continually, making the hospital a noisy, frightening place. Ginny sat next to Harry and took his hand in hers, trying not to listen to the staff who were so anxiously working on him, and only answering the healer working on her in monosyllables. Once he was finished with her, she sat like an island of calm in a raging sea, letting the staff do whatever they wanted to except for moving her. That she would not do.

The Time of Destiny

Merlin sat on the head of Harry's bed, having healed all of the wounds on Harry and Ginny that he could, singing his lovely songs of comfort, but they weren't comforting Ginny now.

Ginny looked at Harry's hand. His palm was burned with images of griffins and phoenixes that matched the carvings on his wand.

"Nurse?" she said quietly to the woman standing closest to her.

"What is it?" the woman snapped.

"His hand's burned. Could I have some essence of Murtlap for it? Or something else? This has to hurt," she said simply.

The woman glanced down at Harry's hand. "Yes, he is badly burned. He has a lot of other more serious injuries right now, young lady. We'll get to that later."

"I can do this," Ginny murmured. She got up and found her bag, which had been shoved against the wall, then reached into it and pulled out her burn ointment.

"What are you doing?" the nurse snapped when she saw Ginny sit back down by Harry and open the ointment.

"I can do this for him," Ginny insisted.

"Leave her alone," Marcus told the nurse. "She knows what she's doing."

Ginny gave him a grateful look and started rubbing the ointment into Harry's hand, working it into every wrinkle in his palm, into the creases in his fingers, rubbing gently until the potion was fully absorbed. She put her small pot of medicine away and took his hand in hers again, sighing. "I wish I could do more for you, baby," she said, leaning forward to wipe some blood from his face with her fingers.

"Here," another nurse said kindly, handing her a bowl of warm water and a flannel she'd been about to use. "You can wash him. That would be a help."

"Thank you!" Ginny said, truly grateful for the woman's kindness. She began washing his face, carefully cleaning the blood out of the shell of his ears, out of his eyelashes, out of his nostrils, away from his mouth. She carefully worked on a bloody patch in his hair thinking there must be a wound hidden there, but apparently the blood was from some other part of his body, because his scalp there was uninjured. Her cleaning revealed the numerous cuts and burns on his face and neck.

"Well done, Ginny," Marcus said, glancing up at her work. "How about doing his arms next?"

She set to work with a will, knowing they were keeping her busy while they worked on his most serious injuries, but that what she was doing was also a help. Merlin came behind her, pouring tears into whatever open wounds he could find.

The Time of Destiny

"That's all I can do for him for now," Marcus said with a sigh a short time later. "Now we wait." As he and the rest of his team stepped back from Harry's still form, Merlin hopped down and nestled next to Harry's side, continuing his healing song.

"How is he?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"I won't lie to you, Ginny. It doesn't look good. It's up to him now," Marcus said sadly.

"It doesn't look good?" she said in a tiny voice. "Tell me the truth, Marcus."

He studied her face. She had that determined look that told him she was going to keep after him until he was honest with her. He sighed, not wanting to put into words what he was thinking. "Are you sure?"

"Tell me!"

He sighed again. "All right then. He has a tremendous number of serious internal injuries, any one of which would take a long time to heal even with wizarding medicine. The combination of things that are wrong with him, and the amount of blood he's lost, and he's weak, exhausted . . . well, if he had just one or two of the things wrong with him that he has now, he'd be in bad shape, but he could recover. With the combination he's got. . . ." He let that thought dangle.

Ginny gulped, and forced herself to say, "What are his chances?"

Marcus clasped her shoulder and looked at her gravely. "Do you really want to know?" When she nodded, he said, "Right now, he has about a ten percent chance to live, Ginny. But he's a fighter. He could pull through. Don't give up on him."

Ginny felt as if her chest was caving in, her heart had contracted so tightly at hearing the news. She was beyond tears for now. She just stared at Marcus in disbelief for a long moment, then nodded, swallowed hard and went back to gently washing the blood and dirt off of Harry. Marcus patted her sympathetically on the shoulder and left to see to his other patients.

A short time later, the door opened just a crack and someone peeped in. "There you are!" Molly Weasley said in relief. "I've been looking everywhere!"

Ginny glanced up at her mother, then turned back to her task. "Hi. How's Ron? His leg looked pretty bad."

Molly leaned down and pushed Ginny's long hair behind her ear so she could see her daughter's face. She looked from Ginny to Harry then, gasping at how pale Harry looked. "How is he?" she murmured.

Ginny shook her head, willing herself not to cry. "Not so good."

"What's wrong with him?"

"It might be easier to say what isn't wrong with him," Ginny replied quietly.

The Time of Destiny

"Tell me," Molly urged, sounding much as her daughter had not that long ago.

Ginny had been listening more carefully than she'd realized while the healers worked. "He has a lot of broken bones. They've managed to mend most of them already. Most of his internal organs are damaged, some of them quite badly. He has a concussion. He's been bleeding internally. They think they have it stopped, but there might be other places they haven't found yet. He's lost a lot of blood. They've given him a transfusion. I offered my blood, but," here she finally broke into sobs, "they wouldn't take it."

"Why not?" Molly asked, taking her grieving daughter into her arms and rocking her gently. "Why wouldn't they, baby?"

"B-b-because I was injured too."

Molly pushed her back and looked her over thoroughly, tucking stray wisps of Ginny's hair behind her ears, sliding her fingers through her daughter's hair searching for bumps, cuts, wounds of some kind. "Where are you injured? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine now. I had a concussion and some cuts and spell burns, but they fixed most of them." Ginny pulled away angrily from her mother's still-searching hands. "I'm all right, Mum! It's Harry!"

"Let's see, then," Molly said, bending over the boy she loved as much as one of her own. She'd bent over this young man this way far too many times, trying to find out where he was injured and how she could help. "He does look a bit peaky."

"He's got a lot more colour than he did a little while ago," Ginny said, nodding toward the transfusion bag which was half empty now.

Molly got another flannel and started washing Harry's other leg, following Ginny's example.

"Tell me about the others," Ginny said, hoping for some good news. "How's Ron's leg? How's Hermione? They were caught in the blast along with Harry and me."

"Ron's leg is . . . well" Molly had to stop and clear her throat, doing her best not to cry. "It's badly damaged."

"How badly?" Ginny asked slowly, hearing something in her mother's voice that scared her terribly.

Molly looked up at her daughter, her eyes full of tears. "He may lose the leg, Ginny."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "*What?*"

"The bone is broken into tiny little pieces. They've tried to reassemble it, but now they're worried about infection. If it doesn't start to mend quickly" She shook her head, angrily wiping tears off her cheeks with the back of her wrist.

"Oh, no! How's he taking it?"

The Time of Destiny

"They have him so drugged up right now, he has no idea what's going on."

"How's Hermione?" Ginny asked nervously.

"About the same as you, I think, although she didn't get any cuts. Spell burns and a concussion. She's feeling very guilty. She keeps saying Ron wouldn't have gotten hurt so badly if he hadn't tried to protect her." She shook her head, and then went on. "What happened?"

"We got hurt when Harry killed Voldemort. I'll tell you about it later. How's everyone else? Dad? Fred? Bill and Charlie?"

Molly stopped working and stared off into the distance, unable to speak. Her face was a study in tension.

"Mum? What's wrong?"

"Your dad's doing well," she said quickly. "He lost some blood and had some serious spell damage, but they expect a full recovery in a few days."

"The boys?"

"George stayed in Grimmauld Place, although I had to put a spell on his bed so he couldn't get up. He was determined to join the fight. Fred is fine. Just a few cuts and bruises, nothing serious at all. Apparently, sailing above it all on a broom and lobbing bombs is a much safer way to fight a war than on your own two feet face to face with the enemy." She lost all control then, burying her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

"Bill? Charlie?" Ginny asked, afraid of the answer.

"Charlie has a broken arm and some spell burns. Bill . . . Bill's . . ."

"He's not . . . dead?"

Molly nodded wordlessly, her face contorted with grief.

"NO! Not *Bill*!" Ginny gasped, reaching across Harry's still form to squeeze her mother's arm. "Not Bill?" Molly nodded wordlessly.

The news about Bill hit Ginny hard, but she was already so numb from shock and grief that it didn't much matter that she'd been hit with another horrible bit of news. She took a deep breath and willed herself to be strong, then looked at her heartbroken mother. "Oh, Mum, I'm so sorry! How are you managing? Here you are, trying to help me. . . ."

"I'm heavily medicated right now, sweetheart, or I'd be screaming," Molly assured her. "They tried Cheering Charms, but even the strongest ones had no effect."

"Do the others know?" Ginny asked hesitantly.

The Time of Destiny

"Ron doesn't. I don't know what to do. I mean, we've just lost Percy! And now *Bill!*" Molly's voice had risen to a shriek. She threw down the flannel and paced around the room anxiously, tearing at her hair in her distress.

"What's going on in here?" Marcus said, coming into the room suddenly. "I heard someone yelling."

"My mum," Ginny began, then shrugged, not knowing what else to say. If she mentioned the deaths of either of her brothers, she'd be crying uncontrollably along with her mum. She glanced from Marcus to her mother, then went back to washing Harry.

"Mrs. Weasley, you need to rest," he said kindly, putting his arm around her. "Come on, your husband has been asking for you."

"Oh, he has?" she said, her eyes searching his. "My children are scattered all over this hospital. I couldn't find Ginny. . . ."

"She's doing very well," Marcus assured her. "Come on, Harry needs peace and quiet. He's not allowed any visitors for a while. You can come back later, all right?"

Molly nodded and started to follow him out of the room, but then she turned back to her daughter. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't seem to. . . ."

Ginny ran to her mother and embraced her. "It'll be all right eventually, Mum. Give Dad my love. Tell him I'm fine, and that I'll come see him when Harry's better."

After settling Molly into a comfortable chair in Arthur's room, Marcus returned to check on Harry.

"How's he doing?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"His colour's a bit better, but he's not out of the woods yet," Marcus told her, his eyes sad. He turned to her. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not. Would you like a Cheering Charm or some potion to help you relax?"

"No. I want to be alert so I can help Harry," she said stubbornly.

"That's what I thought," he said, smiling down at her. "You're quite a young lady, Miss Weasley. He's a lucky man to have you."

"I'm lucky to have him," she said, her lower lip trembling as she fought back tears.

Dumbledore strode into the room just then. "There he is!" he said when his eyes lit on Harry. "How is he?"

"Not too good, Professor," Marcus said, shaking his head as he washed his hands. "I don't know what else to do for him."

The Time of Destiny

"Let me have a look," Dumbledore said, moving next to Harry's bed. "How are you, Miss Weasley?" he said kindly.

"I won't know that until he's better," Ginny said, continuing to wash blood off Harry's limbs.

"Do you have the same healing power Harry does?" Marcus asked the headmaster quietly.

"No. I wish I did. But Harry has shown me a trick or two that might come in handy, and I do have a few ideas of my own." He turned toward the door. "Fawkes! In here!" The phoenix flashed into the room and settled on the opposite side of Harry's body from Merlin. They crooned their soothing songs, doing what they could to help him heal.

"We've been busy on the battlefield helping to sort out those who needed to come here and those who could go to the hospital wing," Dumbledore said by way of explanation. He put his hands on either side of Harry's head and started slowly working his way down the young man's body, sensing for wrongness inside him. When he got to Harry's abdomen, he paused. "He's bleeding inside, just here. I don't know anatomy well enough to say for certain, but I would guess it's his liver? Possibly?"

"I didn't find a site of bleeding there," Marcus said in concern.

"It's smallish, I believe," Dumbledore said, placing his hands carefully on Harry's body. "I don't know how to heal such things. Harry showed me how to sense for them, but I don't trust myself on it yet. But I can definitely feel a wrongness here."

Marcus examined Harry again, and added another potion to his IV. "Anything else?"

"He has lost a lot of blood, yes?" Dumbledore said.

"Yes."

"I want to give him some of mine," Dumbledore said firmly.

"Professor, you're in no shape to—" Marcus began.

"I will be the judge of that," Dumbledore replied.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I just can't do that. I've got him on a transfusion from our blood storage. That will have to do."

"He can have mine!" Ginny offered.

"You've been injured too, although you keep ignoring my advice to rest," Marcus told her fondly. "No, you can't give him blood right now. We'll see in a little while if he needs more. I have a lot of other patients to check on, so I'll leave you for a few minutes. I'll check back in a little while," he said distractedly as he hurried out of the door.

Ginny and Dumbledore were left alone with Harry for the moment. Various instruments hummed, beeped or chirped, recording Harry's life force as it struggled to remain in his body.

The Time of Destiny

"I need your help," Dumbledore told Ginny after a moment's reflection. He took a roll of gauze off a supply table. "Here, you'll need this," he said, handing it to Ginny. He gently lifted Harry's freshly washed arm and looked at it, studying the pattern of the veins in it. Then he shoved up his own sleeve and studied the veins there. "Yes," he said, "I think this will do admirably." He picked up the flannel and scrubbed his arm and the tip of the index finger of his left hand clean. He did the same to Harry.

"What will?" Ginny asked, completely lost.

"Watch and see. And cross your fingers. I've never done this before, but it seems logical that it will work," he said hopefully. He pulled a small silver knife out of his pocket and pricked his finger, lifting a drop of blood from it and depositing it in a small flagon he removed from his inside pocket. He pricked Harry's finger and lifted a drop of blood on his knife tip, dripping it into the same flagon. Then he opened a small bottle he drew from another pocket and, after carefully cleaning and drying his knife tip, he dipped the knife into the bottle, drawing out a few grains of some crystalline powder that glowed a rich, cobalt blue. He dipped his knife into the flagon with his and Harry's blood, submerging the crystals in the blood. A quick swirl later, and the blood had turned to a pure, clear gold in colour.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore said, capping the bottle and the flagon, pressing a clean bandage to Harry's fingertip and his own, and tucking the bottle and flagon back in his pocket. A moment later, he checked to make sure both of their fingers had stopped bleeding. "And now we can get down to business," he said with a wink at Ginny.

"Professor, what did you do?" she asked, totally confused.

"I tested our blood. They're a good match, as I expected them to be," he murmured. He lifted his silver knife again and touched it to the crook of his elbow, opening a vein that dripped a steady stream of blood. He did the same thing on Harry's arm, then quickly laid his arm over Harry's so the two streams of blood mingled. "Now wrap our arms together tightly," he told Ginny. "I don't want any of this blood to go to waste."

She did as he instructed and soon Dumbledore's arm was tightly bound to Harry's.

"Now comes the tricky part," he said, taking a deep breath. He tapped their joined arms with his wand, then closed his eyes and concentrated.

Ginny could see the professor getting paler by the moment. "Professor, stop! You're losing too much blood!" she cried.

"Almost done," he said benignly.

"But— "

"Patience is a virtue, Miss Weasley," he said calmly. "Nearly there, I think. Yes. All right, you can take this off now." He touched his wand to the juncture between his and Harry's arms as he pulled away and Ginny could see their skin had actually adhered together, with no blood lost except for the first few drops that had emerged when he'd originally opened their veins. Each phoenix stood and dripped tears in the openings he'd made in their veins, sealing them instantly.

The Time of Destiny

"He looks a bit pinker," she said hopefully.

"I'm not finished yet," he assured her. He passed his wand above Harry's body repeatedly, running the length and breadth of the young man's form over and over, muttering a long incantation under his breath, his eyes closed in concentration. When he finished, he fell into a chair in exhaustion, pale as a ghost himself.

"Professor! Do you want me to call someone?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"No, dear girl, I'll be fine in a few moments. Do you happen to have any sweets in your pockets? I could use a pick-me-up."

She pulled out a box of Peppermint Toads and his eyes lit up with delight.

"Ah, I haven't had any of those in a long time! Thank you."

Ginny sat down and watched Harry's colour improve minute by minute. "Professor," she asked, "what did you do?"

"I gave him a good strong dose of my magic, then controlled my magic within him to help heal and strengthen him," Dumbledore explained as he savoured the sweets she'd given him.

Ginny was stunned. "Does that mean you have less magic? Did you give up your magic for him?"

"No, a wizard cannot give up his magic. He might refuse to use it, but he can't just give it away. It's part of our blood. Since our blood is constantly renewed by the functioning of our bodies, our magic is constantly renewed as well. Don't worry. I'll be fine once I've had enough sweets," he concluded, waving a Peppermint Frog in the air as illustration.

Marcus entered the room once more. "How's our patient doing?" he asked Ginny, but then his eyes fell on Dumbledore. "What's wrong, Professor? You look ill."

"One of my favourite students is lying here in pain, which grieves me greatly," Dumbledore said in all seriousness, "and more of my students, friends and colleagues currently fill both Hogwarts hospital wing and St. Mungo's emergency ward. I believe all of these circumstances could quite logically contribute to my looking ill. And I am rather old, after all," he added as an apparent afterthought.

Marcus gave him a sceptical look, and then turned to Harry, whose colour was vastly improved. "Looks like the transfusion is doing him some good," he said with satisfaction, not noticing the wink Dumbledore gave Ginny behind his back. He looked at the nearly empty transfusion bag, then examined his patient again. "I thought he'd need at least two bags, but he's much better now." He turned and smiled at Dumbledore. "Your catching that little bleeder in his liver probably turned the tide. Thank you."

Dumbledore nodded serenely. "Always delighted to be of assistance," he said with a smile. "Well, I must be going. I have other students to check on."

"Professor?" Ginny said suddenly.

The Time of Destiny

"Yes, Miss Weasley?"

"Have you seen Ron? How's he doing?" she asked anxiously.

"Would you like me to stay with Harry so you can go and see him?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

Ginny hesitated, glancing from her headmaster to her boyfriend's still face. "I don't want to leave Harry. I want to be here when he wakes up."

"I don't think he'll wake up for a while, Ginny," Marcus said kindly. "Ron's directly across the hall, and Remus Lupin's in the room to the right of Ron's. Why don't you go see them? You'll probably feel better once you've seen them yourself."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Harry's not going to wake up soon?"

"Not for a while. I'd say you have at least an hour or so, maybe more, before he stirs," Marcus said, his prediction more optimistic than he really felt.

"I will not leave him until you return," Dumbledore promised. "I could stand a rest myself, quite honestly. I'll be happy to sit with him."

"Well. . .all right, then. Thank you," she said seriously. She bent over Harry and kissed his forehead, whispering, "I'm going to see Ron for a few minutes. I'll be right back, sweetheart," before she left.

"Ginny!" Hermione said as Ginny entered the room. "How's Harry? How are you?"

"I'm fine," Ginny said dismissively, avoiding answering the question about Harry altogether. "How's Ron?" Her brother's vibrant hair looked shocking against the paleness of his face. Even his freckles were pale. He was asleep, his leg in a cast and hung from an overhead contraption.

"You heard about his leg?" Hermione asked quietly, moving away from his bed to speak to Ginny without disturbing him.

"Yes, Mum told me."

"They weren't able to set it the way they wanted to. It's completely shattered. They may have to treat it several times before they get everything lined up the way it should be. And if it gets infected—" she said, her eyes huge and brimming with unshed tears.

"Don't say it," Ginny said fiercely. "Mum told me, but that's just not going to happen."

Hermione put her hand on her friend's arm. "It could happen, Ginny. We all need to be prepared for it."

Ginny bit back a retort. Hermione was going through a similar kind of agony to the one Ginny was experiencing, sitting by the hospital bed of the man she loved, hoping he'd recover.

The Time of Destiny

Hermione didn't need any displays of the famous Weasley temper just now. Ginny pulled her best friend into a warm embrace and held her for a few moments, then moved to sit by Ron's bed. She took one of his large hands in her small one, amazed as always at the contrast. Silent tears ran down her cheeks as she watched him sleep, a grimace of pain crossing his face from time to time.

"Don't they have him on pain potions?" she asked Hermione.

"Yes, but they have to be careful how much they give right now. He's lost a lot of blood. The muscles on his leg were badly torn, and he had big wounds in his back from the explosion, as well. The phoenixes healed those before we left the battlefield," Hermione assured Ginny when she heard her gasp. Ron was lying on his back in the bed. If he'd still had injuries there, he wouldn't be able to lie like that.

The girls sat quietly by his bed watching him sleep. A soft snore escaped him, making both of them giggle unexpectedly.

"That sounds like Ron, all right," Ginny said with a sad smile.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed.

Ginny looked at her watch. "I should get back. Professor Dumbledore is sitting with Harry while I'm gone, and I'm sure he has other things to do."

"Thanks for coming in. I'll tell him you were here."

"Harry and I are just across the hall. Come see us if you get a break. I'm going to pop into Remus's room so I can tell Harry how he is when Harry wakes up." The girls hugged, and Ginny went next door to Remus's room.

"Hi, Tonks," Ginny said as she walked into Remus's room. "How is he?"

"He's . . . he's going to be fine," Tonks said with great determination.

Ginny recognized the attitude. "That bad?" she said quietly.

Tonks kept a brave face for a moment, then dissolved in tears. Ginny held the young woman and cried with her, both of them grieving for the men they loved. Remus had become a father to Harry. If he died . . . Ginny didn't want to think about it. And Harry – she certainly wasn't going to think about that, either.

"How's Harry?" Tonks said when she calmed down a bit.

"About like Remus, I think," Ginny said sadly, "but his colour's better. Professor Dumbledore found some internal bleeding and Healer Pomfrey was able to fix it."

"Oh, that's good," Tonks said, settling back in her chair. "I wish I'd been there. I would have looked after them."

The Time of Destiny

"They would have been hurt trying to protect you and that baby," Ginny reminded her.

"Yeah," Tonks admitted, blushing a bit.

"How is the baby? Have you seen a healer yet to be sure Harry was right?"

"Yes. He was right. I'm about two months along," Tonks said with a small smile. "Hard to believe."

"I'm happy for you, Tonks." She sat there thinking, *At least if she loses Remus, she'll have his child. I wish. . .* She shook herself. That wasn't the right way to think. Harry was going to be fine and they'd have plenty of children a few years from now.

"Well, I should get back to Harry. Professor Dumbledore is staying with him so I could see how Remus and Ron are." She got up to leave.

"I heard about Ron's leg. I hope they can fix it," Tonks said sincerely.

"Me, too," Ginny said. She hugged the other woman and touched Remus's shoulder gently before leaving. "Take care. We're across the hall if you want to come and see us when you take a break."

"OK. See you later. Thanks for coming," Tonks said, settling back in her seat and smoothing her husband's greying hair off of his forehead, much as Ginny had done with Harry so many times. Ginny wondered if it was a universal thing for women to do when their men were ill. She sighed, waved at Tonks and left the room.

After checking on Remus, Ginny went to see her dad and Charlie for a few minutes each. When she returned, she found Harry still unconscious. His colour was better and it looked as if he was breathing a bit more easily.

"Any change?" she asked Dumbledore as she took Harry's hand in hers.

"He seems to be more comfortable. Healer Pomfrey was in just a moment ago and said he was pleased with his progress, although he did add that Harry's not out of the woods yet," Dumbledore replied quietly. "How's your family?"

Ginny swallowed hard, doing her best not to sob. She turned brimming eyes to her headmaster and said, "Did you hear about B-B-Bill?"

"Yes. I'm so very sorry. I thought a great deal of him."

Ginny just nodded, sniffing and trying to call back the tears that threatened to spill down her face.

"Your father? Your other brothers? How are they?" he said kindly.

"Ron . . . he may lose his leg," she choked out. "Charlie and Dad are going to be OK. Fred had only minor injuries. He was treated and released right away."

The Time of Destiny

"And your mother managed to keep George from joining the battle?" Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling a moment at the thought of what Molly might have done to keep George in bed.

Ginny just nodded, then sat down where she could hold Harry's hand. She began smoothing his hair over and over, just as Tonks had been doing with Remus, and as Ginny herself had done so many times before. The contact with him seemed to calm her.

Dumbledore watched her for a moment, then said, "I'm sure that's comforting to Harry."

"He likes it when I do this," she whispered. "He says he loves it when he's a cat and I stroke him, so I stroke him like this when he's human, as well. Sometimes he'll try to purr," she said, her voice breaking. "He's so silly." A sob escaped her for a moment, then she steeled herself again.

"Yes, he is quite silly at times," Dumbledore said with a sad smile, remembering all the times Harry's quirky sense of humour had made him laugh over the years. "You're taking very good care of him, Ginny. Keep up the good work. I'll go and see how everyone else is doing, all right?" She nodded. He patted her gently on the back and then left.

"Harry, please, please wake up," Ginny said for probably the thousandth time. "Please, baby. You need to wake up. Come back to me. You need to get well. Please. . . ." She'd been talking to him for hours, and was exhausted and heartsick. She thought he looked a little better but it was so hard to tell, and he still showed no signs of waking. Ginny pulled her chair closer to his bed and leaned forward, rested her head on the bed and pulled his hand onto her cheek. She held it there, savouring the feeling of his warm hand gently cupping her face. "Please, please, baby, wake up," she moaned. "I need you." She sat up and studied his hand, then kissed each of the impressions of griffins and phoenixes branded into his palm. "I don't know how you held that spell with your wand burning you like this," she said in wonder. "You amaze me." She leaned her head on the bed again and held his palm against her cheek, finally letting the tears come that she'd held back for so long. "Please, Harry. I can't take this much longer. Please wake up." She sobbed into his blanket, trying to muffle the sound. She cried until she had no tears left to shed. She kissed the heart of his palm as it lay against her face and finally gave in to sleep.

Harry heard someone crying. He tried to reach out to her – he was certain it was a woman – but he couldn't get to her somehow. He kept trying, but she was . . . just . . . out . . . of . . . reach. She finally quieted and he relaxed. Someone else must have comforted her. He was glad she wasn't crying anymore. The sound of her sobs nearly broke his heart.

After what seemed like years, he became aware of a warm, softly curved something in his hand, and something that tickled his palm rhythmically. What was it? He struggled against the darkness and finally managed to crack open his eyes, just the least bit. The light hurt his eyes and he quickly shut them again. But what was that in his hand? He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, then opened them again, ever so slowly, letting his eyes get used to the light gradually. There was a redheaded woman seated next to his bed, her head on his bed in what had to be an uncomfortable position. His hand was on her face for some reason. That rhythmic tickling was her breath. With a tremendous effort of will, he stroked her smooth cheek with his thumb.

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Ginny sat up with a start. Something had touched her cheek. What was it? She sat up and looked around. She and Harry were still alone – or were alone again, she didn't know or care which. She looked down at him and her heart leapt to see those green eyes studying her. "Harry!"

Harry tried to speak. "Muh-uh-uh. . ."

"What is it, sweetie?"

"Mum?" he croaked out.

Ginny sat back in shock. "Mum? It's Ginny, baby! Don't you remember me?"

"Ginny?" he whispered slowly, his voice hoarse and scratchy. "I thought . . . you . . . were my mum. Where . . . is she?" He tried to look around the room, but his eyes kept coming back to Ginny.

"Oh, I'm a goose. Here, baby," she said, putting his glasses on his face. "Better?"

He smiled. "Ginny," he breathed contentedly. "Hi."

"Hi yourself, handsome!" she said, happier than she'd been in ages. "It's good to see you awake."

"Good to be . . . awake," he said slowly, trying to look around the room, but too weak to turn his head very far. "Where's . . . my mum? And my . . . dad? Sirius?"

Ginny shook her head in confusion. "I don't know what you mean, baby. They're . . . they're not here. They haven't been here."

"I was . . . just . . . with them," he said, his face puzzled.

Just then, Marcus Pomfrey walked in. "Ah, I see our patient is awake!" he said jovially.

"Marcus, he thinks his parents and his godfather were just here," Ginny said, her face filled with concern, but trying to keep her voice light. She leaned in and whispered, "They're all dead, have been for years."

"Really?" Marcus said, his eyes alight with interest. "Harry, did you just visit your parents and godfather?"

"Yes, they were . . . right here," he said, still confused, but his voice was growing stronger. "Only we . . . we weren't here. We were in a beautiful place. . . ."

As Harry's voice trailed off, his eyes distant, Marcus leaned down to Ginny. "Get a parchment and quill and write down whatever he says. He'll want to remember this."

"What happened to him?" she asked.

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"I'll explain later," Marcus promised. He turned back to Harry. "Tell us about the place where you were, and your family, Harry. Did they talk to you?"

Harry's face was lit with an otherworldly light, his eyes unfocused, his voice soft and tender. "We . . . we were in a beautiful place, gorgeous blue sky, a light breeze, golden light. Great flying weather. There were phoenixes singing. My parents were there. They hugged me and we talked, and then Sirius joined us."

"What did you talk about?" Ginny asked, understanding now why Marcus wanted her to write these things down.

"They know about us, Ginny," Harry said, his eyes finally focusing on her as he smiled. "Dad said we have a Quidditch team to raise. Sirius knows about the motorcycle." A weak snort of laughter escaped him, making him groan in pain for a moment. When he caught his breath, he smiled and said, "He said chicks love it." He studied Ginny for a moment. "My mum is taller than you. Her hair is shorter, but it's still long. It's not a Weasley red. She's so beautiful – her pictures don't do her justice. My dad isn't as big as me but he's strong, like an athlete. Sirius looked great. They all looked wonderful – happy, healthy . . . Mum and Dad weren't much older than me. It was strange, seeing them like that, realizing they were only a few years older than me, and yet they're my parents." His eyes were distant again, his face lit with excitement and joy. "They said they're proud of me," he added in an awestruck voice. "They're *proud* of me." His eyes flashed to Ginny's for a moment. "And they love me, Gin, they all said they love me."

"That's fantastic, sweetheart," Ginny said in wonder. She couldn't imagine anything that would mean more to Harry than actually hearing his parents' approval of him, and hearing them say that they loved him. No wonder he looked so blissful.

"You said you hugged them, Harry," Marcus prompted. "How did they feel?"

"What do you mean? How should they feel? Hugging my mum was wonderful – she smells just like I remember." He smiled and savoured the memory for a moment.

"Where were you?" Marcus asked.

Harry's eyes clouded. "My dad said I was . . . 'between.' He said I had to choose. I wanted to stay with them, but they said I had a life to live and a Quidditch team to raise with Ginny." His eyes cleared and he smiled at his girlfriend, who was wiping tears from her eyes. "Why are you crying?"

"You wanted to stay, but you came back," she said simply.

"I heard you calling me," he replied. "I had to come back. I didn't want to leave you behind." He slowly, painfully lifted his arm and touched her cheek with one gentle finger, wiping away her tears.

Ginny leaned her cheek into his hand, kissing his palm and relishing the wonderful liveliness in his hand now that he was awake. "Thank you for coming back to me, love."

"I plan to love you for a very, very long time," he said, gazing seriously into her eyes.

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"Me, too," she choked out between sobs.

Marcus took the parchment from Ginny before her tears spoiled the ink, and added a few notes himself. "Here, Harry. It's time you had a dose of pain potion. You'll feel the effects of it in a few minutes," Marcus said, holding a small flagon to Harry's lips and lifting the young man's head a bit so he could swallow more easily. "I'll check in on you two later," he said, then quietly left the room.

"Thanks," Harry murmured as he settled back in the bed. He was awake enough now that his pain was becoming a burden. He'd be glad when the potion kicked in. He looked at Ginny again, and wiped more tears from her eyes. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing. I'm just so relieved . . ." she said, waving her hands around ineffectually. "I can't seem to stop crying."

"You look exhausted," he said in concern.

"I am," she admitted.

He opened his arm invitingly. "Come here. You need to rest."

"Oh no, I might hurt you. You were terribly injured."

"I would feel better if I was holding you," he said, a twinkle in his eyes. "Come on. You know you want to. And we'll be breaking school rules again, which is always a plus, right?"

"We're at St. Mungo's, sweetie, not the hospital wing," she said cautiously, a smile tickling the corners of her mouth. Harry was being mischievous. What better sign of returning health could there be?

"Whatever," he said blithely, feeling much better now that the pain potion was starting to work. "Come on."

"You hate St. Mungo's," she said in surprise. "Why aren't you upset about being here?"

"I'm alive, you're alive, we're together – that's good enough for now," he said, yawning hugely. "Scuse me."

"You need to rest."

"Didn't I just wake up?" he asked curiously.

"You were unconscious, silly, not asleep," she said, giving him a cheeky grin through her tears.

"I'm tired," he murmured. "C'mere." He grabbed her hand and pulled, then groaned and lay there panting when that small effort caused him pain.

"See? You're hurt. You don't need me in your bed."

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"Yes . . ., I do. It . . . hurt when you . . . didn't cooperate," he said obstinately between agonized breaths.

Ginny knew that stubborn glint in his eye wouldn't go away easily, so she cautiously climbed onto his bed and lay beside him, resting her head as gently as possible on his shoulder.

"That's better," he said with satisfaction, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "Comfy?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed, laughing as she sniffled, battling more tears.

"If you need to cry, just go ahead and do it," he said gently. "I don't mind." He pulled her closer and kissed her forehead as she nestled against him. "I love you."

"I love you, Harry, so much, I just can't tell you," she said, crying anew because he'd told her he loved her. For an agonizingly long time, she'd been afraid she'd never hear those words from him again. "I just hope I can stop crying sometime this month."

"How is it possible that you're even beautiful when you cry?" he said, gazing down at her.

"You liar!" she teased. "My eyes are red and puffy, my nose . . .we don't want to talk about my nose . . . my face is probably all blotchy. . . ."

"Nope," he said confidently. "You are beautiful. Don't argue with me." He yawned hugely, his jaw cracking, making both of them giggle. "Sorry."

"OK," she said with a blissful sigh and settled her head comfortably on his shoulder. "Love you."

"Love you too," he murmured. In a very short time, both of them were asleep.

Chapter 31 – Harry Lends a Hand

Harry was on his new Firebolt Excalibur zooming high over the stadium filled with screaming fans, looking everywhere for the Snitch. The other players were a blur below him. The only one recognizable was Ron, whose red hair flashed in the sunlight as he covered the three goal hoops. Suddenly, Harry saw the small golden ball and darted after it, sliding smoothly between players from both teams on his way to capture his prize. The other Seeker was nowhere in sight! Harry had just started grinning, excited to be on the cusp of winning a professional Quidditch game, when he gasped, the pain excruciating. Both Bludgers must have caught him full in the stomach – what else could it be? But he hadn't seen or felt them coming! Whatever the cause, he was falling off his broom, holding his injured stomach as tightly as he could, not caring how or when he hit the ground. The pain increased as he fell and he found himself moaning, his breath coming in short, tormented gasps.

Something moved. His shoulder felt lighter, his side suddenly cold, but his belly still burned in agony. He groaned and writhed in his bed, finally opening his eyes to see Ginny's worried face above his.

"Marcus is on the way," she told him. "You must need more potion."

"What . . . where . . .?" he muttered between moans.

"You're in St. Mungo's, remember? You killed Voldemort – do you remember that? You're injured, but you're getting better, Harry," she said insistently. "You're *getting better!*" Ginny prayed she was right. His face was flushed and pale at the same time, his cheeks hot, and he seemed to be in tremendous pain. She had sent a frantic Adfero to Marcus, wherever he was, as soon as she'd realized Harry needed help.

Marcus Pomfrey was checking on another patient in the ward when he heard Ginny's anxious voice, as clearly as if she were standing beside him, say *Harry's in terrible pain. Come quickly!* He turned around, expecting to see her.

"Did Ginny Weasley come in here?" he asked his nurse in confusion as he finished updating his patient's chart.

"No, but there was a silvery light that seemed to touch your head a moment ago," the nurse said with a puzzled frown while staring at the spot where the light had touched him.

"Oh, it must be one of their message spells," he said, glad he'd sorted that out. "I'm finished here. Harry Potter needs me. Come to his room as soon as you've tidied up here, all right?" he told the nurse with a tired smile. She nodded, already picking up empty potion flagons and putting them in the proper bin to be washed and refilled as he hurried out of the room.

"What's going on?" Marcus said a few minutes later as he strode into Harry's room. Ginny filled him in as he examined his patient. "Harry, where does it hurt?" the healer said as he passed both his wand and his crystal over the young man's writhing form.

"Stomach," Harry moaned piteously. "Hurts."

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"All right, we're changing pain potions," Marcus said briskly to the nurse who'd followed him into the room. "I'll have you feeling better in a few minutes, Harry. Hang on."

Harry nodded slightly, then closed his eyes and rolled onto his side, curling into a pain-wracked ball of misery.

"What happened?" Ginny asked anxiously. "He's healing, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's healing. He was in such bad shape before that I had to use a mild pain potion that wouldn't put him too deeply asleep so we could wake him to check on him. It doesn't last as long as the one I'll be giving him now. I was about to come see how he was doing when you contacted me. He'll be more comfortable with this new potion, but he'll sleep a long time, and very soundly. I think he's doing well enough now that it shouldn't be a problem." He straightened up from his examination and chose three potions from the tray the nurse offered him. "Yes, these will do. OK, Harry, let me help you sit up a bit." He waved his wand over the boy's trembling form and Harry was rolled gently onto his back and his head raised off the bed enough for him to swallow without choking. "Open up, this won't take long."

Harry opened his mouth and took his potions with a minimum of grimaces. He was in too much pain to care much if the potions tasted bad. Within minutes, he breathed a sigh of relief and slumped back on his pillows, his face and body gradually relaxing as the pain left him. He was soon sound asleep.

"Will he wake up in pain like that again?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"It's possible, of course," Marcus replied, "but we'll do our best to get his next dose into him before this one wears off completely. We're a bit overwhelmed with patients due to the battle, but we're getting things under better control now, so we should be more able to stick to a schedule. Thanks for letting me know he needed me."

Ginny nodded, her eyes big and dark with worry. "Did I injure him by lying down with him? He insisted I rest with him. He nearly hurt himself trying to pull me onto the bed," she said anxiously. "I was as careful as possible, but . . ."

"No, I don't think what happened had anything to do with you, Ginny," Marcus said kindly. "And I'm sure your being there was a comfort to him. He's in no pain now, and you look exhausted. You need to take care of yourself. If you want to rest with him again, it won't hurt him, as long as you're careful."

"Thanks," Ginny replied quietly. "How's Ron doing?"

He debated how to answer her question. She was a strong girl and expected honesty from him, and she was planning to be a healer. He decided to be open with her about Ron's options. "We still haven't been able to get the bone fragments back where they need to be, and there's a tremendous amount of other damage involved. We could try Skele-Gro to help heal the broken bone, but if we did that at this point, he could wind up with something like a bone and a half in there, which would always be painful for him. We could try removing the bone entirely and then using Skele-Gro, but that could make things worse because of the extensive damage to his tendons, muscles and nerves. It's complicated and technical and would take a long time to explain in detail, but the bottom line is, if we can't get those bone fragments to

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align properly soon, we'll have to decide if we should remove the existing bone – if we can, without causing further damage – and go the Skele-Gro route, or amputate. Those decisions need to be made in the next twenty-four hours. We can't let it go on to the point of getting infected."

Ginny bit her lip but nodded silently. After a moment, she swallowed hard and said, "Thanks for telling me the truth."

"I thought you could handle it," Marcus replied. "Don't tell your mum, though. She's too fragile just now. We'll discuss those options with her and your dad when we have to, not before."

"I understand."

"Try and get some rest," he said, patting her shoulder kindly as he finished making notes on Harry's chart.

"OK." Ginny sat in the chair beside Harry's bed and tried to relax there, but her heart was aching too much for her to sit quietly, all alone with no one comforting her. She wiped her eyes and climbed carefully onto the bed, lifting Harry's arm and wrapping it around herself as she nestled into his shoulder once more. She smiled a bit as he sighed, tightened his arm in a brief hug, and contentedly rested his cheek against her hair. The warmth of his body next to hers was as much comfort as she could hope for just now.

A few hours later, Harry woke up feeling a bit better. At least he wasn't as stiff or achy as he had been, and the pain in his belly was a minor murmur at present. He turned his head and looked at Ginny, who was still sleeping soundly on his shoulder. He sighed happily, feeling as if a huge weight had been removed from his shoulders with the death of Voldemort. Things were going well for him now. Ginny was all right. Voldemort was dead. He might live after all. And Ron and Hermione . . . Wait! He hadn't asked anyone about them! Nor had anyone volunteered any information on them! His sudden tension woke Ginny.

"Hi," she said sleepily. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," he said, but there was worry in his voice. "Where are Ron and Hermione? How are they? How's Remus?"

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said sadly as she pushed herself upright and slid off the bed and into her chair. "Hermione's fine, physically. She's beginning to get past the stress of the battle and back to grieving over her parents' deaths. Remus is holding his own. Tonks really is pregnant, you were right about that. She's about two months along, isn't that great?"

"Ron. What's wrong with him?" Harry insisted. "You wouldn't be hesitating unless it was bad."

"He . . . his leg was shattered in a million pieces. They haven't been able to reassemble it properly. They aren't sure it will heal right. They . . . they may have to . . . to . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

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"To what, Ginny?" he pressed.

"To cut it off," she said, her face taut as she fought the tears that wanted to escape again.

"Where is he?" Harry said, trying to get up.

Ginny stood up. "You will NOT get out of that bed!" she said sternly. "You are still recovering from life-threatening injuries!"

"Then bring him to me," Harry said firmly. "I may be able to help him."

"No," Ginny said stubbornly. "You're not strong enough."

"Where is he, Ginny? Don't make me start shouting to find him," he warned very seriously. He thought about sending an Adfero to his best mate, but it was entirely possible Ron would be as clueless about where he was located within the hospital as Harry was. He had the feeling, though, that Ron wasn't too far away. "Where is he? RON! RON, WHERE ARE YOU?" Harry yelled at the top of his lungs. He started coughing, moaning in pain between coughs. He was still much too weak to be yelling that way.

"Calm down! He's across the hall. He probably can't hear you. They've been keeping him heavily sedated," Ginny said anxiously.

Hermione opened the door. "What's wrong? Are you two all right?" she said in concern.

"He wants to know where Ron is, how he is," Ginny told her friend.

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said with a tired smile. "He's . . . he's OK."

"Is his leg mending, or not?" Harry demanded. "Tell me the truth!"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "They've just checked him. It's . . . it's not going well at all," she said, trying not to snifle.

"Where is he, exactly?" Harry said as kindly as he could.

Hermione turned and looked over her shoulder. "Just there – straight across the hall."

"Move, Hermione," Harry said sternly.

"What?" she said, confused.

"MOVE!" he said, holding his hand out toward the wall. The instant she stepped aside, he Vanished the wall between his room and the corridor, then the wall between the corridor and Ron's room. "There you are! Hi, mate!" he said with false cheer as he studied Ron's too-white face and his cast leg held in a frighteningly complex metal framework. Ron moved slightly. His eyes were barely open, but he did look towards Harry when he heard his voice.

"What are you going to do?" Ginny said nervously.

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"Move, Gin," he snapped. "Accio!" he cried, groaning a bit as he held his hand out toward his best mate. Ron's bed rolled out of his room, across the corridor and into Harry's, ending up with Ron's leg next to Harry's head, the beds close together. Harry turned on his side and put his hands around Ron's leg, sensing for what was wrong with it. "Bloody hell," he breathed.

"What?" Ginny said anxiously. "What are you finding?"

"Lots of tiny bits of bone nowhere near where they need to be," he said, grim-faced. "Torn muscles, tendons and nerves. Lots of things where they shouldn't be." He grunted with effort as he struggled to hold his hands where he needed them. "Ginny, help me!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Hold my hands here. I can do the magic, but I can't hold my arms in this position for long." The tendons in Harry's neck were standing out, the muscles in his jaw locked as he fought to maintain a gentle, light contact with his best mate's horribly damaged leg.

"OK," she said, deciding it was easier to help him than to fight him.

"Hermione, come and help Ginny," Harry gasped after a few more moments' effort. "Hold my arms still where I have them."

"I never thought your arms were this heavy," Ginny said with a wry grin, grunting with effort as she struggled to help him.

"Sorry," he said, groaning as his strength failed him.

"This is silly," Hermione said practically. She pulled out her wand and cast a Hover Charm on Harry's arms, making them suddenly weightless to both him and Ginny.

"Wow, thanks, Hermione," Ginny said with relief, stepping away from Harry. Hermione held her wand steady, supporting Harry's arms as he did what he could for his best friend's shattered leg.

A few minutes later, Harry said, "That's all I can do for now." He was covered with sweat and gasping for breath. When Hermione released the Hover Charm holding his arms up, they fell heavily to his bed with no resistance from Harry at all.

"You overdid it, didn't you?" Ginny said with a sigh. "You're supposed to be resting."

"Sorry," he panted.

"Do I need to call Marcus?" she said, growing more worried. His face was grey and exhausted.

"I'll be fine," he growled.

"I'll go and get him," Hermione said, heading for the wide-open wall where the door used to be. "He should probably check Ron's leg anyway."

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A nurse with her arms full of charts stopped and goggled as she noticed the two missing walls and Ron's bed in Harry's room. "What's going on here?"

"They wanted to see each other," Ginny said dismissively. "Everything's fine. We'll replace the walls when my brother goes back to his room. All right?"

The nurse shook her head and stalked down the hall, muttering to herself about teenagers and the things they got up to.

"What's going on here?" Marcus Pomfrey echoed the nurse's words when he saw the huge gaps in the corridor walls and Ron's bed in Harry's room.

"Harry wanted to try to help Ron," Ginny said quickly. "He's done what he could. Could you check Ron's leg, please?"

"That's what Hermione was telling me," Marcus said with a bit of amusement as he walked through the opening where the wall was supposed to be and looked at the neat job someone had done of removing it. "Who did this?"

"Harry," Ginny said, smoothing her boyfriend's hair off his sweaty forehead.

"Oh, bloody hell," Marcus said when he saw Harry's grey face. Despite his best efforts to hide his symptoms, it was obvious that Harry was both completely worn out and in great pain again. "What did he do?"

"Vanished two walls, Summoned Ron's bed from there to here, then worked on Ron's leg for several minutes," Ginny said morosely. "We tried to stop him, but it was easier just to help him. You know how stubborn he can be. Hermione put a Hover Charm on his arms when they got too heavy for me to hold for him."

"Harry, you just never learn, do you?" Marcus said, shaking his head as he examined the young man.

"You will not chop off his leg," Harry panted.

"That's the last resort," Marcus said soothingly, trying to calm the boy. "He's doing fairly well so far."

Harry turned infuriated but exhausted eyes on his healer. "I worked on his leg just now. I *know* how bad it was! It's better now. I'll need to work on it at least one or two more times to get it right, but it's a lot closer now. I can do the magic. I just can't hold my arms up that long."

"Harry, your arms were being held by a Hover Charm and you still exhausted yourself," Hermione reminded him with a sigh. "I'm glad you're trying to help Ron, but you need to take care of yourself too."

Harry growled in furious frustration. "I'm sick and tired of this!"

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"Of what?" Marcus said mildly as he finished examining Harry and made some notes on his chart.

"Of being so weak. Sick. Hurt. I want to get out of here!" Harry snarled. "I need to help Ron and Remus. I want to visit my friends. I have—" A coughing fit interrupted him.

"Just be quiet and do what Marcus tells you," Ginny instructed him tartly, sounding exactly like her mother. "You overdid it. You need to rest."

"Harry?" Marcus said with a slight smile. "I wouldn't cross her if I were you. She's right. You need to rest."

Harry glared at Marcus, a stubborn glint in his eye. "How's Ron?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you that when I finish my examination. And then he's going back to his room, and you're going back to sleep. Deal? Otherwise, I won't tell you what I find," the healer cautioned when he saw the obstinate set of Harry's jaw.

"For now," Harry said after a moment's resistance.

"That's good enough for me," Marcus said with a cheerful grin. He turned to Ron and bent over his leg. He passed both his wand and a crystal over it, going over the length of the young man's leg several times before straightening up and turning to Harry.

"You did a marvellous job! His leg is much better. You seem to be able to work more sensitively with your magic than we can with normal healer spells. I wonder if you can teach someone else how to do that?"

"Dunno," Harry said, finally giving in to his exhaustion.

"Perhaps some time you can try to explain it to me," Marcus suggested as he made some notes on Ron's chart. When he finished, he moved to the locked cabinet on the wall and got out two potion flacons. He opened them and leaned over Harry. "Here, drink this. It's a Strengthening Solution. And this one is more Blood-Restoring Potion. It was about time for your potions anyway."

"How's Remus?" Harry asked when he'd finished his potions and settled back on his pillows.

"Still holding his own, Harry. I won't lie to you. He's in bad shape, but so are you. You are not going to help either of you by trying to heal him while you're so weak. We're making progress with him. It's just going to take some time."

"He's not going to die, is he?" Harry said anxiously.

"We're doing all we can for him, lad," Marcus said sympathetically, then turned back to the cabinet. "One more potion for you."

"What is it?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Dreamless Sleep. Open up."

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"No, I don't want—" Harry began fiercely, but Marcus dripped the potion into his mouth as he spoke. A few moments later, Harry was sound asleep.

"That should hold him for a while. The next time he wakes up, he should be a good bit stronger. Rest is the most important thing for him right now," he told the girls. "Come on, Miss Granger, let's take Ron back across the hall."

Hermione followed him quietly, then turned and looked at Ginny, still standing by Harry's bed. She burst into giggles suddenly.

"What?" Marcus said in surprise.

"Harry Vanished the walls. He's the one who has to put them back," she said, laughing madly now.

Marcus smiled, glad to see the girl doing something more cheerful than crying or worrying. "Well, at least you can see each other now," he said philosophically.

"Yeah," Hermione said, more glad than she would have believed to be able to see Ginny and Harry not that far away.

In the basement of St. Mungo's, two young workers were processing the bodies of those who had died in the battle. They moved from body to body, removing clothes, tying a tag on the toe, washing the body, bagging the robes and pocket contents for the deceased person's loved ones, and writing out death certificates for healers to sign later.

"At least they didn't lose as many kids this time," Andy Durer told his co-worker, Kevin Aldwinckle. "Just a few. But still, it's sad. They were so young."

"Yeah," Kevin replied, bagging another set of robes. "And the older ones are only a few years younger than us." He worked finished labelling the bag of robes, then uncovered the next body. "Oh, no. Look here, Andy. It's the flying teacher, Madam Hooch. She taught me to fly when I was just a nipper."

"Yeah, me too," Andy replied. "She went down fighting, I hear."

"Yeah, they all did, bless 'em."

"Have you ever seen Harry Potter fly?" Andy commented after a bit.

"No, have you? I heard he was recruited by the London Lions, him and that Weasley boy, too."

"Yeah. I went to a game at Hogwarts with my brother and his kids last term. Potter makes it look so easy. I never was much shakes at flying, but I do love to watch someone who's good at it. He flies like a bird, he does."

"I bought season tickets to the Lions' games when I heard Potter and Weasley were going to be on the team next season," Kevin said sadly. "Now I wish I hadn't. Have you heard how bad

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they're hurt?" Andy shook his head. "Potter was dying the last I heard, and Weasley's leg was about to be chopped. I wish someone would keep us up on the news down here."

"Yeah," Andy agreed. "Be a damned shame if Potter dies, with him just defeating You-Know-Who and all."

Kevin nodded and sighed heavily. He'd been looking forward to taking his girlfriend to see the famous Harry Potter fly right here in London! And now the boy was dying. He sighed again, wishing things were different.

Finally finished with Madam Hooch, they moved to the next trolley.

"Blimey, if it isn't the Potions Master," Kevin said when he uncovered the body. "What a git. He was a horrible teacher. He always treated everyone but Slytherins like they were dirt."

"Don't speak ill of the dead, Kevin," Andy reminded him. "It could come back to haunt you."

Kevin just grunted. He started removing Snape's robes, revealing stark white skin that looked as if it had never seen the sun. "Greasy git," Kevin grumbled as he Levitated Snape's body to pull his robes out from under him. "AHHHHHH!" he cried, dropping the man back on the trolley with a thud.

"What the bloody hell are you on about?" Andy grumbled, looking up from the death certificate he was filling out with Snape's name.

"His . . . he . . . *look!*" He pointed at Snape's face, where two black eyes glittered malevolently.

"He's *dead*, you silly wanker," Andy said patiently, leaning over the body. The eyes moved to follow him. Andy gasped and jumped back, his hands clutching his heart. After a moment, he finally caught his breath. "Cor! That about gave me a heart attack!" He took a deep breath, locked his shaking hands on the edge of the trolley and forced himself to lean over Snape solicitously. "We'll get a healer for you, Professor Snape, never you mind. You'll be fine. You're just here through some mistake, that's all," the man said, hoping Snape hadn't heard the ugly things they'd been saying about him when they thought he was dead.

A healer rushed to the basement when he was told there was a live one among the dead. If the person had been sent to the morgue from the battlefield, he must have been near death. The Healing Squad had made very few mistakes. They'd sent several dead people to the healers, hoping they were mistaken about the person being gone, but they hadn't sent any live ones to the morgue before this.

"Who sent him here?" the healer asked as he examined his patient.

"Here's the Portkey – they put the squad members' names on 'em so they could track who sent which patient where," Kevin said, pulling the Portkey out of the bag. "Neville Longbottom sent him here."

"Get a message off to Longbottom and find out what happened to this man," the healer snapped to Kevin. "You," he said to Andy, "get this trolley upstairs. This man needs attention!"

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The next time Harry woke up, he felt better. The rest had done him a world of good. He looked around the room, surprised to see it filled with flowers and towering stacks of sweets covering the tops of the various tables in the room, with more sweets and various gifts stacked neatly on the floor. He pushed himself up in his bed, grabbed his glasses, put them on and looked around. "What's all this?" he said in wonder.

"Hi, sweetie!" Ginny said, looking up from the book she'd been studying.

"What's all this?" Harry repeated, looking at her, then gazing around the room again, a bemused smile tickling the corners of his mouth. Chocolate frog boxes were piled everywhere, supported by boxes of Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans, cases of Fizzing Whizbees, Sugar Mice, Sugar Quills, and every other kind of treat imaginable. Huge baskets of flowers filled the air with a heavy fragrance. Wrapped presents crowded the floor.

"Just a few tokens of appreciation from your many admirers," Ginny said with a grin.

"Huh?"

"The news about you defeating Voldemort was in the *Daily Prophet*, along with photos and everything," she explained. "That big basket of flowers with the red and gold ribbon is from the London Lions. Mr. Murphy stopped by earlier to see how you and Ron are."

"How is Ron?" Harry asked, looking across the hall at his best friend's bed. Ron appeared to be asleep, but his room, too, was full of flowers, sweets and gifts stacked everywhere.

"Marcus says he's better. You did a good job on him," Ginny said, standing up and kissing him. "Thanks."

"Yeah, no problem," he said with a dazed smile. "He's better?"

"Yeah."

"How's Remus?"

"A bit better," Ginny said cautiously.

"Help me get to him, Gin. I need to see if I can do anything for him," he said determinedly, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He gasped in pain and nearly fell off the bed. Ginny shoved on his shoulders just in time to rock his weight back over the bed, where he collapsed.

"What . . .?" he gasped.

"You are not well enough to be doing that kind of thing!" Ginny snapped. "Lie down!"

"K," he muttered, still panting in pain.

"So now you must need more pain potion, right?" Ginny said, looking very frustrated with him. He just nodded. "What am I going to do with you, Harry? You are your own worst

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enemy sometimes!" she said as she stalked out of the room. She glanced up and down the corridor, then called, "Nurse? Harry needs some pain potion, please."

"Why can't you just give it to me?" he whinged when she came back to his bedside.

"Because you're in a hospital and they're using stronger potions than we do in the Healer Squad," she said reasonably, "and they're trying to track your progress."

"K," he said, sounding despondent. He opened his mouth obediently so the nurse could give him his potion. He and Ginny were quiet until the woman finished making notes on his chart and left the room. When she was gone and the potion had eased his pain somewhat, Harry said, "How am I going to help Remus?"

"He has a whole crew of healers working on him. The problem is the lycanthropy cure – it's interfering with some of the potions he needs. You can't fix that, can you?"

He thought for a long moment. "No, I suppose not." He looked at her curiously as she helped him get straight in the bed and tucked him in. "Are you angry with me?"

"No!" she snapped.

"Then why do you sound angry with me?" he said quietly. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Ginny fell back into her chair, her face in her hands. "I'm sorry. I just can't think straight anymore. I'm so worried about you, and Ron, and Dad and everything. . . ."

"We're all doing OK, aren't we?" he said, getting more and more worried. Ginny wasn't acting like herself at all. It would take something horrible to make her snap at him that way, wouldn't it? Then again, he supposed he'd nearly died again, and here he was trying to disobey the healer and get up. Maybe she was justified in snapping at him.

"You're much better, so are Dad and Ron from what I hear. But that doesn't mean you can go wandering around the hospital!"

"Have you seen the rest of your family recently?" he said cautiously. Maybe she was just anxious about them, if she hadn't seen them in a while.

"No."

"Then go and see them. I'll be fine," he urged her.

"No. I won't leave you alone," Ginny said stubbornly.

Just then, Mad-Eye Moody strolled in. He looked at the flowers, gifts and candy overflowing the room and smiled. "Got yourself some admirers, eh, Potter?"

Harry smiled a bit and shrugged.

"Don't mind if I help myself, do you?" Moody said, perusing a stack of sweets.

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"No, please! Go ahead," Harry urged him. "I certainly can't eat all this!"

"Thanks! How are you feeling, laddie?" Moody asked as he pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Not nearly as strong as I'd like to be, but better."

"Good. As long as they keep plenty of potion in you, you'll be fine, right?" Moody said knowingly.

"Yeah," Harry said, chuckling. He glanced at Ginny, who looked so exhausted and sad it was breaking his heart. "Mad-Eye, can you stay a while?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Ginny hasn't had a chance to check on her family for hours. If you could stay, she could go and see them."

"Be glad to," Moody agreed. "I just stopped by to see Arthur myself. He's much better. He says they're going to let him get up and walk around a bit today."

"That's good to hear," Harry said. He glanced at Ginny, who was listening to them talk but hadn't got up yet. "Go on, check on everyone. And tell them I said 'hi' and that I'll see them as soon as I'm able to."

Ginny got to her feet slowly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go on, I'll be fine. Mad-Eye can tell me what's been going on outside the hospital," Harry assured her.

"OK," she said hesitantly. "Don't let him get up, Mad-Eye, no matter what he says!"

"Right you are!" Moody agreed.

"All right, then," she muttered. "Thanks." She patted Harry on the shoulder and wandered sadly out of the room.

"Poor kid," Moody grumbled.

"Yeah. She wasn't this way when I went to sleep. I wonder what happened to change her attitude?" Harry mused.

"Her mum told me they've made arrangements for the lads' funerals. I expect that's what's bothering her," Moody said.

"Why wouldn't she tell me that?" Harry had heard about Bill's death earlier that day. He would miss Ginny's oldest brother, who he'd always admired. He knew Bill's death was hurting Ginny terribly. She'd always felt close to him. And then there was Percy. Harry sighed, wishing he knew how to comfort his girlfriend.

"She probably thinks you have enough on your plate as it is," Moody grumbled.

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"Yeah, that's probably it," Harry muttered. He looked at the old Auror, noticing bandages here and there. "How are you?"

"Fit as a fiddle, however fit fiddles are," Moody said with a rumble that could be considered a chuckle. "I've been much worse, Potter. This is nothing," he said, gesturing to the bandages on various parts of his body.

"Yeah, me too," Harry replied. He was glad he didn't have to deal with the open wounds from Voldemort's whip as he'd had to do the previous year. "So tell me the news. What's going on?"

"The most interesting thing I've heard in a while is about Severus Snape," Moody said with his rumbling chuckle. "Absolutely amazing."

"What about him?" Harry said. He hadn't heard anything about the man at all.

"You heard he fell defending D.A. Healer Squad members, didn't you?" Moody said. Harry shook his head. The old Auror launched into the tale, only stopping when Harry gasped after hearing Snape had taken the Killing Curse from Malfoy.

"Oh no! So he's dead, then? At least he was fighting for the right side when he died," he said sadly.

"Yeah, he was. But that's not the most interesting bit," Moody said, an odd gleam in his good eye, while the magical one rolled wildly. "Imagine this. Severus is in the morgue along with a lot of other bodies. They're going through and putting tags on the toes as they remove their clothes. When they start to undress him, his eyes open!"

"What?" Harry gasped.

"Yeah! They thought it was just a muscular reaction that sometimes happens when someone dies. Then he moved his eyes, following the worker. The poor blokes working in there nearly passed out when that happened, from what I heard!"

"So he's alive, then?" Harry said, amazed at how his heart lifted at this news.

"Yeah, just barely."

"How can that be?"

"Malfoy was not only a git, he couldn't do the big spells well, apparently," Moody said with satisfaction. "He didn't cast it right."

Harry grinned. "That sounds like Malfoy, all right," he agreed. "So is Snape going to recover?"

"I don't know. They put him in a room down the hall from here, actually, next to Remus. I tried to get in to see him, but they're not allowing visitors yet."

"Did you see Remus? How is he?" Harry asked anxiously.

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"He's holding his own, lad," Moody said kindly. "He has a long way to go, but he's tough. He'll be all right."

"I hope you're right," Harry said darkly. "Hang on – you said Malfoy 'was' a git – is he dead?"

"Right in one!" Moody said with a chuckle. "Ask me how he died."

"OK. How'd he die?" Harry said, smiling at the old Auror's obvious amusement.

"Those two little ladies, Ginny and Hermione? They hexed him good! He tried to attack you when you were injured at the end of the battle. Ginny turned him into a cow pat, and Hermione gave him explosive boils. I don't know what other hexes they may have used, but those were the ones people saw. Then they decided he was dirt and needed to be 'cleaned.' Well, when two witches as powerful as they are do a Scouring Charm together, it can have remarkable results."

It took Harry a moment to grasp what Moody was saying. "They killed him with a housecleaning charm? How is that possible?"

"He was a cow pat at the time," Moody said casually, shrugging as if it made perfect sense. "That's how Dumbledore got rid of Voldemort's body after he died, as well."

"I didn't know you could do that with a Scouring Charm," Harry said, shocked that a simple charm like that could be so powerful.

"Never underestimate the power of a simple charm, Potter – or the clout of two very powerful witches in complete agreement about doing something," Moody said, chuckling a bit.

He lay quietly for a while, thinking about Malfoy and how appropriate it was that Ginny and Hermione were the ones to finish him off. He was so proud of both of them! "I wonder why Ginny didn't say anything about it?"

"You haven't exactly been good company," Moody teased. "You're asleep most of the time – which is how it should be until you're stronger."

"Yeah, I guess," Harry agreed. He thought about what he'd just heard and then his mind turned to Ginny, as it so often did. He looked at Moody again. "Could you do me a favour?"

"What's the favour?" Moody said suspiciously.

Harry smiled. Mad-Eye was as cautious to agreeing to favours as Harry himself had become. "Would you go to my room at Headquarters and bring me something from my trunk?"

"What is it?"

"It's . . . you have to keep this a secret, I haven't told anyone yet. OK?" Harry said anxiously.

"OK."

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"It's Ginny's engagement ring. It's time I proposed to her properly, and I want to give her the ring when I do it," Harry said, blushing a bit.

Moody's battered face split in an ear-to-ear grin. "Well, now, that sounds like the kind of dangerous mission I relish! Yes, Potter, I'll bring it to you."

"Thanks! It's in the front right corner in the bottom, in a red and gold bag with a gold ribbon. Don't let anyone see you with it, OK?"

"I am fairly good at sneaking around, you know," Moody said in a teasing tone. "Don't worry, I won't let your secret out. Congratulations in advance and all that."

Harry beamed. "Thanks!"

Ginny returned a short time later, full of news about her family and their friends who were injured. Moody left, winking his dark, beady eye at Harry as he waved goodbye. After a while, Harry tired and fell asleep. Ginny was curled up in the armchair by his bed, trying to study for exams. Professor McGonagall had brought her and Hermione's books on one of her visits. Ginny tried her best to keep working, but soon fell asleep too.

Some time later, Moody stood outside Harry's room and put a Silencing Charm on his wooden leg, then tiptoed in, not wanting to wake either of them. He lifted Harry's covers a bit and slid a small package under them next to the sleeping young man's hand, where he'd be sure to find it when he woke up. Smiling at the success of his mission, Moody left as quietly as he'd come in, leaving the two young warriors sleeping peacefully.

"Ron, I have to go and take care of some things," Hermione said, trying not to cry. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Your mum said she'd sit with you while I'm gone. She should be here soon. I'll leave then."

Ron was still sleeping most of the time, but was improving steadily. He forced himself to wake up fully when she said she was leaving. "Where are you going?"

"I have to make arrangements for, erm, my parents', um. . ." she said, then was unable to continue.

"Oh," he said, a confused expression on his face. His mind was still a bit muzzy. His blue eyes widened suddenly and he sat up straighter when his brain finally clunked into gear. "Oh, 'Mione, I'm so sorry! I wish I could go with you," he said sincerely.

"Me, too," she said, sniffing. Tears began to streak down her face. "I don't know what I'm going to do," she moaned. "We . . . I . . . I've stayed with your family over holidays so often, and I've loved it, I really have! But I wanted to live with my parents while I was in college, to get to know them again, you know? We were all looking forward to it. Now I don't know what to do. I don't want to live in that house alone."

"Harry will let you live in his house," Ron offered. "He has loads of room."

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"I know, but it wouldn't be right. Your mum would object to me being there with you two, the three of us alone." Hermione shook her head. "That just won't work."

"Well, you can live at the Burrow, then," Ron said with a smile, but then his smile faded. "Oh. I forgot," he said softly.

"Oh, Ron. I'm sorry about the Burrow," Hermione said, cupping his cheek as the realization of the loss of his home hit Ron.

"Well . . . it was a bit run-down anyway," Ron said dismissively after a long moment, but his heart wasn't in it. He'd lived there all of his life. They'd all grown up there. That odd, funny, ramshackle house was *home*. He sighed heavily and blinked hard, determined not to cry over a *house*, of all things. But it was the Burrow! He swallowed hard and looked at her, determined to ignore his own problems and find ways to help his girlfriend.

"Well. Harry's house is huge. He offered to let all of us live there while the Burrow's rebuilt. You can live there with us while the family's all there. Once the Burrow's finished, you can live there while Harry and I stay at Grimmauld Place. I guess it won't be Order Headquarters anymore, with Voldemort gone."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," Hermione murmured. "That will be nice for you and Harry."

"Yeah," he replied, patting her hand. He'd lost his home and two brothers, but had a place to go to and still had most of his family. She had a home but no family at all. Voldemort had caused so much pain and loss to so many people. He looked up at her and saw the grief and uncertainty in her brown eyes. "I'm sorry I can't be more help to you right now, 'Mione."

She took a deep breath and forced herself to act like the normal, businesslike, efficient Hermione. "You get better. Having you whole and healthy again will be the best help I can think of," she said stoutly, getting to her feet with determination. "The Aurors should be here to take me . . . erm." She stopped and cleared her throat, then went on determinedly. "Your mum should be here soon." She swallowed and shook her head hard, resolving to be strong for the impending nightmare of arranging the funerals of both of her parents.

"Hi," Fred murmured as he stepped into the room, acting uncharacteristically subdued. "I, erm, understand there's a young lady here in need of an escort?" He smiled hesitantly at Hermione.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione said, confused. "I thought an Auror was taking me."

"Ron thought someone from the family should go with you, so he asked me to do it," Fred replied. "We want to help you in any way we can, Hermione. Ginny said she wanted to go with you, but she's afraid to leave Harry. Mum's not willing to leave Dad, Ron and Charlie, and, well, since George is on the mend now, I'm the one who's most available, so you're stuck with me. Just tell me what you need me to do, and I'll have a go at it, OK?"

Hermione blinked back tears, more profoundly touched than she would ever have believed by Fred's words. The cheeky, silly, always-manic twins didn't seem like people you'd be able to count on in troubling times, yet here was Fred, strangely solemn, offering to help her through her coming ordeal. She gave him a tremulous smile and held out her hand. "Thank you," she said, giving his hand a squeeze.

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"Yeah, thanks, Fred. I really appreciate this," Ron said, giving his brother a wan smile.

"Always happy to be of service, little bro," Fred replied with a bit of his normal impishness as he sketched a butler-ish bow.

"How's George doing today?" Ron said.

"Much better. I'll bring him by later, all right?"

"Yeah, thanks," Ron replied.

Molly Weasley, followed by an Auror Hermione recognized by sight, appeared in the doorway. Hermione knew it was time to go. She bent down and kissed Ron briefly, then stepped to the doorway, gave Molly a hug and a word of thanks, and disappeared down the corridor with both Fred and her Auror escort.

Ron waved briefly at the Auror, accepted his mother's kiss on the cheek, and then watched Hermione go, his heart in his eyes. What could he do to help her through the coming ordeal? How could he help her in the future? He had a lot to think about.

Some hours later, Arthur Weasley tottered into Harry's room and sat heavily in the chair vacated by Moody earlier that day. Harry was awake and trying to study using some of Hermione's books. Ginny was revising for exams, still seated in the chair by his bed.

"Hi, Dad!" Ginny said, obviously glad to see her father.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Weasley," Harry said with a smile. "Up and around, eh?"

"Hello, both of you! Yes, they say it's good for me to start moving now," Arthur replied with a tired smile. "I think they'll let me out of here soon."

"That's great," Harry said happily. He glanced across the hall and saw Molly Weasley sitting with Hermione, who'd recently returned from arranging her parents' funeral. Ron was asleep again, despite his best efforts to stay awake. "Ginny, do you want to chat with your mum and Hermione? They're together over there now. Your dad can sit with me for a while, can't you, Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes, I'd be happy to, Harry," Arthur said with a weary smile. "I do need to rest a bit before I try walking any more."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Ginny said, eying Harry suspiciously.

"No! But your mum and Hermione are just over there, and you didn't stay to chat long when you went to visit earlier. Hermione would probably enjoy the visit – your mum, too. You can see me from there, and your dad's here. I just thought . . ." he ended, giving her his best innocent face.

Ginny knew him too well to be fooled, but went along with him. "OK, I'll be over there if you need me. It will be nice to chat to them without having to rush, you're right."

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"I love it when you think I'm right," Harry teased, a cheeky grin flashing across his face.

"Ho-ho," she teased him right back, glad he was feeling a bit playful. She stroked his cheek gently and walked across the hall, where she, Molly and Hermione soon got into a quiet chat while Ron snored loudly beside them.

"Mr. Weasley," Harry said as soon as Ginny was settled and involved in conversation, "I need to ask you something."

"What is it, lad?" Arthur replied with a smile.

"I'm so sorry about Bill and Percy. I wish I could've warned you earlier, but. . . ." He shook his head, impatient with himself. There was no way he could have warned them earlier, and there was no point in dwelling on that now. "I wish I could do something to comfort you and your family. What I need to ask you – well, the timing could be better, but I just need to do this now. I hope you'll understand," he said uncertainly.

Arthur took a deep breath, determined to listen to the young man and not give in to his grief. "Go on," he urged.

"Erm . . . you know I love Ginny. She loves me, as well. I was going to wait a bit longer to do this, but I don't want to wait anymore. I'd like to ask you for her hand – and the rest of her, of course – in marriage," he said with a nervous laugh and a blush worthy of a Weasley. "I can't wait to ask her anymore. I almost waited too long as it was."

"What do you mean, you almost waited too long?" Arthur said, stalling for time as he pondered Harry's request.

"I've had the ring since the Christmas break. I didn't know how long it would take Mr. Joyero to make it, so I ordered it then. I'd planned to ask her at the end of the school term, but during the battle, after we sent Remus to the hospital with Tonks, I realized how little time we might have together. I proposed to her on the battlefield and she accepted. But I want to do things the right way, so I'm asking your permission before I propose to her properly." He looked at the man hopefully.

"Well, Harry," Arthur began slowly, "I have to say your question isn't unexpected. And I understand your eagerness to get on with the good things in life. You've had a rough go so far in your life, and I know you want to settle down with a home and family of your own. I do understand that. And I know you'll take the best possible care of Ginny."

"Do I hear a 'but' coming?" Harry said, his stomach roiling with nerves.

"Well . . . she's very young. When did you plan to marry?"

"I know you and Mrs. Weasley want her to finish Hogwarts. I thought we could marry then. We'd talked about waiting until we were both finished with our studies, but I can't wait that many more years, and I don't believe Ginny wants to wait that long, either." Harry watched the other man seriously, wishing he could read his mind, but knowing it would be rude to do Legilimency on him. He held his breath, waiting to see if the Weasleys were going to be

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happy for them and give them their blessing, or if he'd have to defy their wishes and marry Ginny without their blessing.

Arthur studied the serious young face, so pale and weak, burns and cuts still vivid mars on the boy's handsome visage. Harry's body might be frail from his injuries, but his spirit blazed bright within him, his eyes glowing with a determined emerald fire. "It sounds as if you and Ginny have thought this out quite thoroughly," Arthur began. "That's good. I wouldn't want either of you rushing into something so serious without being certain you were making the right choice." He bit his lip uncertainly. Molly would skin him for not talking to her first, but Arthur knew in his heart what the right decision was. His decision reached, he smiled at the young man whose nervous state showed in his unconscious, anxious plucking at his bedspread.

"Yes, Harry. You may ask Ginny for her hand, and the rest of her, as well," he said with a chuckle, "with our blessing."

Harry's face lit with joy. "Thank you, sir! You won't regret it! I'll take the very best care of her," he promised sincerely.

"I know you will," Arthur said with a fond smile. He held out his hand. "Welcome to the family, Harry. It's nice to have you as an 'official' member, at last."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Harry said, shaking the man's hand with a firm grasp. "I couldn't possibly pick a better family. Thank you."

Arthur sat back in his chair, surveying the young man's elated but tired face. "When will you ask her?"

"Today," Harry said, both weary and relieved as he relaxed against his pillows. "As soon as possible. I don't want to wait a minute longer."

"All right, then," Arthur said, grinning at him. "I'll help you out." He got up and walked into Ron's room. "Ginny? Harry would like to see you," he said, beaming at his daughter.

"Is he all right?" she asked in concern.

"He's fine. Just missed you, I think," Arthur said, pulling her into an unexpected hug as she passed him.

"What was that for?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"I'm just so happy to be up and around and able to hug my family again," he said with a warm smile. "Go on, he's waiting for you."

Molly was looking at him suspiciously. Ron had awakened when he'd heard his father's voice. Hermione looked between Arthur and Molly curiously. Something was going on, but she didn't know what.

"Arthur Weasley, you're up to something. What is it?" Molly asked suspiciously.

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"I wanted to see my youngest son, and I couldn't be happier to be able to just walk from one room to the next," Arthur said benignly, sitting in Ginny's vacated chair and making certain he blocked Molly's view of Harry's room. "How are you, son?"

In Harry's room, Ginny hurried to his side. "Dad said you wanted to see me. Are you feeling all right? What's wrong? Do you need more pain potion?"

"No, I'm fine," he replied with a warm smile. "Just a bit tired," he said. He fought his way back into a sitting position, gratefully accepting Ginny's help. "That's better. How are you?" He took her left hand in his and drew her toward him, so she was sitting on the edge of the bed facing him.

"I'm fine," she said in confusion. He'd wanted to see her to ask how she was? What was going on?

"Ron OK?"

"He just woke up," Ginny replied. "His colour's improved, but I haven't talked to him yet. What did you want? Dad said you wanted me."

Harry laughed. "That's an understatement," he said, grinning wickedly, his eyes twinkling as he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, making her giggle. "But seriously, I do want to talk to you," he said, his expression changing quickly from playful to earnest.

"What . . . what's wrong?" she said, suddenly uneasy.

"Nothing! Nothing at all. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you," he said quickly. "Oh, I knew I'd get all wrong-footed. Bloody hell!" He grumbled to himself for a moment, then took a deep breath and got down to business. "Ginny, I love you. I know you love me, too. I know I did this on the battlefield, but it's time I did it the right way. You'll have to excuse me for not getting down on one knee, but this is the best I can manage for now." He took a deep breath and forced himself to speak slowly, not wanting to rush the most important question he'd ever asked in his life. "I want you to be my wife so we can live together forever. Will you do me the honour of marrying me?"

"For real this time?" Ginny said, her eyes bright as a tremulous smile tickled the corners of her mouth.

"It was real for me the last time, but yeah, this one's official," he replied with a warm smile. "I asked your dad for your hand and the rest of you as well, and he agreed."

"He did?" she said in delighted surprise.

"Yes! He agreed, but you haven't! What are you trying to do to me?" Harry said, sounding wounded, but his eyes crinkled as he fought to keep a silly grin off his face. He wanted to be very serious about this whole thing.

"YES!" Ginny cried, throwing her arms around him, bracing herself just before their bodies collided. "I'm sorry, are you OK?"

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"Never better," he laughed, pulling her close and kissing her soundly.

When they came up for air, she sat up and gazed into his eyes, unable to believe that the moment she'd dreamed of for so long had finally arrived. "I love you," she said simply.

"I love you too," he said, raising her left hand and kissing it. "This has to go, though." He picked up his wand and said the sizing spell, which released the promise ring from her finger.

"What are you doing?" she said in confusion.

"This is on the wrong hand," he said, acting much calmer than he felt as he slid the promise ring onto her right hand ring finger and sized it to stay there. Then he pulled the small, gaily wrapped package from under his covers and held it out to her. "I think this might make a nice replacement. But if you don't like it, we'll get something different, no problem."

"Oh, Harry," she breathed, her hands shaking as she untied the ribbon and opened the bag, spilling a ring box out into her waiting palm. "I . . . I can't do this. You do it," she said, handing the unopened box to him.

Harry took the box and opened it, showing her what was inside. She gasped and held out her trembling left hand expectantly, tears springing to her eyes as he slid the gorgeous ring on her finger. A one-carat perfect blue-white oval diamond rose like a crown above eight rubies bezel-set in the band. "Eight rubies for the eight years we will have known each other before we get married," he said as he slid it on her finger. "Do you like it?"

"It's . . . I . . . eight years?" she said, suddenly cottoning on. "Next year?"

"When you finish Hogwarts, if you'll agree," he said hopefully.

With her head tipped to one side, she studied his face seriously, her eyebrows drawn together in a puzzled frown. "Why not now? I don't care about school. I want to get married!"

"I do too. But your parents have been through a lot recently," he said, equally serious. "Your mum . . . well, she only has one daughter. Don't you think she'd want to plan a beautiful wedding for you?"

"I just want to be married. We could get Dumbledore to do the service for us right here, today," Ginny protested.

"Ginny," Harry said patiently. "Your mum's not the only one who wants to see you in gorgeous white wedding robes. I want to marry you with everything perfect, so we'll never wish we'd done anything differently. We need to have our friends there. We need a big cake and lots of punch. The twins can do fireworks! Our wedding should be something we will remember happily forever, not something we did in haste. Don't you agree?"

"You really want a big church wedding? You, Mr. Shy Potter who doesn't like the spotlight?" She sat away from him and watched his expression carefully, an intrigued smile playing around her lips.

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"Yes. I want Ron to be my best man and Hermione to be your maiden of honour – if that's all right with you, of course. I want Remus and Tonks to sit in the seats for my family, and your side of the church filled with Weasleys. *Loads* of flowers! A big party. I'll even wear my dress robes, or get new ones if you want. Or I'll wear a Muggle morning suit or dinner jacket, if you'd prefer that. You and your mum can plan whatever you want and I'll go along with it . . . well, I will as long as you don't ask me to sing to you or something like that," he added with a cheeky grin. "OK? And by the way, you never officially gave me your answer about waiting until next year to marry," he added, chiding her gently.

"I didn't? Oh. All right, then," she said, frowning and putting her finger on her chin as she pretended to be thinking very hard. "YES! Next year's fine," she said, leaping into his arms again, once more remembering just in time to brace herself so her full weight didn't hit him hard. She kissed him as if she'd never let him go, which was exactly how she felt. When they finally parted, she turned and cuddled into his arms, holding her hand out and admiring her new ring. "I've never seen anything so beautiful, Harry. Thank you!"

"I told Mr. Joyero what I wanted, and he made it," Harry said quietly, tilting the ring this way and that so it caught the light. "This was the most perfect diamond he had. I told him you couldn't have anything but an absolutely perfect one."

"I love it! I love you! Oh, baby, we're *engaged*! I'm so happy!" she said, turning her face up to his for another kiss. Raised voices across the hall caught their attention after a few moments. "Uh-oh. Sounds like Dad just told Mum why you asked to see me," Ginny said darkly.

"I hope she's going to be happy for us once she gets used to the idea," Harry said wistfully.

A few minutes later, Arthur, Molly and Hermione came into the room, Hermione and Arthur both wreathed in smiles and Molly tearful.

"Oh, Ginny! Your dad just told me!" Molly said, sniffing hard and trying to control herself. "And Harry! I was hoping . . . well . . . welcome to the family, you dear boy!" she said, enveloping both of them in a warm hug.

"Mum, look!" Ginny said, holding out her hand so her ring caught the light.

"Oh, my! That thing nearly blinded me!" Molly joked through her tears. "It's beautiful!"

"Harry designed it," Ginny said with obvious pride. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

Harry just smiled and enjoyed the happy family scene before him, delighted to be a part of it. Ginny got off the bed and showed her ring to Hermione, after which the two girls held on to each other, laughing and crying excitedly. Hermione moved to the bed and hugged Harry, then sat in the chair by the bed as Ginny moved back into Harry's arms.

"What's going on in here?" a passing nurse asked, her attention caught by all the happy voices talking at once.

"They just got engaged," Arthur said proudly, nodding toward Harry and Ginny.

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The nurse said, "Congratulations! Now try to celebrate a bit more quietly," smiled tolerantly and went on about her business.

"What's going on over there?" Ron called plaintively. "Sounds like I'm missing quite a party!"

"Oh! I have to show Ron!" Ginny said with a grin. She gave Harry a quick kiss as she got off the bed, then ran across the hall and showed her brother her ring as she told him the news.

"Welcome to the family, Harry!" Ron cried after a moment, then coughed from trying to make his voice carry. His coughing fit lasted a while but he was laughing through most of it, thanks to a liberal and recent dose of pain potion.

"Thanks, mate!" Harry called back, then groaned a bit at the pain caused by the effort.

Hermione went back to Ron's room to keep him company while his parents stayed with Harry and Ginny to celebrate their engagement.

Molly sat on Harry's bed and took his hand in hers. "I . . . I can't tell you what it means to me to have such a wonderful event to look forward to, with all the sad things in our lives right now. Thank you, dear. I'm so happy for both of you."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," he said sincerely. He'd been worried she would balk at the idea, but she seemed to be taking it well.

"Have you set a date?" Molly asked warily.

"When I finish Hogwarts," Ginny said firmly, smiling at Harry. "We want a nice church wedding. You're going to be so busy helping me plan it!" she added, giving her mum a hug.

"Oh, what fun!" Molly said sincerely, tears streaming down her face. She had two dead sons, but life went on. In just over a year, she'd have a new son as part of the family. She willed herself to look forward to that and to try to get past the agonizing weight of grief she'd been under since Percy died . . . and then Bill . . . no, she was going to get through this awful time, she was! She had a wedding to plan for her daughter. She released Ginny and kissed her on both cheeks. "Where do you want to have it? What plans have you made?"

"Nothing yet, except Harry promised he won't sing," Ginny said, teasing him.

"Sing?" Molly said, confused, as Harry and Ginny laughed.

"I told Ginny I'd be as cooperative with the wedding plans as possible, as long as she didn't ask me to sing or anything like that," Harry explained.

Molly was still confused, but smiled bravely, wiping her tears away and doing her best to get into the spirit of things. "Tell me everything. What do you want to wear? Who will you invite? Who will be in the ceremony?"

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Across the hall, Ron and Hermione could hear the happy sounds of celebration and excited conversation floating over from Harry's room. Hermione was still smiling from celebrating the news with Ginny. Ron gazed at her, his love for her shining in his eyes. "Hermione?"

"Yes?" she said, turning to him. "Do you need something?"

"Yeah, I do, actually," he said, glad she was giving him an opening to help him get started.

"What do you need?" she said, rising from his bedside, ready to call the nurse.

Ron held her hand, stopping her movement. "I need you," he said, then stopped and cleared his throat before going on, "as my wife. Will you marry me?"

"What?" she said in shock. "No, Ron, just because Harry asked Ginny—"

"That's not it at all. I've been thinking about it for a long time, and I just realized what a prat I've been to wait so long to ask you. I mean, I did ask you at Christmas and all, but you weren't ready, and I kind of sprung it on you. . . ." He shook his head, trying to say what was in his heart. "I didn't ask again after that because I was afraid you'd say no. I know you want to go to college and to travel. I have no problem with you going to college, and I'll be travelling with the Quidditch team anyway, so you'll have a chance to travel with me if you want, and I'll travel with you on our breaks, if you want to travel more. I love you, Hermione. I can't imagine living without you. I'll be making good money with the Quidditch team, and I've got the money the Ministry gave me with that award last term, so I can support us. We can stay with Harry, or live in your parents' house, if you'd rather, until you finish college and I finish Auror School. Or we can get our own place, if you'd prefer. It could all work out really well."

He gazed at her, his bright blue eyes hopeful and trusting. This was a big step for him. He'd thought it all through and couldn't see any flaws in his plan. He just hoped she wouldn't be her usual stubborn self about it.

"You have thought about this, haven't you?" she said with a small smile, her eyes sparkling.

"Yes. How many times do I have to ask you to get an answer, though?" he said a bit plaintively.

"Erm . . . I love you, Ron, you know I do," Hermione began carefully, "but if we marry for the wrong reasons, it won't last. Marriage is forever. We need to be sure."

"I am sure," he said emphatically. "What wrong reasons?"

"If you're just asking because you feel sorry for me, so I won't have to live alone or at the Burrow while you and Harry live in his house—"

"That's not why I asked," he said a bit sharply. "This has nothing to do with Harry's house or me feeling sorry for you or where you live or any of that. It has to do with me loving you. I don't want us to be apart ever again. I love you, Hermione. Isn't that enough for you?"

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Hermione stood there, her mouth hanging open in shock. He was serious! She studied his face, which now looked both hurt and angry. "I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I don't know why I thought you might actually answer a simple question without giving me the third degree," he said with an unhappy sigh. "That isn't your style."

"No, it isn't," she said tartly. "You know I analyze everything and don't make serious decisions lightly." Tears sparkled in her lashes suddenly. "I'm so flattered you asked. I do love you, Ron, I really do. I'm just in such turmoil right now"

"Yeah, I understand," he said in a low, sad voice. "I shouldn't have asked you yet."

"I'm not ready to hear that question yet," she agreed. "But I'm glad you asked."

"When do you suppose you can give me an answer?" he said, resigned to wait until she was ready.

"Soon. Let me get through my parents' funeral first. I think I need time to deal with that." Tears glistened in her eyes. She blinked hard, trying not to cry, but wasn't having much success.

Ron's heart ached to see her tears. He hadn't meant to add to her pain. He sighed and gave in. "OK," he agreed. "But then you'll agree?" he said, pressing his luck.

"It's entirely possible," she said with a watery smile.

"OK, that's good enough for now, I suppose," he said, opening his arms to pull her into an embrace. "I do love you, you know."

"I know," she said, settling into his arms, "and I'm glad. I love you too. Thanks for being patient with me."

"What's all this, then?" George Weasley said with his usual good cheer as his twin wheeled him into Harry's room.

"George! How are you?" Ginny cried, rushing to hug her brothers.

"Spiffing, simply spiffing! They have quite a lot of cute nurses on this floor, did you notice?" George said with a wink at Harry. "No, I suppose you didn't, since you're now off the market! Welcome to the family, little brother!" He held out his hand, which Harry shook cheerfully.

"We fully expect you two to provide us with loads of nieces and nephews to corrupt," Fred added, shaking Harry's hand as well.

Harry blushed, then laughed and said, "We'll do our best!"

"Harry!" Ginny chided him, blushing madly herself.

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"Well, it will be fun trying, anyway," Fred said philosophically. "When's the wedding? We heard we're doing the fireworks!"

"As soon as Ginny finishes Hogwarts," Harry said, smiling at his fiancé and taking her hand.

"Oh, look at that, Fred," George quipped, "aren't they precious?"

"Simply darling," Fred agreed with a simpering grin as Harry and Ginny laughed, delighted to hear the twins doing their normal twin-conversation-routine again. Suddenly, Fred turned quite serious. "Now, we do need to have an important discussion with you, Harry."

"Yes, we do," George said, equally grave.

"What?" Harry said, surprised. They'd been so playful just moments before. What could have changed their attitude so quickly?

"We," George began, "that is to say, Fred and I, owe you our lives. We don't take that kind of debt lightly."

"No, we don't," Fred agreed.

"We've talked about this quite thoroughly, actually," George went on. "We have made a decision and you cannot talk us out of it."

"Nope, no way," Fred agreed. "We have decided to make you a full partner in our business. We have no other way to repay you for what you did for us, and for our business, as well. If the warning had come even a minute later . . . well, we won't go there."

"Right," George said, overriding the objection Harry was trying valiantly to voice. "At least half of Diagon Alley would have blown up if we'd been attacked in the shop, and a lot of people would have died."

"Including us, which would distress us greatly, I assure you," his twin added.

"Exactly! Now, then. We know you have pots of money anyway, and will soon be an internationally famous Quidditch star—"

"As well as being handsome and rich," Fred quipped.

"But it's the best thing we can come up with. We know you won't have to work with us, although if you want to pop in and give us ideas from time to time, that would be welcome. We'll even let you slice daisy roots if you want! But the main thing is, you'll get loads of money in your account each month, to use however you want. If you want to give it to charity, that's fine. If you want to make it your wife's pocket money, that's fine too," he said with a wink at his sister, who giggled. "In return, we expect to be invited to dinner at your house regularly, to be allowed to play with your children until they start crying—"

"At which time we'll hand them back – same with nappy changing time," Fred added.

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"And generally treated as the 'favourite uncles' we expect to be," George concluded. "How's that?"

Harry was laughing. "All of that will happen anyway, without my having a share of your business."

"We know that," Fred assured him. "We're just making certain we have all the bases covered."

"I'm flattered – honoured, too. But I don't want you to split your company with me," Harry protested.

"You don't get a vote. Did we tell him that, Fred?"

"I believe we left that part out, George."

They looked at Harry very seriously and said together, "You don't get a vote."

"You're our partner whether you like it or not!" Fred declared.

"And you should like it! This is a rare honour—"

"One many would kill for!"

"And one we have not offered to anyone else!"

"Nor will we!"

"OK! Fine! If that's how you want it," Harry said, holding up his hands in surrender. "Thank you. But you didn't have to—"

"Yes, we did," George interrupted.

"No, we didn't," Fred countered, "but we wanted to."

"Now, as the newest partner, you do realize you have to clean the cauldrons every night," George said with a cheeky grin.

"But you said—" Harry protested, laughing hard now.

"Bless him," Fred said fondly. "He's so precious, isn't he?"

"Absolutely delightful," George agreed. "He might actually have started cleaning cauldrons once he got out of the hospital. Such a nice boy."

"And now he's family!" Fred chortled. He leaned over and wrapped his arm around Harry's neck, rubbing his knuckles hard on Harry's head.

"What's that for?" Harry said, laughing, as Fred released him.

"I just made you an official Weasley brother," Fred declared.

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"Ron did that when I asked him about the promise ring," Harry said, lying back on his pillows and grinning. "I didn't know it needed to be done again."

"Oh yes," George said, "and by each brother in turn!"

"That was Bill's turn, actually," Fred said, suddenly solemn. "Charlie will come and do his when he's able. In the meantime, George and I can take Percy's turn and ours."

"No, that's OK," Harry protested, holding his hand up in surrender again.

"Boys!" Ginny snapped, "leave him alone! He's still healing!"

"Yeah, we know, or we would've been a bit rowdier," George said, smiling. "You're OK, aren't you, Harry?"

"Yeah, fine," Harry said, grinning at them.

"Good! As soon as we're all up and around, we'll have a go at doing a proper Weasley Brother Initiation, then!" Fred chortled.

"I'll look forward to it – I think!" Harry replied with a snort of laughter.

"Right! We've spread enough cheer here for now!" George declared. "On to Ron's room!" With that Fred turned George's wheelchair around and pushed him out of the door, both of them waving gaily as they left.

Harry watched them go, a smile lingering on his face. "It's good to see them together again," he said softly. He looked at Ginny. "George looks good, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "I hope they didn't tire you too much."

"Nah, I'm fine," he said, glad he'd had a good dose of pain potion before they'd arrived. All that laughter would have made him quite sore if he hadn't already been dosed.

Marcus Pomfrey walked in just then. "How's my favourite patient?" he said with a smile. Harry was still smiling and flushed from laughing at the twins. He looked much improved.

"I'm fine," Harry replied. "Marcus? May I get up now? I'm tired of being in bed."

"It's too soon for you to be walking around, Harry," Marcus said cautiously.

"What about a wheelchair? George Weasley has one. Could I have one too?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Out of this room! I want to visit Ron and Remus and see how the others are."

"What others? All of the Hogwarts' students who were injured have been discharged now, or sent to the school's hospital wing," Marcus said as he examined Harry.

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"Who's left, then?" Harry said. He hadn't heard that the students were all gone now except for him and Ron.

"Remus and Professor Snape, and you and Ron are the only ones left here from Hogwarts," Marcus replied, "and Ron will be discharged tomorrow, I think."

"Really? Wow, that's great!" Harry said. "His leg's going to be fine, then?"

Marcus stilled, then looked at Harry seriously. "He may always limp, but his leg is nearly healed now. You did a marvellous job on him, Harry. You saved his leg. I didn't want to worry any of you at the time, but it was only a matter of hours before we would have been forced to amputate."

"Can Healer Litteken fix it so he won't limp?" Harry asked. Litteken had repaired the damage Voldemort's whip had done to Harry's body the previous term.

"He's already worked on Ron's leg several times now. There's nothing else that can be done. Some of the muscle tissue was damaged beyond repair or replacement, so that leg will always be a bit stiff. It won't affect his flying, though, so he'll be fine for Quidditch," Marcus concluded, knowing that was one of the things Harry was worrying about.

"Oh," Harry said quietly. "Well . . . I guess that's good, then. Will it hurt him?"

"No, it shouldn't be painful once it's completely healed. It will just get in his way a bit when he's walking, and he won't run well at all." Marcus made some notes on Harry's chart, then said, "You're not strong enough to have a wheelchair right now, but this evening, you may be. I'll check you again later, and will write on your chart when you're allowed to be up. You'll have a few days of using the chair, and then you'll be ready to start walking, probably with crutches at first. You're making excellent progress, Harry. Take care of yourself. See you later, Ginny – oh, and congratulations, by the way!"

"Thanks," she said, blushing prettily.

"I hear he got you quite a rock," Marcus said with a grin. "May I see it?"

Ginny held her hand out and Marcus inspected her ring quite seriously. "Hmmm. Yes. I can see why the nurses are all a-dither about this ring! It's beautiful!" He straightened up and smiled at Harry. "Well done!"

"Thanks," Harry replied, blushing.

"See you later, then. Get some rest, Harry."

"OK," Harry replied, sliding down into the bed gratefully. Between his efforts at studying and the fairly constant flow of visitors this afternoon, he was just plain knackered. Within minutes, he was asleep.

Very late that evening, Harry awoke with a start, not certain what had wakened him. He looked around his room and gasped when he saw a tall man's shadow just inside the door.

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"Calm down, Harry, it's only me," Dumbledore said as he approached the bed. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Harry relaxed against his pillows, a sigh of relief escaping him. "Hi, Professor. How are you?"

"Much better, now that I've seen you, dear boy. You have improved a great deal since I was here last," Dumbledore said, settling into a chair comfortably.

"What?" Ginny said, sitting up in her chair and pulling her wand while she tried to get her eyes to focus. "Who's there?"

"It's Professor Dumbledore, Ginny," Harry said calmly. "Go back to sleep."

"Oh, OK," she said, yawning hugely. "'Night."

"'Night, sweetheart," Harry said tenderly as he reached over and pulled her blanket up over her shoulders.

"I hear congratulations are in order," his headmaster said with a smile.

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling warmly as he put his glasses on and sat up straighter in the bed.

"When is the wedding?"

"Next year, after she finishes Hogwarts," Harry replied. "You'll come, won't you?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Dumbledore replied happily. "I look forward to it."

"Great!" Harry said. "What have you been doing while you've been gone?"

"Checking on everyone, getting Hogwarts back to normal as much as possible, helping Madam Bones with her Cabinet problems . . . that kind of boring stuff. Nothing so exciting as getting engaged to be married!"

Harry laughed. "If you do become engaged, I want to be invited to the wedding!"

"And so you shall, dear boy, and so you shall," Dumbledore said, chuckling along with his protégé.

"Ginny told me you gave me some of your blood, Professor," Harry said, suddenly serious.

"Yes, I did," Dumbledore agreed. "I was happy to do it."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely. "I'm curious, though. Muggles go to all kinds of trouble to try to match blood types before giving transfusions. What's different about wizard blood that means you don't need to match it perfectly?"

"Oh, in ordinary circumstances, healers would do similar tests to those Muggles do to match blood types," Dumbledore explained. "In this case, I had good reason to think we'd match well."

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"I don't understand. Why would you think we'd match?" Harry said, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Because, dear boy, I . . . well, let me preface this a bit. I have something to tell you that I should have told you many years ago. The reason I didn't was that I thought it might be dangerous for this secret to be revealed. And I was keeping a promise made long ago, as well. But the time has come to break that promise and reveal that secret, I believe."

Harry sat up straighter. Dumbledore was being very serious. Whatever he was about to disclose was of great importance, Harry could tell. The old wizard licked his lips, then rubbed his hands together a bit nervously, Harry thought, a strange gesture in a man who was usually so confident. What kind of horrible secret was he about to share? Harry swallowed hard, trying to brace himself for whatever his headmaster was about to say.

"Well, then," Dumbledore said finally, "I suppose there's nothing better to do than to simply get on with it. I thought our blood would have a good chance of matching, Harry, because I'm your great-great-grandfather. And I did do a small test, which seemed to indicate—"

Harry gasped. "Wait . . . you're . . . *what*?"

"Your great-great-grandfather, which means I am your closest living relative."

"I thought all my relatives were dead?" Harry said in confusion. "I don't understand. How can this be? Did my dad know? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Alas, no, James did not know. Let me tell you the story, Harry. It will answer all of your questions, I believe."

"OK," Harry said, thoroughly bewildered, but willing to listen. He rested against his pillows again and gave the old wizard his full attention.

"Many, many years ago, Harry, I was married to a lovely woman. She blessed me with one child, a daughter we both treasured. That daughter grew up and married a wonderful young wizard. She adored her husband, and we loved him, as well. Such a bright, intelligent, funny young man." Dumbledore sighed. "They had a beautiful baby girl during the war. Grindelwald found out about my daughter and thought he'd be able to get to me through her. He tried to kidnap her and her daughter, and her husband was viciously murdered while giving them time to escape. She never, ever forgave me for it. She denounced me, told me to never contact her or her baby again, and to never tell anyone that we were related. She then took her baby and emigrated to New Zealand, trying to get as far from me as possible."

"I'm sorry," Harry breathed when Dumbledore stopped to sigh heavily.

"No matter, Harry. These events all happened long ago."

"But they still hurt you," the young man said, his heart aching in sympathy for the grief he could see on the old man's face.

"Yes, they do," the old wizard agreed, sighing heavily again. "Well, back to my tale. The grief over their leaving killed my wife," he said sadly, "and nearly did me in as well, but I still had

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a war to win. I managed to defeat Grindelwald, and hoped my daughter would bring my granddaughter back and be reconciled with me, but alas, that was not to be. Eventually, she met a British wizard on holiday in New Zealand and fell in love with him. He brought her and my granddaughter back to England, but she still wouldn't see me, and when I tried to contact her, she told me her daughter had no idea we were related. My daughter thought it safest for her child if the girl never knew I was her grandfather. She told me if I ever revealed this information to her daughter that she'd take the child and move away again and never come back, and she certainly wouldn't let her attend Hogwarts. So I left them alone, as she wished. When the child was eleven, she came to Hogwarts and I was able to watch her grow up at last, even get to know her a bit. But I never told her I was her grandfather.

"She grew up to be a lovely young witch, powerful and especially skilled in Transfiguration and Charms. She married a young wizard named Potter – your grandfather, Harry. I liked him very much. He'd always been a good student, and was an intelligent, pleasant fellow with a wonderful sense of fun. I was glad she'd chosen so well. But still, her mother's edict kept me from telling her about our relationship.

"I heard they had a son they named James. I kept watch over him at a distance, but never revealed to him that we were related. James, as you know, was the smartest young man in Hogwarts, and a rascal who got detention on a regular basis as well. I loved him so much – but I couldn't let him know that. I wanted to take him on as an apprentice, but it just wasn't meant to be. My daughter was still alive and every so often would send me a warning – never a greeting, just a warning to stay away from her and her family. I abided by her wishes throughout your dear father's life, and yours, as well – until now.

"My granddaughter and her husband died not long before your parents did, and my daughter shortly after, but I realized that, with Voldemort after you already, the knowledge that you were my grandson – well, great-great-grandson – would make Voldemort even more determined to destroy you. So I kept my secret and did my best to keep my distance from you. But you, dear boy, wormed your way into my heart the instant you arrived in Hogwarts. When I saw your dear little face, so frightened but so resolute while you waited to be Sorted, I saw the depth of your courage and your heart, and was moved by it. I've watched you grow and develop and could not be more proud of you in any way, not at all.

"Now that Voldemort is gone, I think it's safe, at last, to reveal our relationship. I hope you can forgive an old man his many failings, especially this tremendous one of not telling you we're related." When he finished speaking, Dumbledore sat quietly in the chair, his hands in his lap, his fingers interlaced, his face grave but hopeful. He waited patiently for Harry's response.

Harry sat absolutely still, stunned into silence. Finally, he tried to speak, but found he couldn't. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Erm . . . you're my grandfather?"

"Great-great-grandfather, actually, but yes, I am," Dumbledore agreed.

"My dad didn't know?" Dumbledore shook his head. "You're my . . . my family? I have *family*?" Harry was staggered. He had family? And it was Dumbledore?

"You do have a bit more family than just me," Dumbledore admitted. "My brother, Aberforth, who I've mentioned before, is your great-great-uncle. And Professor McGonagall is your

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distant cousin. Let's see, if she's my second cousin, then" He pondered for several minutes. "Hmmm. These relations have always flummoxed me," he said amiably. "I think she's your third cousin twice removed? Possibly. Well, call it a 'distant cousin' and you'll be right, anyway."

"Does she know?" Harry said eagerly. "Does your brother?"

"My daughter changed her name and appearance when she left for New Zealand. No one who knew her before would have recognized her, so no, no one knows but you and Miss Weasley if she's awake enough to have heard us talking."

Harry glanced at Ginny's still form. Her breath was whistling slightly through her nose. "No, she's asleep." He glanced up at the man he now knew to be his grandfather – some kind of grandfather, at any rate. "May I tell her?"

"You may tell anyone you wish," Dumbledore said with a smile. "I imagine it will be in the *Daily Prophet* within a week, since such things rarely stay quiet no matter how hard one tries to keep them private."

"And you're all right with that?"

"Absolutely. I can show you the family bloodlines in the Hogwarts Register, if you want confirmation. That's the book that magically records the birth of all wizarding children. No matter how people try to hide their ancestry, it's recorded properly in the Register."

"So it shows your daughter is my dad's grandmother and my great-grandmother, then?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied, glad Harry seemed to be taking the news well.

"Then why didn't Professor McGonagall or some of the other staff know?"

"Because only the headmaster has access to those records," Dumbledore explained. "If you wish, I can arrange for you to see them. Just let me know."

Harry nodded, then was quiet for a long moment. "What shall I call you?" he finally asked with a shy smile.

"Whatever you like, dear boy," Dumbledore assured him.

"What did your granddaughter call you?"

"She hadn't learned to talk before my daughter whisked her away," the old wizard said sadly.

Harry gazed silently at his headmaster – his professor – his mentor – no, his *grandfather*, for several minutes, pondering all he'd just learned. Finally he took a deep breath and smiled.

"Grandfather?" he said, testing the sound and feel of it. "Granddad? Grandpa?" He snorted with laughter. "No, you're not a 'grandpa,'" he said. "Is 'Grandfather' all right with you?"

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Dumbledore smiled beatifically, wiping a sudden tear from his eye. Hearing Harry call him "Grandfather" touched his heart more deeply than he could ever explain. "'Grandfather' would be lovely, Harry."

"Grandfather," Harry said experimentally. "Grandfather! I have a grandfather!" he cried joyfully, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Ah, there's that grin that makes me smile," Dumbledore said fondly. "You do have the most charming smile."

"Who did I get it from?" Harry asked, eager to learn all he could about his ancestors.

"Your grandfather Potter, I believe," Dumbledore replied promptly.

"So you can tell me all about my family?" Harry said, bubbling over with excitement. "I wanted to ask Sirius so many things, but didn't have a chance. Remus has told me a lot, but he didn't know my dad's family as well as Sirius did."

"I can certainly tell you a great deal about your family, Harry, since I had them as students," Dumbledore said with a smile. "And we will have plenty of time to discuss such things now that Voldemort is no longer a threat."

Harry leaned back against his pillows, a huge grin on his face. "Wow. That's . . . that's just great!" He gazed fondly at the old wizard, amazed at his good fortune. A grandfather, after all these lonely years when his heart ached for someone to call "family," and that grandfather turned out to be his beloved headmaster.

Dumbledore cleared his throat quietly. "I believe there's one rather important thing I haven't told you yet, Harry."

"What's that?" he said, his eyes eager and bright.

Dumbledore studied the young man who was looking at him so trustingly. The old wizard's heart filled, as did his eyes. He blinked hard, determined not to mar the moment in any way. He took a deep breath and said, "I love you, Harry. I always have. You're more precious to me than I can ever tell you. Training you to fight Voldemort and then having to let you face him was torture of the most horrible kind. I would gladly have taken your place. I would happily have given my life for you, if it would have saved you from having to deal with him, but it wasn't my fate – it was yours. Having to leave you with that awful Muggle family, and seeing the horrible way they treated you – I hated the necessity of it, but there was nothing else I could do that would safeguard you as well as the protection you had by living with them. I hope you'll forgive me for that and for all the other ways I've failed you, all the things I should have told you sooner—"

"There's nothing to forgive, sir – I mean, Grandfather," Harry said, blushing a bit. "And that's all in the past, anyway. I . . . you've . . . erm" He dropped his eyes, blushing even more brightly. "I've always loved you, sir – erm, Grandfather." He raised his eyes, his smile lighting his whole face. "I always wished you were my grandfather. I never thought . . . I can't believe"

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"It's all true, though, dear boy," Dumbledore said, patting the young man's hand tenderly.

Harry turned his hand over and squeezed his grandfather's hand gently, gazing into those twinkling blue eyes. Dumbledore moved to sit on the side of the bed and drew Harry into his arms, hugging his great-great-grandson like the long-lost child he was. Harry thought his heart would burst with joy.

Ginny sat up and saw the two of them in a tight embrace. "What's wrong? What's happened?" she asked fearfully.

The two men broke their embrace and turned equally jubilant faces toward her. Harry glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded.

"Professor Dumbledore just told me . . . Ginny, he's my grandfather! Can you believe that?"

"No," Ginny said hesitantly, looking at the ancient wizard next to her handsome young fiancé.

"Great-great-grandfather, actually," Dumbledore corrected with a smile, "but we can leave out those 'greats' when we're among family and friends."

They spent a happy time explaining the situation to Ginny. When they were finished, Dumbledore said, "Harry, you're beginning to droop. You need to get some rest."

"You'll come back soon, won't you?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, of course I will," Dumbledore said, getting to his feet and patting Harry on the shoulder. "Snuggle down in that bed now, and I'll tuck you in. That's something I've always wanted to do. Do you mind?"

"No, not at all!" Harry said with a beatific smile. He slid down in the bed and got comfortable, beaming as his grandfather made quite a production of tucking him in and making sure his pillow was properly fluffed. Dumbledore leaned down and kissed him on the forehead, ruffling his hair gently as he straightened up.

"Rest well," Dumbledore said as he turned to go.

"See you soon, Grandfather," Harry said happily.

Ginny sat with tears streaming down her face. The tender, loving, joyful expressions on both Harry's and Dumbledore's faces touched her deeply. She sat quietly absorbing everything she'd learned as she tried to memorize the transcendent joy on Harry's face. This was a picture she never, ever wanted to forget – Harry discovering he still had living family, and that family was someone he already loved and respected. This was a memory both she and Harry would always cherish.

Early the next morning, Harry was finally allowed to leave his room in a wheelchair. He promptly went to visit Ron, who was being discharged in a few hours.

"How are you?" Harry said brightly as Ginny rolled his chair into Ron's room.

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"Hey! Are they letting you out soon?" Ron asked eagerly. He was sitting on the side of his bed, a cane leaning against the headboard. He'd been learning how to walk with the cane, which the healers believed he'd only need for a week or so before he regained his strength.

"No," Harry said in disgust. "I'm not getting well as fast as you."

"You didn't have the famous Healer Potter working on you then, did you?" Ron said cheekily. "Seriously, mate – Hermione told me what you did for me. I was too woozy to understand what was going on at the time. Thanks for saving my leg, Harry. If I can ever—"

"Just stop right there," Harry cut in. "You and Hermione and Ginny came to help me with that Sphere Shield Charm. I couldn't have done that without you. So I owe you, not the other way round."

"How about we call it square?" Ron said with a grin.

"Works for me," Harry said, reaching out to shake his best mate's proffered hand. "Where is Hermione, anyway?" Harry asked, looking around the room.

"Her parents' funeral is this morning. Mum, Dad, Charlie and the twins went with her. The hospital wouldn't let me out, and the funeral home had so many services to deal with from the train crash, there was no way to work things out so I could be there," Ron said sadly.

"How's she doing?" Harry asked quietly.

"She's . . . she's doing better than I would have expected," Ron said, his face quite serious. "The way she took it so hard at first, I honestly didn't know if she'd survive all this, but she seems to be doing OK now. I'm just glad the family could go with her, so she wouldn't have to be alone."

"Yeah, me too," Harry agreed. He glanced at Ginny, Hermione's best girlfriend, and realized Ginny had chosen to stay with him rather than go to the funeral with Hermione. What a choice she'd had to make. He saw the sadness in her eyes and reached for her hand, squeezing it gently, then lacing his fingers through hers. Hermione was his best friend too, and he wished he could have been there for her.

Ron saw his best mate and sister starting to get gloomy and decided to change the subject. "That's quite a ring you gave Ginny," he said with a smile.

"She deserves it," Harry said, moving the ring on her finger so it caught the light.

"If you say so," Ron said in a teasing voice. "I think she's a bratty little witch, but if you think she's worth that – HEY!" he squawked as Ginny tossed a pillow at him, making all of them laugh.

"So are you going to skip the N.E.W.T.s for the classes you've been taking?" Ron asked once the laughter quieted.

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"I've been trying to revise for them, but it's tough without you and Hermione to help. I don't know how I could have got through school without you two dragging me along," Harry said with a grin.

"Us, dragging you?" Ron said with a snort of laughter. "More like you and Hermione dragging me!"

"Or like Hermione dragging both of us," Harry countered cheekily. "Yeah, I want to take them, if I can get out of here in time. They start in just a few days, can you believe it?"

"Nah. I'm doing my best to convince myself – and Hermione – that we have a month left before they start," Ron said, chuckling.

"And how well is Hermione accepting this idea?" Ginny teased.

"Not well at all," Ron admitted, sighing dramatically.

"It's great to see you looking so well," Harry said, looking at Ron seriously.

"And you," Ron agreed. "I loved the Vanished walls! That was great! It was fun to be able to wave to you two when I was awake. Too bad the nurse made you replace them."

"Yeah. Maybe next time we both wind up injured, they'll have enough sense to put us in the same room!" Harry quipped.

"You two are not going to spend any more time in hospitals!" Ginny declared.

Both boys laughed. "We're going to be playing *professional* Quidditch in just a few weeks, Ginny," Harry reminded her. "I suspect St. Mungo's will give us rooms with our names on them, we'll be hurt so often!"

"You make that sound like something you're looking forward to!" she said, astonished.

"All part of the professional Quidditch player mystique," Ron said dramatically, placing his hand on his chest for effect. He posed various ways, tossing his hair out of his eyes, ruffling his hair as if it was windblown, squinting as if he was flying in a stiff wind, making Harry and Ginny laugh with his antics. "Can you believe it, Harry? In a few weeks, we'll be flying Firebolt Excaliburs for the London Lions in real league games! I still don't believe it!"

"I'd say that jersey you're wearing ought to be a clue," Harry teased.

"Well, yeah," Ron said, grinning, his face suffused with a pleased blush. "Hey, Mr. Murphy gave the whole family season tickets! He got us a family box! Isn't that great?"

"Cool!" Harry said. "He gave me tickets for Remus and Tonks, too. I guess I'll have to ask for some for Grandfather."

"Who?" Ron said, his eyes popping in surprise.

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Harry smiled with absolute delight. "I just learned last night that I have a grandfather! Well, a great-great-grandfather, anyway."

"You're kidding!" Ron said, completely astonished. "Who is it? Why didn't he tell you before? Is it someone you know?"

"Oh, yeah!" Harry said, his eyes sparkling. "Dumbledore."

"*What?*" Ron cried. "OK, what potion have you been over-doing?"

"It's true!" Harry went on to tell Ron the whole story. Ron was, as usual, a wonderful audience, gasping in all the right places, grinning when he should, and as happy for Harry as anyone could hope.

"Wicked! That's so cool, Harry! I'm really happy for you!"

"Yeah, me, too," Harry grinned. He glanced at his watch. "Rats. I'm only allowed to be up for an hour or so, and I want to see Remus. I guess we'd better go. But you're up and around now. Come see me when I get back to my room, OK?"

"Yeah, Fred and George brought me some Exploding Snap cards – we can play when you get back."

"Great! See you later, then," Harry said, waving as Ginny turned his chair around and pushed him out of the door.

"Wotcher, Harry! Hi, Ginny! It's great to see you!" Tonks said with a smile as the two teens entered Remus's room.

"Hi, Tonks! How are you feeling?" Harry asked with a gentle smile. The idea that he'd been the one to discover her pregnancy still amazed him.

"I'm fine. Remus is doing better, and that's all that matters to me right now," she said seriously.

Ginny rolled Harry's chair next to his godfather's bed. Remus's face was still a bit grey with fatigue and pain, but his eyes were brighter than the last time Ginny had seen him.

"Hi, Remus," Harry said. "It's good to see you."

"Harry," Remus smiled, lifting a hand to grasp his godson's arm. "You OK?"

"I'm fine," Harry said with a smile. "I would have come to see you sooner, but they wouldn't let me out of bed until this morning."

"Then you're not fine, you're 'improving,'" Remus teased.

"I guess," Harry admitted. He was getting tired and he was afraid it showed. "Do you want me to see if I can help things along?"

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"No, I don't want you to tire yourself," Remus protested.

Harry cheerfully ignored his refusal. "I'll quit when I get tired, OK?" he said reasonably. "I need to open your pyjama top." With Ginny's help, he was soon seated on the edge of Remus's bed and scanning the man's body with his magic. "I think they're doing a good job on you, Remus," he said at last. "I can't find anything that I can fix. Everything in there seems to be healing well, compared to how you felt to me on the battlefield."

"I'd be dead if you hadn't helped me there, Harry," Remus said seriously. "Thank you."

"Hey, the little one needs his or her daddy," Harry said, grinning. "I couldn't let you miss out on all the nappy changing and middle of the night feedings. I've heard they're *such* fun!" He buttoned Remus's pyjamas and continued, "And Tonks needs her husband, and I need my godfather. You're just going to have to stick around because all of us are so needy!"

"I'll do my best," Remus said with a weary smile.

"We don't want to tire you, Remus. And Harry's been up longer than he's supposed to be this first time anyway," Ginny said, standing and grasping the handles of the wheelchair. "We'd better go."

"Come back and visit again soon, OK?" Remus said hopefully.

"I will! I have loads to tell you!" Harry said, the excitement showing in his eyes.

"Like what?" Remus asked, intrigued in spite of his exhaustion.

"You heard we got engaged, right?" he said with a grin.

Remus's eyes lit up, sharing Harry's joy. "Oh yes, and Ginny showed us that beautiful ring! Congratulations!"

"I want you and Tonks to sit in the row reserved for my family," Harry said seriously, but then his eyes twinkled, "along with my grandfather."

"Your . . . *what*?" Remus said in shock. "Who?"

Harry told him his news as quickly as he could, because Ginny was wiggling his wheelchair in a not-so-subtle hint that they needed to go.

"Albus was James's grandfather? So many things make sense now!" Remus said with a grin. "He was always going out of his way to catch us in the hall and just speak to James for a minute, usually about nothing important. Amazing! I'm so happy for you, Harry!"

"Me, too!" Harry grinned. "Oops, apparently my chauffeur has decided it's time to go. See you!" he called laughingly as Ginny determinedly pushed his chair out of the door.

"See you, Harry!" Tonks called after him. "Bye, Ginny!"

"You're going to bed, Mr. Potter," Ginny said resolutely as she rolled his chair next to his bed.

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"And you're coming with me, right?" he said cheekily.

"You are entirely too cheerful!" she said with a grin as she helped him into bed and tucked him in.

"Why shouldn't I be? I'm engaged to a beautiful woman who loves me! I have a grandfather! My best mate and my godfather are getting better! My arch-enemy is GONE! And I don't have to take N.E.W.T.s if I don't want to! That's a lot to be happy about!" he said with a delighted smile.

Ginny studied his face for a long moment. How long had it been since she'd seen him this happy? The haunted look that had been in his eyes for years was nearly gone. His grin was wholehearted; his body, although drooping with fatigue now, exuding a lightness, a joy that had never been there before. He seemed relaxed and at ease with his life for what, the first time ever? Maybe so. He no longer had the threat of Voldemort hanging over his head. He'd met his predestined fate and conquered his enemy. Why shouldn't he be cheerful, even giddy? She smiled and bent to kiss him. "You be as happy as you want, sweetheart. You've earned it," she said at last. "But you also need to rest, so be happy lying down, OK?"

"By myself?" he teased, but then a yawn overcame him, making his jaw crack, which made both of them laugh. "Oh, sorry," he said when he could speak again.

"You've been a busy boy for quite a while. You need to get some rest. Go to sleep."

"Join me?" he said, his eyes sparkling.

"I have to study for exams, sweetie," she said regretfully.

"OK," he sighed. "I'll just watch you, then." With that, he rolled over on his side and watched her every movement, staring at her until he had her laughing and blushing. "What's wrong, Gin? I'm just watching you!"

"I'm going to take your glasses off if you don't start resting right now!" she threatened, but her chuckle ruined the threat's effect.

"Then I'll just see you in a fog," he said dreamily. He yawned again and finally removed his glasses himself, tucked his hand under his cheek and lay gazing fondly at her for a while before his eyes finally drifted closed in sleep.

When Harry woke up a few hours later, he was surprised to see a beautiful red fox sitting in the chair by his bed. He put on his glasses and smiled at it, then glanced around the room. "Ginny?" He sat up and peered through the door to see if she was in Ron's room. No Ginny. "Ginny?" he called quietly. He was surprised when the fox stood up in the chair and put its front paws on his bed.

"Who are you and how did you get in here?" he asked the fox, leaning a bit away from it. If it was truly a wild fox, it might be dangerous. He looked at it more seriously, and then saw something on its hip that made his eyes widen in shock. "No. Ginny? Is that you?" On her hip was a small patch of hair in a slightly different shade of red, shaped a bit like a heart. It was

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an image of the birthmark Harry loved to kiss. "That's wonderful, Ginny! When did you learn to do that? You've kept it secret really well!" He held his hand toward her and smiled when the vixen bowed her head and rubbed an ear against his palm. She looked up at him hopefully, her tongue lolling out in a foxy grin.

"Are you stuck?" Harry asked suddenly. She bounced around in the seat of her chair, running in a tight circle and then turning to smile at him again. "OK, I'll change you back," he said, reaching for his wand.

The fox gave a startled yip and jumped off the chair, moving toward the door.

"What's the matter?" He saw her looking toward Ron's room, then back at him. "Oh, you don't want me doing magic, is that it? Ron can turn you back. I'll call him. He'll want to see you anyway," he said with a grin. He sent an Adfero to Ron and smiled as the fox leapt up into the chair again, smiling at him and offering her paw. He rubbed her paw lightly with his thumb as he waited for Ron to enter the room.

"What's up, mate?" Ron said as he hobbled into Harry's room, his cane in his right hand. "Whoa! Who let that in?" he said when he saw the fox.

"Your sister, that's who," Harry said cheekily. The fox growled at him in response, making him laugh.

"Ginny let a fox into the hospital?" Ron said incredulously. "Why?"

"Look at her rump, Ron," Harry prompted.

Ron complied, then straightened suddenly when he saw the image of the heart. "What's that?"

"Maybe you don't know about it, but your sister has a birthmark shaped like that on her beautiful little bum," Harry said, grinning.

Ron grinned. "I remember that! I haven't seen it in a long time, mind, but when she was little and wearing nappies, I'd see just the edge of it peeping over them."

The fox gave Ron a disgusted look, making both boys laugh. "She's stuck," Harry said. "She doesn't want me to change her back. I'm supposed to be resting, y'know."

"Yeah, so I heard," Ron agreed. He squatted next to the chair, studying the fox closely. "This is pretty cool, Ginny! You'll be able to run with Remus on the full moon! Congratulations! Dad will be so proud! Two Animagi in the family!"

"Yeah, that's wonderful, isn't it?" Harry agreed. "I'm proud of you, Ginny." The fox sat up and smiled at both of them, wrapping her luxurious tail around her front legs and flipping the end of it coquettishly. "Ready to change? The more you change back and forth, the more confident you'll be." The fox blinked at him, then looked steadily at Ron.

"Ready, then? OK," Ron said as he pulled out his wand. He tapped her three times and suddenly, there was Ginny grinning madly at both of them.

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"Thanks! I've been trying to do that for months, and while I was revising for the Transfiguration exam, I thought I'd just try it again. I wanted to have it for extra points! And suddenly, there I was! And then I couldn't change back. Isn't it cool? Is she beautiful? I just love foxes!"

"She's gorgeous," Harry assured her. "Now try to do it again."

"Oh, no, I should—"

"Do what the man says, Ginny," Ron insisted. "That's the only way to become good at it."

Ginny struggled with the change for the next few minutes, then suddenly, with a small "pop," she turned into the fox.

"Do I pop when I change?" Ron said curiously.

"No, but you did when you were learning how," Harry replied. "Change back now, Gin."

The fox looked thoughtful and then began to snarl as she tensed up.

"What's wrong?" Ron said, glancing around.

"I think she's just nervous about it," Harry replied. "Go on, you can do it," he encouraged her. Finally, Ginny herself occupied the chair. "Well done! Now do it again!" Harry said.

"Slave driver!" she protested, but she transformed again. A few minutes later, she became herself again. "Wow, that's so cool!"

"Don't tell Hermione for a while, OK?" Ron warned. Hermione still had never gone beyond the paw stage in her Animagus transformation attempts.

"Don't worry, I won't," Ginny said, grinning. "I'll wait and show Dad when we're back home." She hesitated. "I mean at Harry's house while the Burrow is being rebuilt."

"I thought you'd forgotten about that for a minute there," Ron teased gently.

"I had. It's so odd to think of it being gone," she said with a shrug.

"Well, now Mum and Dad can build a house that suits them, instead of making do and adding to the house as needed," Ron said philosophically.

Harry yawned suddenly. "You need to rest, Mr. Potter!" Ginny insisted, pushing him down in the bed and tucking him in again.

"If you insist," he said. He really was tired. "I'm so happy for you," he murmured, kissing the fingers that she was trailing down his cheek. "Hey, Ron? Thanks for helping her out."

"No problem," Ron said. "Now go back to sleep before someone comes and yells at us for keeping you awake!"

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"OK," Harry said sleepily. He took off his glasses and snuggled into his pillow, and was soon fast asleep.

"That was a good nap," Ginny said when she saw Harry awake again a few hours later. "How are you feeling?"

"Bit sore. Is it time for my potion?" he said, stretching carefully, obviously in some pain.

"Yes, the nurse should be here soon," Ginny assured him. "You overdid it when you were up earlier, didn't you? I knew you were staying up too long."

"No, really, I'm fine!" he insisted. He'd just been allowed up for a brief time. He certainly didn't want to be forced to stay in bed all the time again!

"You're not fine – but you're getting there," she said with a smile. Her smile faded as she continued. "I've had a message from McGonagall. She wants me to go back to school when Ron leaves this afternoon."

"Why?" Harry said, frowning. He didn't want Ginny to leave him.

"I've missed a lot of classes from being here, and it's time I went back to school so I'll do well on my exams. Or so she says," Ginny said with a sigh. "I don't want to go. I'd be happy to drop out of school today and marry you, you know."

"I know you would," Harry replied with a sad smile, "but you shouldn't do that. I'll be all right. Maybe they can put Remus and me in the same room. Then Tonks can baby-sit both of us. She'll need the practice, with a baby coming, don't you think?" He was trying to make the best of the situation, but the idea of waking up in the hospital without Ginny there beside him, looking after him, cheering him up when he was down . . . he didn't want to think about it.

"Did you tell McGonagall about the fox?" Harry asked her, hoping a change of subject would cheer both of them.

"Yeah, and I showed her, as well. She's over the moon about it," Ginny said. "I'll get extra points on my exam because of it."

"That's great," Harry said sincerely. "I'm happy for you."

"Oh, look," Ginny said, hearing a noise in the hallway. "Hermione's back. Mum and Dad are with her."

"How's she look?" Harry asked. He couldn't see through the door from the bed.

"As if she just came from her parents' funeral," Ginny said sadly. She laced her fingers with Harry's, worried for Hermione, but more worried because she knew that her parents were here to take her, Hermione and Ron back to Hogwarts. Harry didn't know they'd be leaving so soon. She hadn't had the heart to tell him. She looked at him now, as he strained to see Hermione through the door, and sighed. "I have to tell you something," she said quietly.

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"What is it?" he said, realizing her tone of voice didn't bode well for him somehow.

"Mum and Dad are here to take us back to school – Ron, Hermione and me," Ginny said quietly.

"Oh," Harry said, unable to think of anything else to say. He looked up at her and tried to put on a brave face, but oh, how he was going to miss her! "Ron and I didn't get to play Exploding Snap yet," he said plaintively. "Maybe they can wait?"

Ginny smiled at him. "We can ask, but I think they're pretty much ready to go."

"Hi, Harry," Ron said, hanging his head apologetically as he clumped into the room with his cane. "Did Ginny tell you?"

"You have to leave now, yeah," Harry said in a flat voice. "How's Hermione?"

"Pretty fragile, I think," Ron replied, glancing over his shoulder. "Mum said she did really well, but she's been given a Calming Draught now. They're going to take her back to Grimmauld Place for as long as she can bear being out of class. Knowing her, she'll be back at Hogwarts in a day or two."

"How are you feeling now?" Harry asked, glad to see how well Ron was managing with his cane.

"Pretty good, actually. They gave me some potion to take to keep the pain manageable, and a list of exercises to do to get my leg working as well as possible," he said with an attempt at cheerfulness. He'd just seen his leg unwrapped for the first time an hour before and was still in shock from the change in it. He kept reminding himself that he could have ended up with a wooden leg like Moody's, and that he should count his blessings that he still had his own leg and could walk on it at all. Ron sighed and swallowed hard. He was going to be strong through this, even if it killed him to know how horrible his leg looked now. At least it worked, and they said it would look better eventually.

"I heard you'll be able to fly again soon," Harry said, trying to be supportive.

"Yeah, that's what they told me. They said it won't even affect my balance," Ron said with a sickly grin, doing his best to be positive about everything.

"Well, that's good then." Harry pushed himself up in the bed, Ginny arranging his pillows so he'd be comfortable sitting up, just as Hermione entered the room. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she replied.

Harry had never seen Hermione so sad. He held his hand out to her wordlessly and she took it, sitting on the side of the bed facing him. "I'm so sorry," he murmured.

She just nodded, then lifted heartbroken eyes to his. "All this time . . . I've known you for years and I've never understood . . . I'm sorry, Harry." She sniffled, then sobbed, and tears streamed suddenly down her face.

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Harry pulled her gently into his arms and let her cry herself out. "You don't have to be sorry for anything, Hermione," he murmured. "I wish I could help you somehow." She buried her face in his shoulder and cried harder. Harry looked up and saw Molly wringing her hands, tears streaming down her face.

"She was so strong at the service," Molly said quietly, shaking her head and looking a bit lost. She'd buried two of her sons only a few days earlier and was still in shock from that. She had no idea how to help Hermione, or herself, through this dark time in their lives.

Harry held his best friend close, understanding her pain, but also knowing that she would always have fond memories of her parents. For that, he thought she was fortunate. He rubbed Hermione's back, soothing her as well as he could. He glanced up at Ron, who looked lost. Harry understood. Hermione had gone to Harry for comfort instead of Ron. But Ron had his parents, and Hermione was just beginning to understand that she, like Harry, was an orphan. Harry turned his eyes to Ginny, who had gone to her mother and now held her, both of them crying now. When was this pain going to end?

Finally, Hermione quieted and sat up. "I'm sorry. I got your pyjamas all wet," she said, shaking her head ruefully.

"No problem," Harry said, waving his wand and doing a quick Drying Charm on his pyjama top. "You're going to be all right, Hermione," he said, looking at her seriously. "You have loads of friends. We're all going to look after you. You can stay at my house if you want. You know there's plenty of room."

She nodded. "Thanks, Harry. I can't bear the thought of going back to my parents' house. I don't know how I'm going to . . . I don't know what . . ." She stopped speaking and fought to control her emotions. "Thanks. I'll be happy to stay with you. You're sweet to offer."

"Whatever you need, I'll do my best to help you. You do know that, right?" he said, bending down to see past the curtain of dark curls that hid her face.

"Yeah. Thanks." She sighed heavily, then tried to put on a happier face. "I heard you're doing a lot better. Will they release you soon?"

"Not for a few more days," Harry told her. He didn't know what else to say. If he mentioned studying for exams, she might get upset again. If he mentioned them returning to Hogwarts . . . he couldn't think of a safe topic of conversation.

Arthur came to his rescue. "We're going to have to leave soon, you lot," he said, looking at his two children and Hermione. "Gather up your things and say your goodbyes, all right? We're going to stop in and see Remus and Tonks before we leave."

"Right," Ron said dully, getting up and hobbling back to his own room to gather up the bags of sweets and gifts that hadn't already been sent to Hogwarts for him.

"Shall I take some of this back to Hogwarts for you?" Ginny asked Harry, looking at the numerous get-well cards, presents, sweets and flowers that filled his room.

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"Yeah, thanks," he replied, doing his best to be cheerful. Ginny's eyes met his for a moment and both of them had to look away.

"I'll help you, Ginny, since Ron's nearly finished," Hermione offered.

"Thanks," Ginny replied quietly. They gathered up as much as they could carry and put a temporary Sticking Charm on everything, then did a Shrinking Charm so the pile could be carried easily. They repeated the process several more times, until all of their pockets were full, then made two more bundles to carry in their arms.

"I guess that's all we can take for now," Ginny said, her eyes brimming with tears when she looked at him again. She heard her parents come in the room again and the tears started to fall.

Harry held his arms open and Ginny sank into them gratefully once more, snuggling her head into his shoulder, then lifting her face for his kiss.

"Don't cry, baby. It's only for a few days," Harry whispered as he gently rubbed noses with her. "I'll be all right. I love you."

"I love you too," she said, sniffing hard as she tried to stop her tears.

"Give me a kiss to remember," Harry breathed, lowering his lips to hers.

The Weasleys and Hermione all found other things to do as Harry and Ginny kissed, giving them a bit of privacy.

Finally, Ginny rose from Harry's arms, but didn't let go of his hand until she'd moved out of his reach. "Just for a few days, OK?" she said. "Don't do anything silly to make it longer."

"I'll be careful," Harry agreed.

"Wait, we can't go!" Ginny said suddenly. "Where's Tonks? She's supposed to be sitting with you now."

"She went with Remus to physical therapy so she could see how to help him," Harry told her. "She'll be here soon. Don't worry."

"Are you sure?" she said. "You shouldn't be left alone."

"I'm sure. The hospital staff has all been checked. No Death Eaters here. And Merlin's here with me. I'll be fine," he replied, but his heart wasn't in it. He blew out a breath, then did his best to put on a cheeky grin. "Have fun revising, you lot! And tell everyone I said hello."

"We will," Ron said, poking Harry gently in the shoulder.

"Bye, Harry," Hermione said, looking sad and lost.

"You take care of yourself, dear," Molly said, bending to kiss his forehead. "We'll all be together again soon."

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"Yeah," Harry agreed, holding his too-cheery smile until they'd all disappeared through his doorway. He bit his lip and told himself quite firmly that he would be just fine for a few days by himself, and they were moving Remus into his room in a little while anyway. Holding tightly to that thought, he slid down in his bed and went to sleep.

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Chapter 32 – The Torch is Passed

Harry was sound asleep, lying on his side, his right arm hanging off the bed, his palm lying open, exposing the branded phoenixes and griffins to view. He looked exhausted and very young with his face relaxed in slumber. His mouth was slightly open and he was snoring softly. A flash of light woke him and he sat up.

"Merlin?" he said muzzily, looking above him for his phoenix, wondering where he'd been. Suddenly, he saw a red blur zooming out the door, an angry scream issuing from that usually-lovely, soothing voice. "*Merlin?*" Harry said, truly worried now. He'd never seen his phoenix acting aggressively. He put his glasses on, grabbed his wand and swung his legs over the side of the bed, then got up and tottered weakly to the door, looking up and down the corridor for his phoenix or whatever had disturbed the normally placid bird. "Merlin?" he said again, still softly. He knew he didn't have to call loudly for the phoenix to hear him.

Merlin soared around a corner and up the hallway toward him, landing gently on his shoulder and ruffling Harry's hair affectionately with his beak.

"What's up, mate?" Harry asked, caressing the obviously unhappy bird.

"What are you doing out of bed, Mr. Potter?" a scary-looking nurse demanded as she stormed down the hall toward him. "You are not strong enough to be walking around!"

"Sorry," Harry said, backing into his room. "I just . . . I thought . . . something bothered my phoenix and I came to see what it was."

"There's nothing here. Go back to bed," she said, not unkindly. "You've probably had a bad dream. That would be quite understandable, after what you've been through."

He considered arguing with her, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. With her strong hand under his elbow, he wobbled back to bed and got in, grateful for her support. He hadn't realized he was still so weak. "Thank you," he breathed, suddenly exhausted, as the nurse tucked him in.

"Do you need anything?" she asked as she finished straightening his covers.

"No, thank you, I'm fine," he said. "Do you know when they're moving my godfather in here with me?"

"He's still in physiotherapy. I think they'll move him in here when he returns," she said. "Go back to sleep, young man. You need to build up your strength."

He nodded, then turned on his side, Merlin tucked closely against his stomach. When the woman left the room, Harry looked at his bird and said, "What happened?"

Merlin told him that someone had been there taking a photograph of Harry. Merlin had tried to catch the man, but he'd Apparated away when he saw the bird coming for him.

"What the bloody hell was that about?" Harry wondered with irritation. He pondered this for a few minutes, but then the weakness of his body began taking over. He was simply too frail to

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be angry for long. He yawned, stretched comfortably and began to relax. "Why would some sod want a picture of me sleeping?" He stifled another yawn, truly too tired to care much. "Thanks for looking after me," he murmured, petting the magnificent scarlet bird nestled so warmly against him. Merlin crooned sweetly in response, then moved gently away and hopped onto the foot of Harry's bed facing the door, standing guard over his young charge as well as he could. Harry smiled, grateful for having such good friends of every sort, then tucked his hand under his cheek and went back to sleep.

The next morning, Harry, Remus and Tonks were just finishing breakfast when Marcus stormed in.

"Good morning," Harry said with a smile, wondering what was bothering the healer. He'd nearly forgotten about the previous day's incident.

"Good morning," Marcus replied tersely, dropping huffily into the chair beside Harry's bed.

"You seem a bit upset," Remus said mildly. "Everything OK?"

"Fine, fine. It's these bloody reporters that are the problem," Marcus growled. "And some damned fool let a photographer in, or else a hospital employee took a photo and sold it to the papers. When we find out who was involved, they will be looking for work elsewhere immediately!"

Harry had never seen Marcus so angry. "Photographer?" he said in confusion, but then he remembered. "Oh." He held his hand out toward Marcus, who handed him the paper without a word. Harry opened it and looked at the front page, then shook his head, a look of disgust on his face.

"What is it?" Remus asked.

"It says, 'The Boy-Who-Conquered-Voldemort Near Death' and has a picture of me asleep," he sighed, tossing the paper to his godfather. "I'm not near death, am I, Marcus?" He gave the healer a cheeky grin.

"No, and you haven't been for a while now. I don't know how this happened. We did our best to keep the hospital secured for your safety. Whoever did it could have attacked you in your sleep rather than just taking your picture!"

"If he had tried, he would have been flashed out of here by one very angry phoenix," Harry replied. "That's what got Merlin so upset. He tried to catch the person, but he said the man Disapparated once he got away from my door. Merlin flew down a couple of corridors looking for him in case he was still around, but came back when he couldn't find him quickly. He didn't want to leave me alone for long."

"When was this?" Marcus asked.

"Late yesterday afternoon, before Remus was moved into my room. A flash of light woke me up, and I thought Merlin was coming back from somewhere. He does wander around on his own at times. He always comes when I need him, so I don't mind him exploring," he said,

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answering Marcus's questioning look. "But when I woke up after the light flashed, I saw Merlin go through the door, and then down the hall. I got up and went to the doorway, and he returned a moment later. Then a nurse came and told me off for being up and put me back to bed."

"The flash must have been when he took the photo, then," Marcus said thoughtfully. "Hmm. The nurse may have put on your chart that she found you out of bed, and noted the time. Perhaps we can work out who could have done this once we know what time it happened." He got up and started for the door. "I'll check your chart and start some inquiries. I'm so sorry about this, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry replied.

"If Ginny had been here," Tonks began darkly.

"The culprit would have been hexed into oblivion before he could Disapparate," Remus said with a grin.

"And the photo would have never reached the paper," Harry agreed. "So bring Ginny back!" He grinned, hoping someone would take him seriously.

"You wish!" Tonks teased.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I do."

"I'm sorry we weren't here when you needed us," Remus said worriedly. "They took me to therapy at a most inconvenient time. Tonks could have stayed with you instead of coming with me."

"I went with Remus so I could learn how to help him with his therapy," Tonks said with a guilty look. "I should have stayed with you, Harry. I'm sorry."

"It's over now, nothing we can do about it," Harry said with a shrug. "Don't worry about it."

"You'd better let Ginny know you're OK," Tonks said, just as Harry heard Ginny's voice coming from his ring.

"She's calling me now," he said with a smile, then pressed the stone in his ring and said, "Ginny Weasley." When her face appeared above his ring, he smiled and said, "Hi. The reports of my demise are a bit premature. Did that article worry you?"

"Only because you were apparently left unguarded!" she said heatedly. "Are you all right?"

"I miss you – other than that, I'm fine," he assured her.

"That's good. Professor Dumbledore is livid! He's on his way there, I think," Ginny said.

"Why?"

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"Dunno. I suppose to straighten things out," she said with a shrug. "How are you feeling today?"

"I feel stronger," he said with a grin. "They may let me leave in another day or two!"

"Behave yourself so you can leave then!" she urged him.

"I behave!" he said, acting wounded.

"Right," she teased. "I'd better go, it's time for class. Hermione only just showed me the paper. I thought I should call."

"I'm glad you did. It's nice to see you. You look pretty today," he said tenderly.

"And you look as if you've just woken up," she teased. "Your hair's all muddled."

"I did!" he said, trying to smooth down his hair as he spoke. "There's not much else to do here but sleep."

"Lazybones!" she said, grinning. "Oh, Ron and Hermione and Neville say 'hi.' Oh, yeah, Colin, too. And Luna. I'd better go. Talk to you soon!"

"Have a good day, Gin," he said, smiling at her pert face, which soon disappeared from above his ring.

"So what's up?" Remus asked.

Harry filled him in on what Ginny had said, and told him Dumbledore was on the way. He'd no sooner finished saying that than his grandfather came striding briskly through the door.

"How are you today?" he asked Harry, sitting by the young man's bed.

"Better than the reporters think I am," Harry quipped, his eyes twinkling.

"We're going to find out who did this and deal with them," his grandfather promised. "There's no excuse—"

"I'm not that fussed about it, honestly," Harry said with a smile. "Everyone I care about knows I'm OK. That's good enough. If I'd seen the photographer, I would've hexed him, but really, what harm has it caused?"

"Harry, you have no idea what's going on outside," Dumbledore told him seriously. "People are mourning in the streets. It's quite sad, really."

Harry's eyes widened in astonishment. "Mourning *me*? Because of that stupid picture?"

"Yes. Things are in such an uproar, Minister Bones is beside herself. She'd like you to do another press conference, so people can see you're alive and recovering well," Dumbledore said quietly. He raised his hands in anticipation of the protest already forming on Harry's lips. "I know you don't want to. I know you've been imposed on enough. But in the interest of

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calming and reassuring the public, Harry, would you consider it?" He sat studying the various expressions chasing each other across his grandson's face.

Finally, Harry sighed. "You think I should do this?"

"Yes, I do," Dumbledore said. "I'm sorry."

"OK. When and where," Harry said, looking a bit disgusted to be forced to face the press again.

"Are you really up to this? We shouldn't exhaust you," Dumbledore said, his face concerned.

"Marcus says I can go back to school in a day or two, so being up for a little while shouldn't be a problem," Harry assured him.

Marcus pushed Harry's wheelchair toward the lobby. "We seem to be having press conferences nearly every time I take care of you, Harry," Marcus said, trying to be playful.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I'm sorry. I know this is taking you away from your patients."

"You're my patient too, and I feel responsible for this incident. We took every precaution we could think of . . ."

"Don't worry about it, Marcus. What's done is done. We can deal with this," Harry said, surprised at how calm he felt.

Marcus left Harry in the corridor and stepped into the lobby, facing the milling crowd. Flashes of light sparked all over the room from photographers capturing the moment. All of the reporters and photographers had been required to show their forearms upon entering the hospital to make sure there were no Death Eaters in the crowd. The lobby was surrounded by Aurors and hospital security staff.

"I'm Marcus Pomfrey, a healer here at St. Mungo's," Marcus began, his face and voice grim. "Those of you with Quick Quotes Quills can put them away. Mr. Potter will set them on fire if he sees them, as will I," he said, flicking his wand and setting fire to a Quick Quotes Quill that was still doing its job rather than being put away. His eyes flashed with anger as he perused the crowd looking for more offenders. He finally relaxed when he saw that they were all complying with his instructions.

"Now that you're writing what's actually being said, I'll get on with this conference. We have found the hospital staff member who took that photo of Harry Potter while Mr. Potter was sleeping. That staff member has lost his job and is facing legal consequences as a result of his actions. Let this be a warning to others who think they can do what they want to rather than following hospital protocols, which are put in place for the protection of our patients. Those staff members who do not put the patient's privacy and welfare first will never work in this hospital or any other licensed wizard medical facility in the country, and may face a nice long stay in Azkaban as well." He glowered at the crowd, his face plainly showing his barely-controlled fury. "Like any of our patients, Harry Potter has a right to privacy. That right has been violated. Such violations *will not* be tolerated!"

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He sighed and forced himself to speak more calmly. "Mr. Potter is recovering remarkably well from the injuries he incurred while defeating You-Know-Wh— erm, Lord V-V-Voldemort. He needs rest, a few more potions and a bit of time to get his strength back, and then he'll be returning to school for his exams. If all goes well, and I fully expect it to, he should be strong enough to begin practicing with the London Lions Quidditch team on time, two weeks after the end of his school term." He stopped and thought a moment. "I suppose that's all I have. Mr. Potter?" he said, turning to look down the corridor to where Harry still sat in his wheel chair.

With a nurse's help, Harry got to his feet. He slipped a crutch under his left arm and wobbled into the lobby, standing in front of the crowd in his dressing gown and slippers, but glaring at them as defiantly as if he were arrayed for battle.

"As you can see, I'm *fine*," Harry snapped. He forced himself to calm down. "Look, I appreciate people caring about how I am, but I'm a person too, and I appreciate my privacy. How would you like it if people sneaked up on you and took pictures while you were sleeping, and then told everyone you were dying? That's not fair, it isn't right, and I'm tired of being treated this way."

He glanced around the group, seeing some faces he remembered from the press conference after his scars were worked on. Most of the reporters had their hands in the air. Harry sighed, then said, "I will take a few questions, then I'm going back to bed so I can go back to school as soon as possible. I have exams to deal with in a very few days." He pointed at a wizened old reporter near the back of the group who was being nearly overwhelmed by younger ones around him vying for Harry's attention. "Yes, you, sir, in the blue robes and orange hat."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter! I would like to know if You-Know-Who is truly dead. Pictures can be falsified, as you well know, so I'm sure the public would like to hear the truth from you directly," the man said in a quavering but earnest voice.

Harry stifled a growl of impatience with the man for saying "You-Know-Who." He pressed his lips together, biting back an angry retort, then replied, "His name was Lord Voldemort, and yes, he's dead. He was completely destroyed. He will never be able to restore himself as he did before. Next question?"

He saw Penelope Clearwater's hand raised and smiled at her. "Yes, Penelope? How are you?" he said, wondering if she knew Percy had died, how he'd died, and if she still cared for him. He wouldn't mention it if she didn't.

"Hi, Harry. Thank you for taking my question," she said brightly. "I'm so glad we have something other than boring war talk to discuss with you! We've heard you and Ginny Weasley are engaged now. Is that true? If so, when and where is the wedding?"

Harry stifled a surprised laugh at her comment about "boring war talk" as he blushed at her question, which wasn't the type of thing he'd been expecting. He took a deep breath and thought of Ginny, which made him smile. "Yes, it's true. We'll be married after she finishes Hogwarts next year. I don't know where yet – that's up to her and her family. I told them I'd cooperate with whatever they wanted me to do as long as nobody asked me to sing."

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"Why don't you want to sing?" Penelope asked, grinning at his charming answer and accompanying blush.

"You've obviously never heard me sing," he quipped. "It will be a private ceremony – no press. I know that much. Next question?" he said, more relaxed now. "Yes?" He called on an older man.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, could you tell us what you think of the war effort?"

"What war effort?" Harry said, genuinely curious. "Voldemort's dead. The Death Eaters are nearly all rounded up, as are the Dementors. Everything should be over now. So what are you asking about?"

"I mean, how well do you think things were handled in this last battle?" the man clarified.

"Oh," Harry said, finally understanding the question. "Well, we had Aurors with us this time, and I believe that saved a lot of lives. The D.A. members are well-trained now, but we're still teenagers and don't have the training the Aurors do, nor as much experience in battle. Ron Weasley's strategies worked very well." He glanced around and noticed some curious looks, and some confused ones. "I don't know how much you know about what happened. We used the D.A. Flying Squad as the first wave of the attack. They dropped bombs in the house so the Death Eaters either died or ran outside to be captured by the Aurors." Mentioning the Flying Squad reminded him of a teacher he'd lost. "The Flying Squad was a tremendous help. Losing Madam Hooch was awful. She trained them very well."

"Do you know where she was buried?" someone called out. "Hogwarts or elsewhere?"

"I honestly don't know," Harry said. He turned and looked into the corridor, where Dumbledore stood waiting for him. At his look, Dumbledore joined Harry in front of the crowd.

"Madam Hooch made her home in Hogsmeade for many years, and was buried in the churchyard there," Dumbledore said quietly. "She was a wonderful teacher and will be greatly missed."

"Professor Dumbledore, what do you think of Harry's performance in the battle?" someone else shouted.

"I think he was magnificent, as you will agree when you see the films that the Ministry made of the battle," Dumbledore said with a smile. He patted Harry on the shoulder. "No one could have done a better job than he did. He showed tremendous wisdom, restraint, good judgement, and unlimited courage and selflessness. I'm very proud of him."

"Harry, why do you think the Ministry let students fight for them?" a man at the back asked when he was called on.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who nodded and waited for the young man to answer. "I, erm, I don't think we actually gave them a choice," he admitted with a shrug. "Everyone in the D.A. wanted to fight. And the Ministry doesn't have an army of any kind, nor any flying squads. We were able to be a real help to the Aurors, because there simply weren't enough of them to

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handle that many enemies at once. The Aurors fought brilliantly – I don't want to give the wrong impression here – but there were a lot of Death Eaters to deal with."

"Can you tell us how you killed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" asked the next reporter Harry called on.

"Erm. . . ." Harry hesitated, then looked at Dumbledore and said quietly, "Grandfather, how much—"

The crowd had stilled completely when Harry turned to his headmaster, in order to hear whatever they were saying. When they heard Harry call Dumbledore "Grandfather," pandemonium broke out among the reporters.

"*Damn*," Harry grumbled, then looked up at Dumbledore. "I'm sorry."

"It isn't a problem at all, dear boy, don't worry," Dumbledore said, patting his shoulder affectionately. He turned to the clamouring reporters. "Settle down, please, or we'll leave. There, that's better. Thank you. Yes, you did hear Harry call me 'Grandfather.' He's only recently learned that I am his great-great-grandfather. I've kept this relationship secret for many years, but with Lord Voldemort gone, I felt it was safe to tell him. And I can't tell you how delighted I am to have such a fine grandson."

"Harry, what do you think of all this? How angry are you that he kept it from you?" someone called.

"I'm not angry at all, because I understand his reasons," Harry replied. "I'm just glad to find out that I have relatives who are still alive. I thought they were all dead. Now I find I have a grandfather and some other distant relatives." He smiled warmly. "I'm very happy about it."

"Congratulations and all that," another reporter said a bit impatiently. "You haven't told us how you killed You-Know-Who."

"He's *dead* and you still can't say his name?" Harry said, amazed. "His name was Tom Marvolo Riddle. He made an anagram of that name to create the name 'Lord Voldemort.' He was a normal human being who went very, very bad. And he's DEAD! Learn to say his name!"

"OK," the reporter replied, a bit unnerved by the young man's vehemence. "So how did you kill him?"

"I think it's safe to tell them, Harry," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. He leaned over and whispered in his grandson's ear, "It's not as if any of them could ever do a spell like that, right?" Harry grinned and nodded.

"I'd like to give you a bit of background first," Dumbledore added, turning back to the reporters. "The summer before Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts, he was stricken with a very rare illness, The Refiner's Fire. The fact that he survived at all is nearly miraculous. No one under the age of fifty has ever survived it, and of all the wizards in our history who have had it, only three survived at all: Great Merlin, Harry, and I." He watched as the reporters scribbled furiously, trying to keep up with him. "You might well ask what this illness does to

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a wizard. Yes, I see all those raised hands. I will answer the question, please be patient. The Refiner's Fire burns through the wizard, purifying the magic within him, which increases that wizard's power tremendously if he doesn't die of the illness. It takes a long time to learn to control these increased powers, which is one of the reasons Harry became my apprentice this year rather than attending a full load of classes like his classmates. A wizard who has survived the Refiner's Fire has much more power to put behind his spells than an ordinary wizard, but it takes wisdom and experience to use this power properly. Harry has shown a great deal of wisdom in using his power, and has worked hard to make the best possible use of his abilities. He is, by far, the greatest and most powerful wizard in the world today."

"No, I'm not," Harry protested suddenly. "You are!"

Dumbledore smiled sweetly at his grandson. "No, dear boy, you surpassed me months ago." He patted Harry fondly on the shoulder again, giving him a quelling look so that the boy's further protests died on his lips. "I'm simply stating the facts. Now then. With that introduction, I'll let Harry tell you how he defeated Lord Voldemort. Please bear in mind that he could not have done the magic he did without the power he has from The Refiner's Fire."

Harry was still staring at him, his mouth opened in surprise. When Dumbledore turned and looked at him expectantly, but with a twinkle in his eye, Harry stared at him a moment longer, swallowed hard, then turned to face the reporters again. "Uh. . .OK. Um. . .well, I spent a lot of time researching spells, charms, jinxes, trying to find something that would either get past Voldemort's defences or contain him until I could do something else to him. I found a Sphere Shield Charm in an old book last term and started working on that, mostly because it was an interesting spell. It's a very difficult charm to do, but it's rather useful at times. I used it during the Battle of Little Hangleton when I was nearly worn out and needed to rest, but couldn't leave, because then Voldemort would leave the battlefield and I'd lose my chance at him." Harry swallowed hard, the awful memories of that battle as clear in his mind as if they'd happened only hours before. "Well, you've seen the films and know what happened then. I worked on the Sphere Shield Charm more this term, and learned how to cast it outward, so it goes around someone else."

"Can you show us?" someone called when Harry stopped to take a breath.

Harry instantly cast a sphere around the person who'd called out, shocking that man into dropping his quill, and making the others laugh. Harry dropped the sphere immediately, far too quickly for any of the photographers to capture it. He gave the reporters a brief but cocky grin. "That's a light version of what I did. But just containing Voldemort wouldn't destroy him. I knew I had to do something else to kill him. He'd worked hard to become immortal, and ordinary ways of killing a person simply didn't work on him. After thinking about it for a long time, talking with Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin quite a bit, and doing a lot of research, I came to the conclusion that, since his body was created from Dark rituals and potions, and his spirit was pure evil, the evil and darkness needed to be removed from him. After that, he could be killed, or he might just die on his own. I worked out the refining spell—"

"Refining Spell?" someone called.

"The spell to remove the evil from his body and spirit," Harry replied.

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"What's the name of it?"

Harry smiled. "I never named it. I suppose 'Refining Spell' will work, since that's what it does," he said with a shrug. "I knew I couldn't do the Refining Spell strongly enough while also holding the sphere, so I taught my girlfriend and two best friends, Ginny and Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, how to do the Sphere Shield Charm. Once I had him contained and had concentrated the sphere, they joined me and cast their spheres over mine. They held the spheres in place so I could cast the Refining Spell." He shrugged. "And that's how I did it."

"Wait a minute," a man in blue robes said. "That's it? How did he die?"

"When the sphere imploded, there was just an old man left lying there where Voldemort had been. He died soon after that, so I was told. I was hurt in the explosion – so was Ron – so I don't remember much after that." Harry turned to Dumbledore for help. "You were there, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was," Dumbledore said with great satisfaction. "Harry has left out a few things, which he may not even be aware of. When he was refining Lord Voldemort, a mist enveloped him, his friends and their sphere. Out of the mist came ghosts, quite a small army of them, actually. They were the ghosts of people who loved Harry or were friends of his. His love called them forth to help him in his time of need."

"Wait," Harry said, turning to his grandfather. "That was real?"

"Yes," Dumbledore assured him. "Do you remember?"

"A bit," the boy replied, his eyes wide in amazement. "My parents? Sirius? Casey and her family? Seamus?"

"They were all there, as were many others," Dumbledore replied serenely. He turned back to the reporters. "There is a power Voldemort never truly understood – the power of love. Ginny and Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger spoke words of love and encouragement to Harry while he was refining Voldemort. They showed their great love for him, too, by being there for him, helping him with this very dangerous task. They put their lives at risk for Harry, because they love him. The ghosts played their part because of their love of Harry. He hadn't planned on their arrival – it was quite a surprise to see them, actually. But they apparently sensed his need and came to his aid of their own accord." Dumbledore paused, gazing at the young man beside him fondly. "Harry has the purest heart of anyone I've ever known, and despite all the horrors he's lived through, he still has a tremendous capacity for love. His heart saved the wizarding world, his and those of his friends who gave themselves so willingly to help him in his time of need. Voldemort died and became dust. I made certain no one will ever be able to use Voldemort's remains for any nefarious purposes by Scourgifying the dust he became. Lord Voldemort is no more."

The reporters sat in stunned silence for a moment, then went back to scribbling furiously. Numerous hands were quickly raised again.

"A couple more questions, then I'm finished, all right? Yes, you," Harry said, calling on a tall thin woman in plum-coloured robes.

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"What are your plans after Hogwarts, Harry?" she asked.

"I'm going to enjoy the two weeks I have off before I start practicing with the London Lions, although given the injuries I've had, I suppose I'd better spend that time getting back in shape so I'll play well," he said with a self-deprecating grin.

"Will you make a career of Quidditch, then?" the reporter pressed.

"I'm also going to Auror School. I'd like to play Quidditch professionally as long as I can. Then maybe I'll become a coach, or go into full-time Auror work, I just don't know yet."

Marcus looked at Harry, who was quite obviously tiring. "All right, you've seen him and asked some questions. It's time he got back to his room so he can continue healing. Thank you for your cooperation."

Harry was soon in his wheelchair being taken back to his room. "Marcus, wait," he said as they passed an open door. Inside the room, Harry could see Professor Snape lying as still as death on the bed.

"What is it?" Marcus said.

"I'd like to see Professor Snape," Harry said firmly. "Wheel me in there, OK?"

"He's not conscious," Marcus replied. "He won't know you're there."

"I've heard things when I was unconscious. He may, as well. And I want to see if I can do anything for him," Harry said with determination. "He saved a boy when he took that curse. He's saved my life repeatedly. I can't stand the man, but I owe it to him to try to help him."

"Harry, nothing we've done has helped him. He's teetering between life and death and we can't find any treatment that works," Marcus said, his frustration obvious.

"Then it can't hurt for me to see if there's anything I can do, can it?" Harry said, looking up at Marcus defiantly. When the healer still hesitated, Harry tried to get out of the wheelchair.

"Stop, Harry. Sit down! I'll take you in there, but if you overtire yourself, I'll take you right to your room and put you back to bed," Marcus warned. "Clear?"

"Crystal," Harry said, pleased that the healer had agreed. Soon Harry was sitting on the side of Snape's bed, passing his hands over the man's chest and trying to sense for wrongness inside his body. Harry made a frustrated sound, then started unbuttoning his professor's pyjamas.

"Hi, Professor. I don't know if you can hear me, but it's Harry Potter," he said as he worked. "I'm opening your pyjamas so I can try to see if there's something I can do to help you. You've helped me often enough – I do owe you. I'm glad you saved Alex's life. That was generous of you." He went on chatting about the battle, about how various people were doing now, just talking to keep Snape's mind occupied in case he could actually hear him, as his hands touched and pressed various places, trying to sense what was wrong and if there was something he could do about it. Suddenly, he looked up at Marcus.

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"It seems as if there's a . . . a fog over everything," he said, puzzled. "I haven't had this kind of feeling with anyone else I've worked on. Do you know what's causing it?"

"No, I don't," Marcus replied, looking puzzled. "A fog?"

"Yeah. Something's interfering with my sensing him – it's pushing back against my magic." Harry shook his head, truly confused. "The only time something has pushed back against my magic when I'm doing this kind of thing was when I discovered Tonks was pregnant. The baby pushed magic back at me. What could be doing that here?"

"I have no idea. What are you doing now?" Marcus asked, seeing Harry moving his hands much more quickly over Snape's body, something he'd never seen the boy do while using his healing powers.

"Searching for the source of the fog," Harry said distractedly. His brow was furrowed as he concentrated. His hands slowed, making smaller and smaller circles as he neared Snape's left forearm, then finally stilling. "It's his Dark Mark," he said finally. "That's what's causing it." Harry dropped his hands and looked from his healer to his grandfather. "Do either of you know how to remove Dark Marks?"

"No," Marcus said.

"I don't believe it's possible," Dumbledore said slowly. "What are you thinking, Harry?"

"I think the Dark Mark is interfering somehow with the healers' diagnostic methods. Something is pushing back against my magic when I try to scan him, and it's centred in his Dark Mark. I don't understand it, but I think he won't get better until that Mark is removed." He studied Dumbledore's face for a moment. "You don't know any way to remove it?"

"No, I don't," his grandfather said, watching Harry's reaction to this news. "Why?"

"I had an idea that I thought would work, but if you don't know how they're removed . . . I mean, can it be done at all? I thought my idea would work, but—" He shook his head in frustration.

"What's your idea, Harry?" Dumbledore said quietly.

"The Mark looks like it's made of spots of ink somehow—"

"Like a tattoo?" Marcus said, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration.

"Yes, like that," Harry agreed, glad the man understood. "I thought perhaps the spots that form the Mark could be drawn out magically, one at a time, as if they were . . . um . . . well, sort of like those poison capsules Hermione put in my back," he said with a shrug. "But you know a lot more about these things than I do, so—"

"Trust your instincts," Dumbledore said. "If you think you can do it, give it a try."

Harry gazed back at him for a long moment. Somehow, he felt a torch was being passed. Yes, his grandfather had told the reporters that Harry was now the greatest wizard in the world, but

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Harry hadn't believed him. And now, the man he considered to be the greatest wizard in the world had just admitted he didn't know how to do something, but that he thought Harry could manage it. Harry wasn't certain how he felt about the odd feeling this realization gave him, but he would have to ponder it later. Right now, Snape was hovering between life and death and Harry thought he could help him, so it was time to get to work.

The decision made, the young wizard nodded and placed his hands together just over the ugly Dark Mark on Snape's arm. With Voldemort dead, the mark was shadowy and smudged-looking, but it still exuded an extreme feeling of evil. Harry began to concentrate, pouring power into his hands, projecting that power into Snape's skin, the Mark resisting him stubbornly. Light magic fought against Dark in an awesome struggle for domination. Gently but resolutely, Harry's magic worked the Dark Mark free, one tiny bit at a time.

Concentrating so hard on the Dark Mark that he was blind and deaf to anything outside the focus of his attention, Harry worked silently for a long time. He gradually increased the amount of magical power behind his spell until he was surrounded by the golden aura, his hair blowing wildly in an unseen, unfelt wind, constant streams of golden sparks shooting out of the ends of his hair and his fingertips. The sparks from his fingertips spiralled down to Snape's forearm and spun there over each spot of the Dark Mark, whirling in a cyclonic fashion, creating a vortex that inexorably drew each spot out of the man's skin, millimetre by millimetre, in a painfully slow process, and then dissolved it.

Behind him, the room had filled with hospital staff who had seen the golden light pouring through Snape's door and came to see what was happening. Dozens of people stood silently around the room, crammed in shoulder-to-shoulder, witnessing a phenomenon they'd only read about in the few reports the Ministry hadn't managed to keep out of the newspapers. The viewers knew they would probably never see such an amazing thing again in their lives. The room was eerily silent, with no sound at all except the occasional grunts and laboured breathing of the young man at the centre of the brilliant gold aura.

Sweat streamed down Harry's face now and he was trembling with exhaustion, but he was determined to finish what he'd started. Little by little, more of Snape's skin showed clean and white where parts of the Dark Mark had been.

Marcus stood as transfixed as everyone else in the room for quite a while. He knew he was witnessing a miracle in progress, an event that would become a new legend to be passed down through the ages. He'd read about the Refiner's Fire, but very little was actually known about it. Seeing the strength of a Refiner's Fire-empowered wizard in action was astounding. Marcus watched in awe. Here was funny, sweet-natured, selfless, heroic Harry, surrounded by light, doing magic beyond anything Marcus could imagine. He gazed at the boy in admiration, but then the healer in him noticed the exhaustion on his patient's face.

"Harry? Harry, stop. That's enough for now. Come on, lad, you need to rest. You're not well yourself yet. Harry? Harry, stop!" he said, his voice growing more urgent as Harry either ignored him or didn't hear him. He reached out, intending to touch the boy's shoulder, but Dumbledore pressed his arm down.

"If you touch him now, you can get hurt," the old wizard warned him.

"What? How?"

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"Harry is in the midst of a very powerful spell. If you distract him, it could inadvertently be directed at you and injure you. He can't be interrupted right now."

"He's hurting himself, Professor! He needs to stop!"

"I know," Dumbledore said sadly, "but there's no way to stop him until he's ready to stop."

"Can't you do something?" Marcus said in frustration.

"All I can do to distract him when he's that focused is to attack him, and none of us want that to happen. He would retaliate and we'd both be injured," Dumbledore explained. "He's tiring. He'll stop soon."

"He's exhausted already! He's going to hurt himself," Marcus cried.

"Yes, he may very well do that," Dumbledore said with resignation. "That's his way, to give far too much of himself to help someone else."

Harry was shaking hard now, his hands trembling violently as he fought to hold them in place. Suddenly, he gave a great cry of pain and collapsed on top of Snape's still form, the golden aura, unfelt wind and sparks all vanishing in an instant. Harry held his stomach and groaned feebly.

"Merlin," he whimpered, and with a flash of light, his phoenix appeared and landed next to him, crooning comfortingly. The phoenix seemed to consider his master for a moment, then lifted in flight, grasped Harry's robes in his talons, and disappeared in a flash of light.

"Bloody hell, where did Merlin take him?" Marcus said frantically.

"Hopefully to his room. If not, then to the land of the phoenixes," Dumbledore said sadly.

"What?"

"Let's see if he's in his room. If he isn't, I'll explain," Dumbledore said, pushing his way through the still-crowded room and moving down the corridor in long strides. He found Harry in his bed, Merlin nestled against his stomach and singing his song of comfort to the agonized boy.

"Bloody hell," Marcus said as he began examining his patient.

"What happened?" Remus asked in concern. "Merlin brought him in and—"

"Harry removed most of Severus's Dark Mark," Dumbledore replied.

"What? I didn't know that was possible!" Remus said in shock.

"Nor did I," Dumbledore agreed. "But Harry thought he could do it – and he did. His power is astonishing."

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"And it's nearly killed him," Marcus said in disgust as he finished his examination and rushed to get the proper potions to treat his patient.

Harry began stirring a bit after a long, exhausted sleep. He felt a hand smoothing his hair back from his sweaty forehead and smiled a bit. "Ginny?" he said sleepily.

"Sorry, ducks, it's only your doddering old godmother," Tonks said cheerfully. "How are you feeling?"

"Dod . . .?" he mumbled as he struggled to open his eyes. "Huh?"

"Just playing with you, sweets," she teased. "Come on, open those gorgeous eyes of yours. You've slept long enough for now."

Harry managed to pry one reluctant eye open, then finally the other, and squinted up at the hazy face of his godmother, whose hair was currently a magnificent shade of blue. "Hi," he said with a weary smile.

"Hi, yourself! How are you feeling?" she asked, straightening his covers as he began to turn onto his back.

"AAAAAH!" Harry cried. He doubled up, lying on his side panting, holding his stomach and trying his best not to vomit from the sudden onslaught of horrible pain in his gut.

"Pain potion's worn off," Tonks crooned sympathetically. "Marcus will be right here, sweetie, don't worry."

"Good, you're awake," Marcus said as he hurried into the room. "Here's your potion. Scar on my sister's arm is my password. Let me sit you up a bit – just relax, I've got you."

Finally, Harry's pain subsided and he began to relax. "What happened to me? I thought I was getting better! I was supposed to go back to school in a day or two!"

"Do you remember removing most of Professor Snape's Dark Mark?" Marcus asked him seriously.

"Huh?" Harry said, completely at a loss.

"A few days ago, you tried to help Professor Snape, remember? But you thought there was a sort of 'fog' over his organs, and you traced that to his Dark Mark. So you tried to remove it, and you did get most of it. You used your full power to do it, do you remember at all? And then you collapsed."

"Oh," Harry said in a small voice. "Using my power injured me somehow?"

"Yes."

"And this happened a few days ago?" he asked in bewilderment. "Have I been unconscious all this time?"

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"You've been drifting in and out," Marcus replied. "Sometimes asleep, sometimes unconscious. We've had a time getting your potions into you. This is the first time you've been awake enough to talk to us for more than a word or two."

Harry sighed as he considered what his healer had said. "So how much longer do I have to stay here?" he said resignedly.

"At least two more days," Marcus said, patting the boy's shoulder. "I know you wanted to go back as soon as possible, but you've had a setback."

"OK," Harry sighed, his voice quite glum. He turned to his godfather, who was sitting up in the next bed. "When are you going back, Remus?"

"Tomorrow," Tonks began.

"Well . . . I don't know," Remus mused, interrupting her. He ran his fingers over his stomach, chest, and arms. "I seem to be having some sort of relapse."

"What?" Harry said in shock.

"What's wrong, Remus?" Marcus asked, turning to the man in concern.

"I seem to need to stay here however long my godson does," Remus replied with a smile. "I'm going to have symptoms of some kind for another day or two at least."

Marcus smiled. "Actually, you were rushing things a bit trying to go back tomorrow. Two more days will do you good."

"So I won't be here alone?" Harry said hopefully.

"No, we won't leave you here alone," Remus promised. "Even if they make me leave, Tonks will stay with you."

"But you need her to look after you!" Harry protested, twisting around to look at his godfather seriously. In his heart, though, he hoped his godparents would ignore his protest.

"I can stay at school and let Madam Pomfrey fuss over me if I have problems, Harry," Remus assured him.

Harry lay back in bed and smiled. *It's good to have a family*, he thought contentedly. Suddenly, his jaw cracked in a yawn. "I just woke up!" he moaned. "Why am I sleepy again?"

"Sleep's the best thing for you right now, Harry," Marcus assured him. "Next time you wake up, we'll give you some dinner. For now, though, go back to sleep."

"K," Harry agreed, his eyes already drifting closed.

Quiet conversation filtered into Harry's brain, just a hushed background buzz of familiar voices at first. As other voices joined the conversation, his mind clunked into gear trying to

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identify the speakers and what they were saying. He fought his way to wakefulness and opened one eye, squinting around to see who was in the room with him.

"Hi, ducks!" Tonks said when she noticed his movement. "Are you waking up?"

"Guess so," he mumbled. "Who's here? I heard voices."

"Sorry. We were trying to be quiet," Tonks said ruefully. "You have a visitor." She handed him his glasses.

"Thanks," he said, putting them on and looking around the room. "Grandfather! Hi!"

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore said fondly as he sat on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine, as long as they keep enough pain potion in me," Harry said contritely. "Apparently I hurt myself."

"Yes, you did," Dumbledore agreed. "You did a marvellous thing in managing to remove most of Professor Snape's Dark Mark. I didn't believe it could be done, to be quite honest with you. You used your full power to do it, which is how you got hurt. You weren't strong enough at the time to use that much magic. The hospital staff was quite impressed with the show." The old wizard looked rather amused.

"The show?" Harry was confused.

"Ah, I forgot. You haven't really looked at the newspapers since the battle, have you?" Harry shook his head. "Your full powers manifested at last during one of your last fights with Lord Voldemort."

"What do you mean?"

"You put on quite a light show when you use every ounce of your power, now that you're a grown man and your Refiner's Fire powers have fully developed." He studied Harry's still-confused face. "Do you remember how I looked in the Ministry of Magic when I was battling Voldemort and you were being protected by the statue?" Harry nodded. "Did you notice that it seemed as if I was surrounded by light and my hair and beard were blowing in a wind, but there was no wind?" Harry nodded again, frowning. "I am very old and have excellent control of my powers, if I do say so myself," Dumbledore said with an amused smile. "But when I was younger, before I conquered my Refiner's Fire powers, I looked much as you did when I used my full powers – my hair and beard blew around, sparks came out of it, and there was a bright glow around my body."

"Sparks . . . came out . . . huh?" Harry said, dumbfounded.

"Allow me to demonstrate," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "Now remember, I'm very old indeed, and what you'll see is nothing compared to how you look at your full power." He stood up and backed away from the bed and waved his wand. Suddenly, he looked much taller and broader, with a silvery-gold glow around his body, his hair and beard blowing in a non-existent breeze. It was over in a moment. "See? When you do that, you have a strong gold

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aura around you, great gold sparks come out of your hair and the ends of your fingers, and your hair blows much more fiercely than mine did." He sat back down and patted the stunned young man on the arm. "It's nothing to worry about, Harry. It's wonderful that you've matured and developed your powers to this extent. Now we'll have to work on controlling them. But not today."

"I . . . did that?" Harry said, still trying to get his mind around this strange concept. "I had . . . sparks? Coming out of my hair? And fingers? That's just weird!" He stared at his hands as if he'd never seen them before.

"No, dear boy, it isn't weird. It's a display of the truly awesome power you command," Dumbledore said seriously.

"So if that's my magic . . . how did I hurt myself doing magic? I don't understand." Harry was a bit frightened. If he injured himself when he used his full powers . . . but his grandfather hadn't damaged himself just now, had he? Harry's brain hurt, trying to understand what he was being told.

"You were going to go back to school in two days' time, remember? You'd asked Marcus to let you go as soon as possible. He was allowing you to return to school to finish healing. He'd told you that you'd need to take it easy for a while longer. Do you remember that?" Harry thought a moment, then nodded. "Right. You were still rather fragile from your injuries. Doing powerful magic like that stressed the injuries beyond their tolerance. That's why you're in pain again."

"I hurt myself? Is it permanent?" Harry said, horror-struck. He slid his hands over his abdomen, searching for the damage. Dumbledore put his hands over Harry's, stilling them.

"It isn't permanent, and there's nothing you can do to speed things up," Dumbledore told him. "Even if you could, you'd be straining your body again to do so. Just relax and let the healers do their jobs, all right?"

"But I'll be OK then, right? My magic won't hurt me again?"

"Not once you have your strength back, no," the old headmaster said with a fond smile.

"But, Grandfather," Harry began, then stilled when he heard a gasp near the door. Suddenly wary, he turned to see who was there. "Professor Snape?"

"Hello, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he came into the room, walking with a cane. "Are you feeling better?"

"A bit," Harry said, staring at his least-favourite teacher. "You?"

"Much, thank you. Did I hear you say 'grandfather'?" Snape said in confusion.

"Yes, you did," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Harry is my great-great-grandson. I've kept it a secret even from him until recently. Since Voldemort's death, I think it's safe for him to know that he has a grandfather, and I must say, I'm certainly enjoying having a grandson!" He turned and patted Harry on the shoulder. "And a fine grandson he is." Harry beamed at him.

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"I see," Snape said slowly, not really 'seeing' at all. "Potter, are you up to a bit of conversation? I wanted to speak to you, if you don't mind."

"Sure," Harry said, struggling to sit up a bit.

"Hang on, ducks, let us help you," Tonks said immediately. Dumbledore helped Harry sit up while she arranged his pillows so he'd be comfortable.

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile.

"Comfy?" she said brightly.

"Yeah."

"Do you need anything? Are you thirsty or hungry?" she continued.

"You're really getting into this godmother thing, aren't you? Or are you practicing being a mum?" Harry said with a fond smile.

"A little of both," she said, blushing. "I enjoy spoiling you, sweets. What can I get for you?"

"Something to drink would be nice," Harry replied.

"I'll be right back," she said, giving him a pert grin as she turned to Remus to see if he needed anything.

Dumbledore stood up and moved away, sitting in the chair by Remus's bed. Snape pulled an empty chair close to Harry's bed and sat down, looking a bit tired.

"Are you all right?" Harry said in concern.

"Considering I was hovering between life and death a few days ago, I'm spectacular," Snape said acerbically. He bit his lip and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to speak sharply, Potter. This is difficult for me. I hope you'll be patient and let me say what I need to."

Harry frowned. What was going on? "OK," he said cautiously.

"I want to thank you for what you did for me. I don't believe anyone has ever had a Dark Mark removed before. I can't tell you how . . . how different I feel with so much of it gone. I've had it for most of my life. I didn't realize how it coloured everything – my physical and mental states, the way I react to things. It's . . . well, it's quite frankly astounding how much my life has changed in such a short time, with part of the Dark Mark removed."

"I'm glad it helped," Harry said quietly. He could tell the man was building up to saying something even more difficult, but he wondered what, for Snape, could be more difficult than thanking Harry Potter?

Snape frowned. "You have always wondered why Professor Dumbledore trusts me. It's time you heard the story. I just hope you . . . well . . . never mind."

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"You hope I'll what?" Harry prompted.

Snape sighed. "Listen with an open mind. But that's too much to ask. I have to tell the story, and you have to listen however you can. I won't blame you for your reaction, whatever it is," he assured the boy. Harry just gazed at him quietly, waiting for whatever was coming. Snape sighed heavily again and began.

"You saw some of my memories in the Pensieve, so you know what my childhood and school years were like, to some extent. When I was fourteen, I did something very foolish. I took the Dark Mark."

"At fourteen?" Harry gasped, astonished.

"Yes, and if you interrupt me, it will make it even more difficult for me to get through this story," Snape said with a frown, his eyes glittering darkly.

"Sorry. Go on," Harry urged him.

"At fourteen, as I said, I was a very foolish young man and took the Dark Mark. Voldemort had promised wonderful things – power, respect, comrades in arms, honour – heady stuff to a boy who was so reviled by his classmates and family alike. So I joined him. I'd been interested in the Dark Arts even before I started at Hogwarts, so the things he was offering held great appeal for me. In my fifth year, my Potions professor paired me with a Gryffindor, of all things. He had some foolish notion that the Houses should interact more, become 'friends.'" He shook his head, his greasy curtains of hair flapping sadly around his face. "My lab partner was your mother, Potter. Lily Evans. She was excellent at Potions."

"She was? I'd heard my dad was, but Mum too?"

"Yes, your mum too. Your father was an excellent student, and had a gift for Potions as well as Transfiguration. Your mother was simply brilliant – and a sweet, kind girl, as well. We became friends, good friends. I came to care for Lily more than I can say. I . . . fancied her." His voice faded and his eyes stared off into a distant past Harry could only imagine.

"You fancied my mum?" Harry said, stunned.

Snape gave Harry a quelling look and the boy subsided. "By the end of our Seventh Year, I was in love with Lily, but she had eyes only for James."

"That was another reason for you to hate him, then," Harry said wisely.

Snape's eyes locked with Harry's for a moment. "Yes, it was. After we finished Hogwarts, we went our separate ways. I heard Lily and James married, and a few years later I heard they'd had a child, but that had nothing to do with me, so I just went on about my business. Sometime before they had the child – you – I was in the Hog's Head. Voldemort wanted me to keep an eye on Dumbledore whenever possible, so I was there spying on him. I did not know at the time that your mother was pregnant – you need to remember that. I heard Sybil Trelawney give Dumbledore a prophecy about the Dark Lord and some child that would be born –"

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"YOU were the one!" Harry said suddenly, sitting up straight, his eyes flashing green fire. "You were the one who told him about the prophecy! *You betrayed my parents!*"

"Harry, calm down, please," his grandfather said quietly, moving toward him and putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Severus didn't know who the prophecy referred to, nor did he hear all of it. Remember, you and I discussed this at length. It could have referred to Neville as easily as you."

Harry tried to slow his racing heart. He swallowed hard, then nodded sharply once, and leaned back against his pillows. "Sorry. Go on."

"As Professor Dumbledore just said, I only knew that it referred to the Dark Lord and some child yet to be born. I hurried to tell the Dark Lord what I'd learned, not knowing at the time that Lily was pregnant, as I said earlier. I had no idea she was in danger, or I would not have said anything at all. I want you to believe that. I would never have willingly endangered Lily, no matter how much I despised your father."

Harry swallowed hard again and nodded, but stayed quiet.

"When I learned Lily was pregnant and when her baby was due, I realized she was in danger. I went to Professor Dumbledore and told him everything, so he could do whatever was possible to protect her from the Dark Lord. You know that your parents went into hiding." Harry nodded. "Quite some time passed, and the Dark Lord asked me to go on an errand with him. I was a bit surprised to see that Peter Pettigrew was going to accompany us."

"You were there when my parents were killed, weren't you?" Harry breathed in horror.

"Please, let me tell the story my way, Potter. It will go much more quickly."

Harry bit his lip and sat back, waiting for the rest of the tale.

"I had no idea where your parents were hiding, so I didn't know where we were when we arrived. Voldemort had Pettigrew and me stand aside – he said it would be his pleasure to deal with these people himself. He did this from time to time, so I didn't think much about it. I wondered why he'd wanted Pettigrew and me to go with him, but you didn't question the Dark Lord, not ever. He blasted the door off of its hinges and entered the house, where he began to duel your father. I was shocked to see it was James. I had no idea it was his home, I promise you. It was over quickly. Your father was an excellent fighter, but nothing compared to the Dark Lord – or you, Potter.

"James yelled for Lily to take you and run. That's when the Dark Lord killed him. He then found your mother about to lift you from your crib and raised his wand to kill her. I begged him to spare her life. I told him she was my friend, that she was the reason I was so good at potions – I was his Potion Master long before I started teaching at Hogwarts. He offered to spare her life several times, but she would not leave you. I begged her to run, told her she could have more children in the future, but she simply would not leave you." Snape's eyes glittered and he bowed his head. A tear slipped down his cheek, shocking Harry. "I would have gladly given my life for Lily, but it was over before I could do anything. And then he cursed you before her body even hit the floor. I had started moving forward, hoping to save Lily's child if I couldn't save her, but he struck so quickly – well, you know how fast he was

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with spells." Harry nodded, unable to speak. "When he cursed you and the curse rebounded on him, the house just . . . exploded. I grabbed you and ran outside as debris fell all around us. Pettigrew picked up the Dark Lord's wand and Disapparated. When I got outside, I set you on the ground, then Summoned your parents' bodies to get them out before they were buried in rubble, since the house was still collapsing.

"I picked you up again, thinking to take you to some place of safety. You looked so much like your father, but you had your mother's eyes, those beautiful eyes . . ." His voice faded for a moment. Everyone in the room remained still, waiting for him to go on. Finally, he shook his head and lifted his eyes to Harry's again. "I finally realized that I didn't know where to take you, where you might have relatives, what to do with you. So I contacted Dumbledore. When I heard that motorcycle coming in the sky, I put you on the ground and hid, thinking Sirius Black had come for you. I knew if he saw me, he'd kill me, assuming I was the one who'd – well, you can imagine. And the rest, you know." He sat back in his chair, head bowed, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am for the way things turned out, Potter. I would have done anything for your mother. And because I stayed a Death Eater in order to spy on Voldemort, I had to treat you horribly all through your school years." He glanced up at Harry, a rueful smirk flitting across his face for a moment. "Of course, you look and act enough like your father that you annoyed me on a regular basis, so some of my behaviour was due to that. But mostly, I was maintaining my image as a Death Eater when I berated you in class. And part of it was caused, I think now, by the influence of the Dark Mark on my body. I cannot tell you how different I feel with more than half of it gone."

He straightened and gazed into Harry's eyes quite seriously. "I know I don't deserve any forgiveness from you, and I won't ask it. But I am most sincerely sorry for the many ways I mistreated you over the years, and certainly for not being able to save your parents. I wish things had been different. I couldn't tell you any of this while the Dark Lord lived. Now that he's gone, thanks to you, I thought you should know the rest of the story." He sighed heavily and got to his feet. "And I wanted to thank you for saving my life. If you hadn't removed as much of the Dark Mark as you did, I believe I'd be in that awful limbo forever." Snape stood watching Harry, as if afraid to move, while the young man sat quietly for several long minutes considering what he'd heard.

Finally, Harry looked up into those tormented black eyes and said, "I forgive you, Professor." He held out his hand for Snape to shake.

"What?" Snape said, blanching in shock.

"I said, I forgive you," Harry said seriously, grasping and shaking Snape's hesitantly offered hand firmly. "It isn't an easy thing for me to do, but I believe it's what my mother would have wanted me to do. I'm glad you told me the whole story. I understand a lot of things now that never made sense before. Thank you for that." As he released the man's hand, he glanced at Snape's left forearm, where faint traces of the Dark Mark still remained. "And I'll finish taking that off when I get my strength back, all right?"

"You'd do that after hearing what I just told you?" Snape said, astonished.

"Yes."

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Snape swallowed hard and straightened his shoulders, staring at Harry as if seeing him for the first time. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. I'll . . . I'll see you at school, then. Get well soon."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said. He doubted he'd ever feel truly friendly toward the Potions Master, but he did feel lighter in his heart somehow after forgiving the man. He had a lot to think about. Harry slid back down in his bed, his face thoughtful.

"That was a wonderful thing you just did, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly as he took the seat Snape had just vacated. "I'm proud of you."

"It just felt like the right thing to do," Harry said with a shrug. "You knew all of that?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"It wasn't my story to tell, Harry, and it would have endangered Severus even more if the facts had been revealed. I hope you'll forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," Harry said, grasping the old man's forearm and giving it a squeeze.

"You are a better man than I, Harry, truly," his grandfather said, smiling at him. "And apparently a tired one. Go to sleep. Get your strength back so you can return to school."

"OK," Harry said, stifling a yawn as well as he could. He removed his glasses and turned over on his side, his mind whirling with all of the information he had to process. As he pondered these things, he drifted off to sleep.

A few days later, Harry, supported by a crutch under his left arm, and Remus, using a cane for balance, walked through the doors of the Great Hall. Dinner was in full swing, with the house tables nearly groaning under the massive amounts of food the house-elves had prepared for the students and staff.

Remus stood watching Harry as the young man surveyed the Great Hall. Harry had been smiling, happy to be back at school, but suddenly, his face lit with real joy. Remus followed his gaze down the length of the Gryffindor table and saw a long mane of red hair swinging beyond Neville Longbottom's back. Ron was seated across from Ginny. He glanced up and saw the two in the doorway, his face splitting in an ear-to-ear grin. Ginny turned to face them and was soon pelting down the length of the Hall, Ron and Hermione doing their best to keep up with her, Ron's limp much more pronounced as he tried to hurry. Remus looked back at Harry and smiled at the look of pure bliss suffusing the young wizard's face.

Ginny stopped herself just before she would have thrown herself into Harry's arms. Very carefully, she wrapped her arms around his slim waist and embraced him, burying her face in his chest.

"I'm so glad you're back!" she said when she lifted shining eyes to her fiancé's face.

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"It's good to be back," Harry said, bending to kiss her briefly. Ron and Hermione arrived just then and careful, gentle hugs were exchanged all around. Remus greeted the three and started walking slowly down the length of the Hall, planning to take his seat at the Head Table.

By this time, others had noticed their arrival. Dumbledore stood and led the applause, cheers and whistles that erupted all over the hall. Harry stood with one arm around Ginny, lifting his other hand to wave at his friends at the various tables. As he grinned, feeling more light-hearted than he had in ages, the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He drew his wand, but Ginny had already been hexed and fallen to the floor.

"Ginny!" Harry cried, broken-hearted. She'd dropped like a stone. He turned to face his attacker and saw a hex coming from Blaise Zabini's wand. He tried to dodge it and fire back, but his crutch hampered him, his weakness slowed his reflexes, and the hex hit him full in the chest. As he fell, his wand dropped from his fingers. Rage and the devastated feeling that had overwhelmed him the instant Ginny fell concentrated into a burst of energy that flew from his branded right hand and slammed Zabini against the wall, pinning him there. Harry put every bit of his massive Refiner's Fire power behind the intense bolt of energy that hit Zabini. The Slytherin boy vibrated as he remained plastered to the wall, magical power coursing through him like surges of high-voltage electricity. When Harry's body slumped to the floor, Zabini was released from the spell but remained pinned to the wall, quite dead. The front of his robes was burned away, revealing distorted images of phoenixes and griffins branded deeply into his chest.

Harry lay next to Ginny, barely able to breathe. With a tremendous effort, he turned his head to look at her. Her eyes fluttered open after a moment and he smiled tremulously, glad beyond belief that she was alive. "Gin," he breathed painfully. "I'm . . . sorry. So sorry."

"What?" she asked muzzily, only just beginning to wake up.

Harry slid his hand across the floor and touched her cheek with a trembling finger. "It's . . . not fair. I . . . was free! Not . . . fair," he gasped, then collapsed and lost consciousness.

Remus had hobbled back to his godson and now fell to his knees beside him. He turned Harry's body over, tears streaming down his face as he did so. "Harry? Harry?" he cried, touching the boy's beloved face with tender hands. "Don't give up now! Hang on!" He lifted his godson in his arms and rocked him, his heart breaking as he felt the boy's body already stiffening. "No! No, not now! NO!"

Ron and Hermione pocketed their wands and knelt on the floor next to Ginny, looking at Harry in Remus's arms with horror. They had stunned Zabini's friends who had their wands out and aimed at Harry. "He's not . . . dead, is he?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"Not yet," Remus sobbed, "but soon, if he doesn't get help."

Several things happened at once then. Ron couldn't deal with the reality in front of him, his best friend dying in Remus's arms. He shook his head determinedly and turned to his sister, who was still lying on the floor. "Gin? You OK?" he asked, helping her sit up.

"MERLIN!" Ginny screamed as Ron clasped her narrow shoulders with his large hands to help her up. "*Harry needs help!*"

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As Ginny called for Harry's phoenix, Hermione pointed her wand at Harry and said, "*Finite Incantatum*," but nothing happened.

"You can't undo this kind of spell with a Finite," Remus told her sadly as he rocked his godson in his arms. "It's far too complex for that."

"You've seen this kind of spell before?" Hermione asked anxiously. "What is it?"

"I don't know the name of it," Remus began, but was interrupted by the phoenix's arrival. Merlin grasped his master's robes in his talons and flashed him away quickly. Remus sat looking dazedly at the empty space in his arms where Harry had just been, tears streaming down his face.

"What kind of spell was that, Remus?" Hermione pressed.

"A very Dark one. He was barely breathing," Remus said, struggling to his feet and hobbling as quickly as he could toward the hospital wing, Ginny, Ron and Hermione in his wake.

"Fawkes!" Dumbledore cried as he reached the group in the doorway. His phoenix flashed above him. "Take them to the hospital wing, please," he said, pointing at the four grieving people in front of him. He turned to them and said, "I'll be there as quickly as I can," just as Fawkes flashed them out of sight.

"He just got out of the hospital!" Madam Pomfrey scolded everyone in general as she fussed over Harry's still form. He was fighting for every breath, making horrible squeaking sounds, his skin turning a dusky purple colour as it was deprived of oxygen. "What happened this time?"

"He was attacked," Hermione said, her voice breaking as she spoke.

"I can see that," the nurse snapped. "What kind of hex was it?"

"A Slytherin cast it," Ron growled, absolutely furious that his best mate had been attacked the instant he'd returned to school from his long recovery after the battle. "Blaise Zabini. Whatever it was, it was a Dark spell."

"Miss Weasley," the nurse said impatiently, "go to the fireplace and call my brother."

Ginny sat by Harry's side, holding his hand and weeping as she stroked each long finger in turn. She shuddered in horror as his skin darkened from lack of oxygen until the fine black hairs on his arm barely showed, there was so little contrast with his skin. She didn't seem to hear the nurse at all. She lifted his hand and pressed his palm against her breastbone, wishing the strong beating of her heart would somehow filter through his fingers into his body, and help him survive.

"I'll do it," Ron said, his voice low and sad. He limped to the fireplace as quickly as he could and contacted St. Mungo's. "Marcus Pomfrey, please. It's an emergency. Harry Potter's been attacked with a Dark spell and Madam Pomfrey doesn't know what to do for him," he told the receptionist who answered his call.

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"I'll try to find him, but he's taken the day off," she said impatiently. "He thought it would be safe now, with Potter back at school."

"So did we," Ron snapped, his frustration and anger about to boil over. "Just tell him to get here as fast as he can. Or send Healer Bradford if you can't find Marcus. Be quick about it! Harry's barely breathing." He withdrew his head from the fire and went back to sit by his best friend's bed.

Dumbledore came striding into the room. "How is he?"

"Not well, not well at all," Nurse Pomfrey said as she anxiously examined the young wizard. "He isn't getting enough oxygen. Something's terribly wrong with his lungs." She studied him worriedly for a moment. "Let's sit him up a bit – that will help him breathe more easily." Ron lifted Harry's shoulders and slid in behind him, holding him upright in his arms as he'd done numerous times when Harry was ill or injured and needed potions. "That's good, Mr. Weasley," Madam Pomfrey said. "Thank you." She turned to the headmaster. "I don't have the right antidote for this kind of spell. Can you do anything about it?"

"I saw the spell cast, but I'm not familiar with it," Dumbledore said, gazing at his grandson with heartbroken eyes. "I'd have to research it to find the counter-spell or antidote, and it doesn't look as if he has time for that."

"You're right," the nurse said darkly.

Suddenly Hermione sat up straight. "Gills!" she cried. "That will do it!" She turned to the nurse. "Can you get a tank of water up here big enough to hold Harry?"

"Why?" Madam Pomfrey asked, thoroughly confused.

"Fish don't have lungs! It's perfect!" Ron said, cottoning on. "Will it work?" he asked the nurse.

"Will what work?" she said, still not understanding.

"I think it's an inspired idea," Dumbledore said with a relieved smile. "I can conjure a tank of water for Harry to see if it works. Then if it does, we can bring a real tank up and use that." He looked at Remus. "Perhaps one of your grindylow tanks could be enlarged for him? It would be sturdier and last longer than a conjured one."

"Yes, I'm sure that would work," Remus said, looking hopeful for the first time since Harry had been injured.

"Would someone please tell me what you lot are on about?" Madam Pomfrey said impatiently as Dumbledore passed his wand over Harry's body, apparently measuring him, then turned and conjured a tank on the floor near the young man's bed.

"Harry can do a gill transformation," Hermione explained. "Fish don't have lungs. They get air into their bodies through the membranes in their gills. If he had gills and was in water, he'd get plenty of oxygen until he healed enough to breathe with his lungs again!"

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"But Harry does that himself," Ginny countered, looking worried. "He's been teaching me how to do it, but I can't manage it every time yet." She looked up at Dumbledore. "Can you give him gills?"

"Yes," he said, studying the conjured tank and turning to his students. "You lot fill that with water while I work on Harry, all right?" Hermione and Ron instantly pointed their wands at the tank and began conjuring water to fill it. Ginny was torn between wanting to stay with Harry and wanting to help. Remus patted her on the shoulder and added his wand to the tank-filling effort.

"Right, then," Dumbledore said after a moment's thought. "I think this will do." He pushed up his sleeves, then began to pass his wand over Harry's neck, muttering a long incantation under his breath.

"Do it to both of us," Ginny insisted suddenly. "He's not going in there alone."

"That's a good idea," he said, then included her in the wand movement he was making. Suddenly, both Harry and Ginny had gills. Harry began to choke, unable to breathe at all. Ginny simply held her breath and climbed into the tank, waiting for Dumbledore to Levitate Harry into it with her. She pulled Harry under the water and began to breathe through her gills, watching her fiancé hopefully. Harry wasn't moving, nor were his gills. Panicked, Ginny pushed on his chin, forcing his mouth open and closed, encouraging him to breathe the only way she could think of. His gills finally began to move. Ginny sat down on the bottom with her back against the glass wall, cradling his head in her lap as she helped him breathe. Several tense minutes later, his mouth was opening and closing on its own, the gills doing their job. His skin gradually lost some of its dusky colour and his lips were no longer blue.

Suddenly, Harry's eyes opened and he looked around, his face terrified, his movements weak but frantic. His hands scrabbled at the glass walls of the tank as if trying to escape. Ginny pressed her hands into his cheeks and turned his face up to look at her. The sight of her calmed him immediately. He mouthed some words to her, then relaxed visibly when she mouthed something back at him. No one outside the tank could make out what they were saying.

"It seems to be working," Remus said in relief as he watched the joy in Harry's face as he realized Ginny was all right. "I'll go and get the grindylow tank. I'll be right back." He hurried from the room.

Harry looked at the beloved face above him. The last he remembered, he'd thought she was dying. His heart swelled with gratitude and love to see she was fine, she was safe, and she was doing what she could to help him. He mouthed, "I love you," and smiled when she mouthed the same precious words. He reached up with a trembling hand, wanting to touch her. She took his hand in hers and lifted it to her mouth, kissing each finger in turn, then opening his hand and kissing his palm tenderly. He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it, then held her palm to his cheek and just gazed at her. Even in the eerie greenish light of the water-filled tank, she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Her robes were flapping gently in the current created by air being magically injected into the water to ensure them having enough oxygen. Her long hair floated around both of them in a fiery red cloud. Harry glanced around, trying to sort out where they were and how they got there. He could see there were other

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people outside the tank, but with her hair in the way, he could only tell that one of them was Ron and another was Dumbledore, simply by their height and hair colour. That small person crouched by the tank closest to him must be Hermione from the mass of dark hair roiling around her head. He tried to smile, then wondered if they could see him at all between the distortion in the glass and Ginny's cloud of hair.

Bloody hell, he thought, *what have I got myself into now?* His chest hurt horribly, his lungs a leaden weight within him. His robes felt heavy and awkward in the water, their weight adding to the pain in his chest. He let go of Ginny's hand and rolled onto one elbow, trying to push himself into a sitting position. When that failed, he fell back into her lap and tugged feebly at his robes, trying to get the heaviness off of his chest.

Outside the tank, Dumbledore saw his movement and understood. He swiftly Vanished Harry's robes and Transfigured his briefs into swimming trunks, receiving a wan smile in thanks from his grandson. When the headmaster saw Ginny glance up at him, he tilted his head in question. She nodded, and he Transfigured her robes into a modest black swim suit.

Ginny nodded her thanks to him, grateful to be more comfortable in her current situation. She lifted Harry's head and slipped out from under him, moving around to the side of the tank and settling down there where he could see her more easily. She lifted his head and shoulders a bit and slid her legs under his back and bent them to create a back support for him. She tucked his head under her chin and held his torso in her arms to try to let him be in the more upright position he seemed to want.

Harry rested a few minutes in Ginny's arms, then began moving around again. At Ginny's questioning look, he pushed gently at her restraining arms and she let go of him so he could find a more comfortable position. He pulled away from her and moved around until his upper back was supported by the glass wall of the tank, allowing him to be even more upright. Then he placed the arm that had been trapped between their bodies around her back, tucking his shoulder under her arm and resting his head on her shoulder again. He lay there panting from exertion, his gills flapping quickly as he fought his weakness. Finally, his breathing slowed to a more normal rate and he finally relaxed in her embrace, closing his eyes wearily.

"What will happen if he falls asleep or loses consciousness in there?" Madam Pomfrey asked Dumbledore worriedly as she watched the now slow but steady movement of her resting patient's gills.

"The transformation will hold, and his gills should keep working. After all, he was unconscious when we put him in the tank," Dumbledore replied. "I do think it would be a good idea to keep an eye on him at all times, to make certain he's all right."

"Mr. Weasley, go and call St. Mungo's again," Madam Pomfrey urged. "Tell them the situation and that I don't know how to treat this type of hex. They need to send us a healer. We simply can't move him while he's in a tank of water." She shook her head, baffled about what to do to help the boy, who was breathing much better now but couldn't stay in there forever.

"OK," Ron said, then hurried to the fireplace to contact the hospital.

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A few minutes later, the hospital wing doors swung open with a bang and Snape came striding in, carrying a self-stirring cauldron in one hand, a small stand and a pot of fire in the other.

"I have the antidote here," Snape said as he approached the bed and noticed Ron walking toward it, having finished his call to the hospital. "Weasley, you know what to do." He stopped cold when he saw the tank on the far side of the bed. "What is *that*?"

"It's a tank of water," Remus explained as he entered the room, Levitating a clean, empty grindylow tank in front of him. "Here, Albus. This is the biggest one I have. How's he doing?"

"Fairly well for now. Let's get the tank set up and get him moved," Dumbledore said.

"I have the antidote here," Snape said again. "What's going on?"

"For now, Harry and Ginny have gills so Harry can breathe. His lungs were severely damaged by that spell," Dumbledore said, finally taking his attention off of Harry's situation long enough that what Snape was saying finally registered in his mind. "You have the antidote?"

"That's what I've been saying," Snape said impatiently. "He'll need his gills removed so he can take the potion."

Dumbledore bent down by the tank so Ginny could see him. He tapped gently on the glass. "Miss Weasley? Is he awake?"

Ginny looked at him, then down at Harry, who was now completely limp in her arms. She shook her head.

"Could you wake him? Professor Snape has a potion that will help him," Dumbledore said kindly.

Ginny rocked Harry's shoulder, trying to wake him, her movements growing more agitated as he failed to respond. Just then, she noticed his gills weren't moving. She stood up quickly and hauled on his body, trying to lift him out of the water. She couldn't speak, since she had gills, but she didn't need to. The others in the room sprang into action.

Dumbledore Levitated Harry out of the tank and onto the bed while Remus cast Drying and Warming Charms on him. Dumbledore removed the gills from Harry, then turned and did the same for Ginny, who was climbing out of the tank on her own, since everyone was ignoring her for the moment. Ron pulled Harry's limp body into a sitting position with Harry's back resting against Ron's broad chest, his head nestled in the crook of Ron's shoulder. Hermione gently removed Harry's glasses, trying not to sob as she carefully folded them closed and put them on the bedside table.

"What's your password?" Ginny demanded of Snape in a shrill voice as her brother, best friend and professors tried to help her fiancé.

Snape set the cauldron on the bedside table before replying, making sure the cauldron was secure on its stand over the little pot of fire. "His father – and he – saved my life. Potter removed most of my Dark Mark in the hospital, as well," he said, sliding his sleeve up to show the remains of the mark. He glanced at Ron, who was still trying to get Harry's body

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arranged comfortably. Ron's lame leg was hindering his efforts. "Hurry, Mr. Weasley. The sooner we get this into him, the less he'll suffer."

"What do you mean, the less he'll suffer?" Ginny said suspiciously. "Are you going to *finish killing him*?" she added, her voice on the edge of hysteria.

"No, you silly girl. I'm trying to save his life. I owe him mine," Snape said. "This is the preferred antidote for the Lead Lung Curse."

"The Lead Lung Curse?" Hermione gasped. "Is that what it is? I saw that mentioned in a book once. I don't know why I didn't think of it." She shook her head, angry at herself.

"Poppy?" Snape said, looking up at the nurse. "It is the Lead Lung Curse, isn't it?"

"It has all the signs of it, Severus. I didn't have the antidote here and was trying to find something that would do," she said, indicating the huge stack of open books lying helter-skelter on a nearby table. "Thank you for bringing it."

"I learned yesterday that Zabini was researching that curse, so I began the antidote just in case he perfected it," Snape sneered as he finished dipping a portion of the potion into a small vial. "That's the first time he's managed a difficult curse – and the last." He held the vial toward Harry and glanced at Ron. "Hold Potter's head up, Weasley, we don't want him to choke. Poppy, if you'd help him swallow," he said as he lifted the vial to Harry's lips, which were rapidly turning blue again. Madam Pomfrey used her wand to cast a Swallowing Spell.

Harry coughed, a tight, painful sound, what little air he was taking in rattling and squeaking loudly as it moved slowly through his lungs. Snape pulled the vial away from the young man's lips when the coughing began.

Ron bent him forward and pounded him on the back as the coughing continued. "Cough it up, mate. Better out than in," he said encouragingly.

"Beating him won't help," Snape snapped. "Just keep him upright. It will be easier for him to breathe that way." He put the vial to Harry's lips once more and got the dose into him this time.

"What exactly is the Lead Lung Curse?" Hermione asked hesitantly as a chastened Ron got Harry's head settled back against his shoulder again. "The book I saw it in only said it was nearly always—" She stopped herself before saying "fatal." She glanced at Ginny and saw that she, like everyone else, knew the word Hermione had avoided saying.

Snape ignored her gaffe. "It hardens the walls of the lungs. He can't move air if he can't expand his lungs," he explained as he set the vial by the cauldron. "That's why he's wheezing now. His airways have constricted quite tightly. It's a fast-acting curse. If I hadn't had the antidote already prepared, he would have died in another minute or two. The gills bought him some time. If he hadn't had those, he would have died very quickly and painfully."

"But he'll live now? He'll be OK?" Ginny asked, looking almost afraid to hope. Harry's face was blue once more from lack of oxygen, as were his fingernails. The skin on the rest of his body was already quite dusky again. "He looks awful."

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"And I'm sure he feels awful, as well," Snape replied. "He has a long recovery period ahead of him, and he's not out of the woods yet. It could still go either way."

"NO!" Ginny cried, tears flooding her eyes again. "He's been through so much already! It's not fair!"

"No, it isn't fair at all," Snape agreed quietly. "He deserves better."

Everyone stared at him in shock, silenced by the Potions Master actually saying something sympathetic about Harry Potter.

"How is he?" Dumbledore asked, leaning over his grandson. "Can you tell if the potion is working?"

"He's just hanging on for now," Snape replied softly, studying the young man's face with an unusually sympathetic expression. "He has a long way to go, but he's already moving more air." He gently took Harry's limp hand in his and examined the nail beds, which were growing pink again. "See? His body is getting more oxygen now." He seemed to realize he was behaving in an unusual way, then shook himself a bit and became businesslike once more. He glanced up at the nurse. "He'll need a dose of this potion every two hours around the clock, Poppy. I'll go brew some more. It has to steep for twelve hours before it's effective, so the next batch should be ready when this one runs out." He dropped his eyes and stared quietly at Harry for a long moment, then shook himself out of his reverie. "He'll also need a Spitting Daisy Poultice applied every hour around the clock for the next three days. Do you have some on hand?"

"Yes, I do," the nurse replied, glad she had something in stock that would help the boy.

"Good. All we can do now is wait," Snape said, still sitting on the edge of the bed and keeping a close eye on Harry.

"What happened after we left?" Remus asked Dumbledore after forcing himself to tear his eyes away from his godson.

"Mr. Zabini is dead. Harry wasn't in control of his power at the time – I don't think he intended to kill him," Dumbledore said quietly.

"He thought Ginny was dead! Of course he wanted to kill him!" Ron snarled. "So did I, but Harry got to him first."

"I wouldn't have believed Harry could move that quickly, as weak as he was, and on a crutch," Hermione mused sadly.

"He was so badly hurt, yet he managed to fight back," Dumbledore remarked, stroking his grandson's hair gently. "Bless him."

The hospital wing doors opened again and Hagrid did his best to tiptoe in, followed by Professor McGonagall.

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"How is he?" Hagrid asked, gazing at his young friend with heartbroken eyes. "I moved the body like you asked me, Headmaster. It was stuck ter the wall pretty hard. Professor Flitwick an' I had trouble getting it off. He's cleanin' up the mess now."

"Thank you, Hagrid," Dumbledore said kindly. "I appreciate your help."

"I contacted the boy's parents. They were livid, of course, but I had enough witness statements to shut them up," McGonagall said acerbically. "I understand their being upset about their son's death, but the way they dismissed his attack on Harry! Appalling!"

"The Aurors should find out if they're Death Eaters that haven't been rounded up yet," Hermione suggested, her dark eyes snapping furiously.

"Yes, I already contacted them," McGonagall said, nodding approvingly at Hermione.

A sudden commotion from the fireplace attracted everyone's attention.

"What the bloody hell happened to him this time?" Marcus Pomfrey demanded as he brushed the soot off of his clothes, Healer Bradford right behind him. "I'm sorry it took so long – I had taken the day off, and Brad was in the middle of . . . what's wrong with him?" he said, aghast as he saw the blue tinge still suffusing Harry's tortured face.

"Lead Lung Curse," Madam Pomfrey said darkly.

"What have you done for him so far?" Marcus said tersely, already moving the blanket so he could examine him. "Ron, why are you holding him?" the healer asked suddenly.

"Professor Snape said Harry could breathe easier if he was sitting up," Ron explained. "I don't mind holding him."

"Poppy, can you raise the head of the bed so Ron doesn't have to hold him?" Marcus asked as he examined his patient. "He can't sit here forever." He glanced up at the redhead. "How's the leg?"

"Fine. I limp, but it's not painful. It just doesn't work the way it used to," Ron replied stoically. "And I don't mind holding Harry. It's something I can do for him."

"All right. You can do that for a while. I'm sure it's comforting to him to have you there." He looked up and smiled at the redhead. "I wish we could have done better on your leg," the healer said, shaking his head as he continued his examination of Harry's still form.

"If Harry hadn't fixed my leg, I'd have a lot more to complain about," Ron murmured, gently moving Harry's arm off of his chest so it was out of Marcus's way. His heart clenched at how limp his friend was. Moving his arm was like moving a rag doll's arm – it just flopped and lay wherever it landed.

Madam Pomfrey told the healers what had been done for Harry so far.

"And the gills worked?" Bradford said in surprise. "We'll have to remember that one. I wouldn't have thought of it."

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"Miss Granger thought of it," the nurse said approvingly.

"Only because Harry does that transformation so he can swim in the lake," Hermione said sadly. "He thought of it. I just remembered it."

"Well done anyway," Marcus said encouragingly.

"So how is he?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

"I won't kid you. He's in bad shape. He'll have difficulty breathing for a while," Marcus said. "It's a good job that Professor Snape had that potion ready, or Harry would be in a great deal more danger." He gave the Potions Master an approving glance. "Thank you, Professor." Snape nodded in reply. "I've never seen this spell before. Have you, Brad?"

"I've seen it only once, in Algeria," Bradford replied. "The poor bloke died a horrible death. We had no way to treat him." He glanced up at the nurse. "I want you to keep excellent records of everything that's done for him. We'll be adding this treatment to our medical books." He turned to Snape. "Could you give me the formula for that potion and any other information you have on this hex?"

"Certainly," Snape agreed.

"Why is he still unconscious?" Ginny asked worriedly. "He's been out for ever so long."

"His body is protecting him from pain," Marcus said kindly.

"Sometimes our bodies know better than we do about such things. He needs time for the potion to work, time to heal," Bradford added. "If he was awake, he'd be in terrible pain. We'd have to give him pain potions, and those slow the breathing as the patient relaxes. He doesn't need his breathing slowed any more than it is. So being unconscious for a while is actually helping him. If he's still out after twenty-four hours, I want to know, but he should be awake by then." Bradford passed his crystals over Harry's chest again, then straightened. "It might be more comfortable for him to have gills for the next twenty-four hours, to give the potion a chance to work," he said. "You'll just have to remove the gills when you give him his potions."

"What about the poultice?" Madam Pomfrey said. "He can't have one while he's underwater."

Bradford turned to Snape. "You're the expert here, Professor. What do you recommend?"

"Leave it off for the next twelve hours," Snape replied. "Take him out of the water then and apply a poultice and keep an eye on him. If he's still struggling to breathe and in a lot of pain, give him a minimal amount of pain potion – too much will react badly with the one that's healing his lungs. When the poultice dries, remove it and put him back in the water. Try him out of the water again every two hours until he can breathe somewhat freely."

"All right," the nurse said, glad someone knew how to deal with this kind of spell.

"If there's nothing further, then?" Snape asked. He glanced around, then nodded curtly and left, striding briskly toward the doors.

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"Professor Snape?" Ginny called suddenly.

The man turned and looked at her impatiently. "What is it, Miss Weasley? I have things to do."

"I just wanted to thank you," she said in a small voice.

"Oh. Yes. Well," Snape said, obviously nonplussed. "I'm glad I had the potion prepared."

"Me, too," she said softly, gazing at him steadily, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Right. I'll . . . um . . . I'll just go and brew some more, then," Snape said uncomfortably, then turned and started down the corridor.

"May we watch?" Bradford called.

"If you wish," Snape said, waiting for the healers to join him. The three of them disappeared around the corner, talking quietly as they went.

"So what now? Back in the tank?" Remus asked when they were gone.

"That's what Severus said," Madam Pomfrey replied.

Hagrid wanted to do something to help, so he lifted Harry gently in his arms and held him tenderly while Dumbledore gave him gills. He then settled his young friend gently in the tank, his huge tears splashing as they landed in the water that quickly covered Harry's body. The sight of Harry's limp form sinking in the water broke Hagrid's great heart. The boy looked dead, and being underwater didn't help that image at all. He sniffled hard, then lifted Ginny and helped her stand in the tank as her gills appeared. When she ducked under the water and sat down beside Harry, Hagrid pulled out his table-cloth-sized spotted handkerchief and blew his nose loudly after wiping his eyes.

"Well, I'd better go an' . . . an' do summat," the gamekeeper said brokenly. "Let me know if there's summat I can do ter help him."

"We will, Hagrid. Thank you," Dumbledore said, patting the man's arm kindly. He turned to McGonagall. "Minerva—"

"I will go deal with the Zabinis and whatever else crops up," she assured him. "You stay here with your grandson. He needs you now."

"Thank you," the old wizard said gratefully as he sank back tiredly into a cushy armchair he'd conjured moments before. He stared at his grandson lying so still in the tank, as if watching Harry would help him breathe more easily.

"Remus?" Hermione said quietly. She'd just remembered something. "You seemed to recognize the spell. Have you seen it before?"

Remus sighed heavily, glanced at the tank, then dropped his eyes, as if the sight was too painful for him to bear. "I saw it once, during the previous war with Voldemort. It hit a friend

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of mine. His body stiffened the way Harry's did down in the Great Hall. I tried to help him, but there was nothing . . . no one knew what to do. He was in agony," Remus said, his face anguished at the memory. "He was dead within minutes. It was a horrible way to go." He shook his head sadly, then sighed. "Severus's potion seems to be helping," he said, trying to lighten the dark mood of the group surrounding the bed.

Hermione nodded and crawled into Ron's lap, glad to have his strong arms cuddling her. She sighed and relaxed against him, her eyes, like everyone else's, locked on that tank where her friend fought for his life. She burrowed her head deeper into Ron's broad shoulder and hoped for the best.

When Harry and Ginny sank to the bottom of Remus's enlarged and water-filled grindy low tank, Ginny did her best to arrange Harry's limp body the way he'd done it before he lost consciousness. As she settled his head on her shoulder, making sure his gills weren't obstructed, she studied his face. He looked so young, much too young to have faced all the trials he'd gone through in his life so far. She smoothed his hair away from his too-pale face. The light filtering through the water gave his hair shimmering highlights that glistened and shifted erratically as it moved in the gentle current. His lashes looked so dark against his too-pale skin. She missed the lovely roses that bloomed in his cheeks when he was excited, happy or cold. The strange underwater light made the faint tracery of scars on his chest and arms stand out brightly against his skin. She'd learned to ignore his scars, and truthfully, since his treatment the previous summer, they barely showed at all. But now, they were greenish-white lines criss-crossing his body in bright, bizarre patterns. *They're probably so bright because his skin is still dusky from lack of oxygen*, she mused. The gills were moving air for him, but not nearly enough, he was breathing so slowly.

She wondered briefly if her tears would make the water too salty. She sighed as well as anyone with gills could manage, and watched the slow movement of his gills as he struggled to survive. She sat tense and worried as the gills lay closed and still against his neck, willing him with every ounce of strength within her to take the next breath, not relaxing until his gills were wide open once more. And then they would close again, and the stressful cycle would start once more.

The hours passed slowly. Ginny was shattered from the strain of hovering over Harry and willing his gills to keep moving. When Harry was removed from the tank in order to be given his potions, she took advantage of the break and walked around the hospital wing, loosening up her cramped legs. She was preparing to re-enter it as Dumbledore Levitated Harry into the water when Ron stepped in front of her.

"It's my turn," he said stoutly. "You need to rest."

"He needs me!" she protested. "He expects me to be there when he wakes up!"

"And you will be – just outside the tank. Harry wouldn't want you exhausting yourself. It's my turn now. Hermione can take the next turn. We all want to help him. It's time you rested." Nervous but determined, he turned to Dumbledore and said, "Can you give me gills, please, sir?"

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"Certainly," Dumbledore said, lifting his wand.

"And teach us how to do it, as well," Hermione added quickly. "Harry's taught Ginny to do it herself – she almost has it. But we haven't learned it."

"Of course," Dumbledore said kindly. He showed them the proper grip and wand movement and said the incantation slowly, giving Ron gills while Ginny stood in the tank holding the unconscious Harry's hands and watched his gill movement, refusing to let him be alone even for a moment. The headmaster also Transfigured Ron's robes into swim trunks, making the redhead blush.

Ron got into the tank awkwardly, his bad leg giving out when he tried to use it for support as he climbed over the side. He fell in with a splash, coming up sputtering and embarrassed. He looked around nervously for a moment, and then his face became truly alarmed when he found he couldn't breathe properly out of the water. His sister pushed his head under and he gulped, finally getting his gills moving. She smirked at him a bit as she climbed out.

Ron gave her a withering look, then settled on the bottom next to Harry's still form. He looked around, trying to decide how to make his friend comfortable, then decided the "potions position" was probably the best he could manage. He moved to the narrow end of the tank above Harry's head and settled his back against the glass, then pulled his best friend up into his arms so he was sitting almost upright. Madam Pomfrey had told them that the weight of Harry's lungs would be very painful to him if he was lying on his back, so as upright a position as possible would be best. Once Harry was settled into place, Ron relaxed and looked rather pleased with his ability to breathe in the water, grinning cheekily at the girls whenever he caught their eyes.

"Go and lie down, Ginny," Hermione urged her weary friend. "I'll keep an eye on these two."

"Get me if anything changes – or when he needs his next dose," Ginny said seriously.

"I will. Take a nap or something."

"As if I could sleep," Ginny sighed, glancing at her boyfriend's still form. "I wish he'd wake up again."

"Marcus told us his body is protecting him from pain by staying unconscious," Hermione reminded her.

"Yeah," Ginny said darkly. "That isn't much comfort. It scares me, him being unconscious for so long, and in the water. He stopped breathing in there once – he could do it again. Do keep an eye on him for me, will you?"

"I will – and on your brother as well," Hermione promised.

"Yeah, him too," Ginny conceded with a small smile, glancing at her brother. "His poor leg. It looks awful, and the water just seems to magnify it."

"Don't let Ron hear you saying that," Hermione warned urgently, turning herself and Ginny so that Ron couldn't see their faces as they spoke. "He's not as strong about it as he seems to be."

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"Yeah, I know a lot of that 'I'm fine' stuff is an act he learned from Harry," Ginny agreed, her tone surprisingly snide.

"He *will* be fine, once he gets his strength back," Hermione insisted.

"He'll always limp, and it will always be ugly! He used to have beautiful legs! He was an athlete!" Ginny snapped, her fear and grief over everything that had happened to them recently finally exploding in rage.

"At least he has both of his own legs! And he'll still be an athlete! He'll be a professional Quidditch player soon, for Merlin's sake! What's wrong with you?" Hermione hissed, shocked at her friend's words. Ginny had been so supportive of Ron ever since his injury in the battle. Making such negative comments was out of character for her.

"My boyfriend – my *fiancé* – is lying in a grindylow tank full of water, barely able to breathe even with gills, and you're asking what's wrong with me?" Ginny snarled furiously, ready to do battle.

"Ladies," Remus said softly. "Ron's noticed you arguing." Dumbledore was also watching them closely.

Both girls froze. "Sorry," Hermione said finally, hanging her head.

"Me, too," Ginny replied reluctantly. Yes, she'd lost two brothers recently, as well as her home, and Ron was crippled for life. Yes, Harry had nearly died from the wounds he'd received in battle, and now *twice* more since then, but still – Hermione had lost both of her parents and was also grieving over Ron's and Harry's injuries. Ginny shouldn't take out her rage on her best friend, whose heart had been as sorely abused lately as Ginny's. Truly chastened, she hugged Hermione and then climbed into a nearby bed. She stared at the tank for a long time, tears streaming silently down her face as she tried to deal with the madness of her life recently. She was glad Harry and Ron couldn't see her clearly if they looked her way. She didn't want them to worry about why she was crying. Finally, she turned over and fell into a troubled sleep.

"What was all that about?" Remus quietly asked Hermione once Ginny had climbed into bed.

"I don't honestly know," she said with a sigh. "I think she's had about all the stress she can stand. I feel the same way."

"Well, don't take it out on each other," Remus advised.

"OK," Hermione said with a sigh as she sat next to the tank, smiling a bit at Ron as she did so. She saw a sympathetic look in his eyes and gratefully pressed her hand against the glass near him. He pressed his hand against the glass on his side, matching her finger for finger, a slow grin spreading across his face at the huge disparity in the size of their hands. She returned his grin and settled down to keep watch over her love and the young man who was closer to her than a brother.

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"It's time for the poultice," the nurse said hours later. "It can be quite comforting." Once Harry was Levitated out of the tank, his gills removed and his body dried and warmed with charms, she sat on the edge of the bed and began spreading the poultice on his chest. The fumes were horrible, like ranky old socks soaked in skunk perfume and set on fire.

"It seems to be helping him," Ron said in relief after watching his best friend closely for several minutes. "He's not fighting so hard to breathe." Ron and the others, however, were all holding their noses until the fumes dissipated a bit.

"Oh, we're such idiots!" Hermione said suddenly. She pulled out her wand and did Bubblehead Charms on herself, Ron and Ginny. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks," Ron said, sighing in relief.

"I don't want anything between me and Harry," Ginny snapped impatiently, pulling her own wand and removing the globe around her head.

Hermione froze in the face of Ginny's wrath. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to help."

Ginny turned and looked at her best friend. "I know. I'm sorry I snapped at you. Thanks for trying. It was a good idea. I just don't want him to wake up and see me like that. It might frighten him."

"I didn't think of that," Hermione admitted, pulling her wand out again.

"No, you and Ron can keep yours," Ginny said, putting her hand on Hermione's arm. "It's OK. It's just me. I can't bear to have anything between Harry and me right now."

"I understand," Hermione said, relieved that Ginny was acting more like herself. *Stress does strange things to people sometimes*, she thought.

"You had a good idea, Miss Granger," the nurse said approvingly as she gave herself a Bubblehead Charm. "Miss Weasley, are you sure you don't want one?"

"I'm sure. How will it look to Harry when he wakes up and sees he's the only one without a Bubblehead Charm? It might scare him!"

"And it's easier to snog him without the bubble," Ron said wisely. "We understand."

Ginny blushed a bit and nodded.

"Excellent," Madam Pomfrey said in satisfaction a few moments later. "This poultice generates heat that helps with the muscle aches he has from trying so hard to breathe, and the fumes help open his airways. He'll be breathing better very soon now."

Everyone was silent for several long minutes, watching Harry struggle for each breath. The poultice seemed to be relieving some of his distress, and his colour improved a bit more. Suddenly he began coughing hard. Ron sat on the bed and pulled Harry up into a sitting position and Harry's breathing eased again. Ron settled back against the head of the bed and

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pulled his friend up into his arms more securely, supporting him against his chest, being as careful as he could to not disturb the poultice.

"I can set the bed up so it will hold him there," Madam Pomfrey offered.

"This is something I can do for him," Ron countered with quiet determination.

"He shouldn't need such support for long," the nurse assured him. "The poultice is helping. He should be able to lie down comfortably again in a bit. Are you certain you want to hold him?"

"I'm fine," Ron insisted. With a nod, the nurse picked up the tray containing the pot of poultice, flasks and vials of potions, and other things she'd used to treat Harry, then went to her office to put them away.

"He looks better," Hermione said hopefully after a long quiet spell, trying to cheer Ginny. "See? His cheeks are pinking up."

"Not enough," Ginny said darkly. She sat on the side of his bed, ignoring the horrible fumes from the poultice, holding his hand against her heart again, hoping that he could tell she was there, that he was loved, that she was waiting for him to wake up and smile at her. She closed her eyes and bowed her head, unable to bear the sight of his ill face and closed eyes any longer.

Ron and Hermione sat in silent vigil, their hearts aching for Harry, for Ginny, for all the traumas they'd suffered in recent weeks. Hermione climbed on the bed and snuggled up against Ron, grateful for the comfort of his warm body against hers, his strong arm around her back. She put her hand on Harry's shoulder and breathed in rhythm with him, willing him to get well, wishing she knew a spell that would just make this illness vanish and leave him well and whole. She wished she could do something, anything, to see those green eyes teasing her again, to hear his laughter, to watch the joy on his face when he flew, or saw Ginny across a room. But all she could do was breathe along with him, and hope air would soon move through his body as easily as it did through hers.

Several long, silent minutes later, Hermione cried, "He's waking up! Look, he's opening his eyes!" Remembering Ginny's concern, she removed the bubble from her head so she wouldn't worry Harry. Ron nodded at her and she removed his as well, then moved from Ron's side to sit on the edge of the bed across from Ginny.

Ginny's eyes flew open and she smiled as she stroked his cheek with gentle fingers. "Harry? Harry, how are you? We're all here, baby. Wake up."

"Gin?" Harry whispered, coughing a bit as he spoke. "You . . .OK?"

"Yes, I'm fine!" she assured him. "You saw me when you woke up earlier. Do you remember?" He shook his head slightly. "Well, you did. I'm fine now. I'm sorry you were worried about me."

"I thought . . ." he said, his exhausted eyes saying far more than he was able to express in words. He clasped her hand weakly, his breath coming in gasps as he struggled to talk, to move, to escape the leaden feeling in his chest.

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"I'm fine now. It wasn't such a great hex anyway," she said dismissively. "I think he was just trying to get me out of the way."

"He'd heard about your Bat-Bogey Hex and didn't want to cross you," Ron said supportively, hoping to get a smile out of his sister, but she merely looked at him with sad eyes. Ron sighed, wishing there was something more useful he could do.

Harry turned his head a bit and saw red hair next to his cheek. "Ron?"

"Right here, mate," Ron assured him, a warm smile in his voice. "I've got you. Comfy?"

Harry nodded weakly. "Ron? You're . . . executor," he muttered, his voice a feeble whisper. "Take care . . . of . . . Ginny . . . for me, 'K?"

"You can take care of her yourself," Ron said resolutely. "You're going to be fine!"

"Don't . . . feel . . . fine," Harry replied miserably, then began coughing hard. Blood splattered his chest, the blanket covering his legs and Ron's hands as he tried to support his friend though the horrible spasms of deep, wracking coughs. Harry's body sagged in Ron's arms as he lost consciousness again.

"*Madam Pomfrey!*" Hermione screamed, racing to the nurse's office. "He's coughing up blood!"

"*He's dying!* NOOOOOOOOO!" Ginny wailed in panic. She started rocking in grief, clutching his hand desperately as tears streamed down her face.

"I'll call Marcus again," Madam Pomfrey said as she examined him. "I'm sure he'll be here as soon as he can."

Harry lay there much too still, the only motion detectable the obviously painful rise and fall of his chest, each breath making his body shudder horribly. The people who loved him watched each and every agonized breath, breathing with him, as if that would help him somehow.

Marcus and Healer Bradford ran into the room, soot billowing behind them as they batted at their clothes. "He's coughing up blood?" Bradford said in concern, gratefully washing his hands in the basin the nurse held for him and her brother.

"Yes, just a few minutes ago," Madam Pomfrey said, looking quite concerned. "You can see how much it was. I haven't cleaned up any of it yet."

Bradford and Marcus worked on their patient silently for a while, then looked at each other, nodded and straightened up, both of them sighing with relief.

"He's a lot better than he looks," Bradford assured them. "He's moving air fairly well now. He's in a tremendous amount of pain, but his lungs are actually in much better shape than they were." He dug in his bag and handed a small vial to the nurse. "Give him one small sip of this now and every fifteen minutes until it's all gone. Then give him some Strengthening Solution and Blood Restoring Potion in an hour. This potion and the one Snape gave him need time to work before you give him anything else."

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"What is that potion?" Ginny asked suspiciously, sniffing hard as she tried to stop crying.

"Scar on my sister's elbow is my password, Ginny," Marcus said reassuringly, "and I got Brad's before we came."

"OK," she said. "So what's the potion for?"

"The curse hardened the tissues in his lungs," Bradford replied. "Now there are places that are loosening up unevenly, so some areas are soft and working well, while other spots are hard and resistant to the motion of his lungs as he breathes. That's why he coughed up blood. Those hard places resisted his breathing and tore some surface capillaries when his breathing stretched them. This potion will help soften the hard spots and heal the damaged places as well as opening up his airways. He wasn't ready for it before. And he's in so much pain because he has to work so hard to breathe, but he can't have much pain potion until his lungs have cleared a bit more."

"You said you didn't know how to treat this," Ginny snapped, still suspicious.

"We spent a long time talking to Professor Snape, and have been researching potions that will treat the symptoms ever since we returned to the hospital," Marcus explained patiently. "We're doing the best we can to help him."

Harry suddenly made a soft, sighing sound that startled all of them.

"What was that? What happened?" Ginny cried, clasping Harry's hand against her chest again. She was still rocking anxiously.

Marcus and Bradford examined Harry again. "He simply took a deeper breath, Ginny," Marcus said with satisfaction when they finished. "He's not breathing normally yet, but he's on the road to recovery at last."

"He is?" She was afraid to believe them. Harry still looked so weak and ill.

"He is," Marcus assured her. "He'll be in bed for several more days. I let him come back to school before he was fully recovered, so he was weak to start with. He insisted he'd be fine, that he wanted to be here to take his exams," the healer said, shaking his head regretfully. "I shouldn't have listened to him."

"He can be very persuasive when he wants to get out of the hospital," Madam Pomfrey told her brother with a small smile.

"Yes, he can," Marcus agreed. He glanced at Ginny, who looked ill with worry. "Are you all right?"

"I won't be all right again until he's well," she said, her voice breaking.

Marcus patted her shoulder comfortingly. "You have all been through hell lately. I don't know how you've stayed so strong. You look exhausted. Why don't you rest?"

"*I'm not moving*," she snarled. "He needs me."

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Marcus held up both hands in surrender. "Stay there if you want, but he needs you to stay healthy. Have you eaten lately?" She shook her head. "All right then, healer's orders: Eat something. Force yourself, if you must, but eat something. Drink plenty of fluids, and try to get some rest. Take a nap once in a while, all right? He's a lot better than he looks right now, I promise you. He'll be fine soon."

"You're sure?" she said, a small glimmer of hope finally stirring in her dark, sad eyes.

"I'm sure," he replied with a warm smile.

"Four days should do it," Bradford said, after passing his crystals over Harry's body again. "Poppy, don't let him talk you into letting him out any earlier than that, all right?"

"Four days," she agreed.

"And we'll want to examine him before you release him," Marcus added. "We won't discharge him until he's strong enough to deal with the challenges he faces here."

"Anyone who tries that kind of thing again will regret it," Ron said darkly.

"After what happened to Zabini in front of the *entire school*, do you honestly think someone will try anything?" Hermione asked Ron curiously. "I mean, he was seriously injured and still . . ." She stopped and shook her head, apparently puzzled.

"Still what?" Bradford asked curiously.

Hermione took a deep breath, trying to decide how to explain what had happened. "Erm . . . well . . . when Ginny fell, it looked as if she was dead. Harry was devastated, and his attention was distracted just long enough for Zabini to get that curse off. Ron and I had just got our wands out when Harry was hit with the spell and shot one back at Zabini. But Harry dropped his wand – I don't think it was intentional, he was already very seriously wounded. He sent off that spell, but it wasn't one I recognized. It was more, um, pure, raw power, and it, erm . . ." She stopped uncertainly.

"What?" Bradford asked, fascinated. How Harry could have managed any kind of spell after being hit with such a horrific curse was beyond his comprehension.

"Zabini was, erm, kind of, um . . . glued. . .to the wall," Hermione said uneasily. "There were electric bolts coming out of his hands and feet and eyes and mouth and the top of his head. It was really disgusting."

"Electric . . .?" Bradford said, confused.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how else to describe it. It looked as if . . . erm . . . as if lightning was coming out of his hands and feet and so on," she explained.

"Merlin's beard!" the healer said in amazement.

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"And that's not all," Ron added. "His chest was branded with images of the phoenixes and griffins in Harry's palm. They weren't sharp-edged like the ones on Harry's hand, but they were distinct enough to know what they were."

"How the hell . . .?" Marcus said, scratching his head.

"Nobody knows, not even Dumbledore. He's still trying to work out what happened. Professor Flitwick and Hagrid had to peel Zabini's body off the wall," Hermione said, looking more than a bit green. "It was up there for a while before they could get it off. The whole school saw what happened, so I seriously doubt anyone from here will ever bother Harry again. I mean, he was already dying when he fell, wasn't he?" Marcus nodded. "And still, he managed such a strong spell without even thinking about it. He just pushed power at him, from the way it looked."

"Pushed *power*?" Bradford said curiously.

"That's what it looked like. A beam of golden light went from Harry's hand to Zabini's chest. I suppose the phoenixes and griffins were inside that light somehow," she finished with a shrug.

"Incredible," Bradford said, stunned by what he'd heard.

"Harry never ceases to amaze me," Marcus said, looking at his patient. "He's a remarkable young man."

Everyone was quiet for a few minutes, just watching Harry breathe. It was obvious now that the tightness in his lungs had eased, at least a little. He was breathing without horrible raspy sounds coming from his lungs and his colour was truly improving.

Ginny finally broke the silence. "Four days. But he'll be fine then? He'll be back to his full strength?"

"He'll need to work out a bit to be ready for his Quidditch practices, but yes, he'll be fine then unless he has some kind of setback. And I don't think he'll need to go back in the tank anymore, either," Bradford said with a smile. "That was an outstanding idea. I'm going to write a report on it, and give you full credit," he added, looking at Hermione.

She blushed and shook her head. "It was Harry's idea. I just remembered it."

"And just in time," Bradford assured her. "I think our work here is done. Let us know if he has any more problems," he told Madam Pomfrey.

"I will," the nurse assured him.

The Time of Destiny

Chapter 33 – The Last Hurrah

Many hours later, Harry became aware of a gentle weight on his arm, a soft sound to his right. *What's that on my arm? What was that sound? What happened to me this time?* He sensed no danger nearby, so he lay quietly, eyes still closed, trying to remember. No luck. He opened his eyes just a crack, squinting around without moving his head. Ginny was asleep, sprawled in the chair beside his bed, her hand resting lightly on his arm. He smiled a bit. The weight on his arm was her hand. Bless her, Ginny was always there to look after him.

Glancing past her, he noticed the all-too-familiar curtains around his bed. *Hospital wing again. Wonder how long it will be this time? Or how long it's been?* Poor Ginny looked completely exhausted, and was sleeping soundly enough that his slight movements hadn't disturbed her yet. That was fine with Harry. She needed to rest, from the look of her.

He glanced around a bit, squinting to make his eyes focus as much as they could without his glasses. Ginny was the only one with him at the moment. Curtains cut off the view of his area from the rest of the wing, but he could hear movement out there. From the rustling, shuffling sounds, other people were here to see the nurse. The pale light shining over his curtains told him it was probably early morning. He remembered that it was nearly exam time, or possibly they'd already started. He had no idea how much time had passed since his return to Hogwarts.

The quiet sounds of many feet and soft voices outside the curtains caught his attention again. There must be a lot of students who were ill from worrying about their exams and needed a remedy, which was normal this time of year. He sighed. Would he be able to take his exams? Had he already missed the ones he'd planned to take?

Something just past Ginny's chair caught Harry's eye. It was a huge, odd shape – what was it? He squinted at it harder, lifting his head a bit to try to see more of it. It looked like a huge glass aquarium filled with water. Was a merperson being cared for in the hospital wing? He shook his head a bit in confusion, then regretted it immediately.

Ow. Shouldn't have done that, he thought, moaning softly. Was there any part of his poor abused body that didn't hurt? He ran through a mental checklist and decided that his hands and arms were OK, as were his legs. It was his chest and back, and his head, to some extent, that were in tremendous pain. Maybe if he turned on his side, his back wouldn't hurt so much. He began trying to turn over, but quickly stopped, his movements and gasps of pain enough now to awaken Ginny.

"Hi," she said sleepily as she smiled at him. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm . . . fine," he said, struggling to smile despite the agony in his chest.

"No, you're not, but you will be. You need some pain potion, right?"

"Oh, yeah," he moaned. "That . . . would be . . . brilliant." He was gasping again. He couldn't get a deep breath no matter how hard he tried. "What's . . . wrong . . . with me?"

"You're getting better. You'll be out of here in a couple of days, Marcus said," Ginny assured him.

The Time of Destiny

"But what . . . happened . . . to me?" he insisted.

"I'll tell you later, sweetie," she said, getting to her feet. "Your lungs were hit with a curse that made it hard for you to breathe. They're healing very nicely now. That's all that's important. I'm going to get your pain potion, all right?"

"What aren't . . . you . . . telling me?" he said, his eyes anxious.

Ginny leaned down so she was nearly nose to nose with him. "Do I look upset? Don't shake your head, it might hurt," she said as he started to move a bit. "If I'm not upset, you must be doing well, right? Trust me. It would take a few minutes to explain it to you, and you'll listen better when the pain potion takes effect. Madam Pomfrey is tied up with people who are ill worrying about exams, so I'm going to go and get your potion – she's too busy to give it to you herself right now, but I can do it. I'll just be a minute, OK?"

"K," he whispered, then tried to return her smile. She patted his shoulder and disappeared between the curtains. In a short time, she returned and gave him his potion.

"Better now?" she said brightly as she capped the potion flask.

"Yeah," he said, having realized that one syllable answers were much easier for him than actual sentences.

"I know it hurts, baby, but you were so ill. You'll feel better soon. I'm going to put your poultice on you. It stinks pretty badly, but it does help." She opened his pyjama top and sat on the edge of the bed, a covered jar in one hand, a small spatula in the other. She tried to be all business, but when she glanced at his face, the sight of those beautiful green eyes gazing so trustingly at her was more than she could take. She set the pot and spatula aside, cupped his cheeks in her hands and bent down to kiss him, trying not to drip tears into his face. He lifted his arms and tried to pull her close, but was too weak to manage it.

Ginny sobbed and relaxed into his embrace. Feeling his arms around her again was an indescribable joy. She cried on his shoulder for a few minutes, then sat up, wiped her face and did a Drying Charm on his pyjamas. "I'm sorry. That must have hurt, having me on your shoulder when you're in so much pain. I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I'd say . . . your git . . . of a fiancé . . . was hurt again," he said, giving her a slow smile. "Sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," she insisted, wiping her face again before taking the lid off the pot so she could apply the poultice.

"Ergh," Harry grunted, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"I agree, but it has helped your lungs open up," Ginny said as she began slathering the nasty concoction on his chest. "Breathe it in as deeply as you can. You improve a lot every time we use this stuff, nasty as it is."

"Tell me . . . what happened," he said, gazing at her seriously.

The Time of Destiny

Ginny went through the story as she worked. When she mentioned Zabini dying, Harry winced. "I didn't mean . . . to kill him," he moaned. "I was trying . . . to shield us."

"Everyone knows that, Harry," she assured him. "You aren't in any trouble."

"But I didn't mean . . . to *kill* him," Harry said obviously distressed.

"What's bothering you?" she asked him as she closed up the poultice pot and re-buttoned his pyjamas.

Harry looked at his right hand in horror. "You said . . . these . . . were on his chest?" he said, glancing at the phoenixes and griffins branded into his right palm. Ginny nodded. "I didn't do anything . . . didn't send them . . . didn't know," he said, sounding a bit frightened. "My magic's . . . out of control."

"Yes, that's what Professor Dumbledore thinks, too," she replied. "He thought it was remarkable for you to cast any kind of spell as badly injured as you were."

"Wasn't a spell," Harry insisted. "I couldn't think, couldn't speak . . ."

"I know, that's what they told me," she agreed. "You just rest and don't worry about it. You're not in any trouble. Remember that."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Are you hungry or thirsty?"

"No."

"Well, Madam Pomfrey did say you might not have an appetite while we're using the poultice. It is pretty smelly, isn't it?" She waved her hand in front of her face and grimaced, making him smile. She smiled in return, glad to see the more cheerful light in his eyes. "Would you like me to read to you? Or do you just want to go to sleep?"

"Dunno," he said, then surprised himself with a huge yawn. "Sorry," he said, blushing a bit.

"That's better!" Ginny said with satisfaction. "You're blushing! You must have plenty of oxygen in you if you can blush!"

Harry smiled at her, then lifted his hand and twined a lock of her hair around his fingers. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For always . . . being here . . . for me. I love you."

"I love you too. You get some rest now, okay?" She tucked him in, noticing as she smoothed the covers across his broad chest that he'd lost weight again. He'd lost a lot in the hospital while recovering from the battle and had just started to regain what he'd lost, and now he was far too thin again. She was going to have to make sure he ate well when he was strong enough.

The Time of Destiny

Late that afternoon, the hospital wing was silent, all the students who'd been ill from nerves having received a dose of potion to calm their nervous stomachs. Ginny had spent the day revising for her exams, the first of which she'd need to take the next day. Harry slept quietly after she applied the poultice.

Ginny sat up and stretched, her movement waking Harry a bit. "Sorry, love, I didn't mean to wake you," she said as she bent down and kissed his cheek. "How do you feel?"

A mischievous light sparkled in his eyes as he made clutching motions in mid-air. "With my hands," he said, giving her a cheeky grin.

"With . . . *ha!* You're loads better, if you're being cheeky with me, sir!" she said in delight. "Hey, I need to go to the loo, and you need to eat. I'll order some food for you and it should be here by the time I get back, how's that?"

"Sounds great," he murmured, then stifled a yawn. "Hand me my wand, please?"

"Here you go. You shouldn't do any magic, you know. Marcus said that wouldn't be a good idea. You need to heal first."

"OK. I just wanted it."

"And since I'll be gone, it would be a good idea for you to have it," she said. "Ron or Hermione would be here to help me watch you, but they're taking their N.E.W.T's. Go back to sleep. When you smell something delicious—"

"That will be you," he said, chuckling a bit, then moaning.

"It's not quite time for your pain potion, so stop making yourself laugh!" she chided him gently. "Go to sleep. I'll be back before you know it," she added, kissing him lightly on the lips and tousling his hair.

"I worked on my hair for *hours*," he whinged, making her laugh. He smiled, satisfied that he'd amused her, then closed his eyes and was soon asleep again.

Shortly after Ginny's departure, Harry awoke when he sensed someone nearby. He opened his eyes to see who it was and squinted, unable to identify the tall woman before him. She handed him his glasses rather imperiously and he put them on with a quietly muttered "Thanks." When he could see properly, he looked at the woman again. "Minister Bones!" he said, trying to sit up a bit. He groaned in pain and gave up on moving.

"We need to talk," Madam Bones said. The Minister of Magic was accompanied by a seedy-looking man who wrinkled his nose and backed away when the fumes from the poultice on Harry's chest reached his nostrils.

"What about?" Harry asked, unnerved by her brusque manner. She'd always been quite cordial with him.

The Time of Destiny

"About Zabini's death. Tell me exactly what happened. You're facing life in Azkaban unless I can find a way to help you. Tell me everything," she said impatiently. "Hurry up, I don't have much time."

"I . . . I don't remember much," Harry said, wishing Ginny was here with him. It would be rude to call her on his ring in front of the Minister of Magic. Madam Bones had always been fair with him, even seemed to like him. What was going on here?

"Tell me what you remember. What were you thinking when you sent that spell that killed Zabini? Why did you want to kill him?"

"He nearly killed me! And I thought he'd killed Ginny. But I wasn't trying to kill him, I didn't mean to—" Harry began.

"Don't give me that. I know he's been giving you trouble all year," Madam Bones snapped. "What were you thinking? How did you put those marks on his chest? How did you stick him to the wall that way?"

Merlin, who'd been sitting quietly by Harry's side, suddenly stood up, the crest of feathers on his head erect, his posture stiff and angry. A flash of light came from the man behind Madam Bones and Merlin attacked him, knocking the man down.

"You're not Madam Bones! You're a reporter!" Harry pointed his wand at her and cried, "*Incarcerous!*" and the woman was instantly bound in magical ropes. The filthy language that came out of her mouth would have made a Muggle sailor proud. "Zip it!" Harry snarled, slashing his wand through the air and then groaning in pain.

He fell back against his pillows, glad the woman was now silent, and watched Merlin rip the camera from the man's hands. "Merlin! Get rid of him," Harry said, coughing now and groaning in agony. With a flash of light, the phoenix and the man were gone. Harry was in too much pain and too angry to care much about what Merlin might do with the man. He just wanted him gone.

A few minutes later, Ginny returned, a tray of food in her hands. When she saw Madam Bones tied up on the floor, she gasped and dropped the tray, crockery and food flying everywhere. "Minister Bones!" she cried as she pulled out her wand to untie the woman. "Harry, what happened?"

Harry had remained still long enough to regain a bit of strength. "DON'T UNTIE HER!" he snarled, then had a hard coughing fit. "She . . . isn't," he added when he could catch a breath, then coughed a while longer.

"She isn't what?" Ginny said, dumbfounded, standing with her wand still held loosely in her hand.

"Madam Bones. She isn't Madam Bones," Harry said, trying hard to catch his breath.

"How do you know?" Ginny said, staring curiously at the writhing, furious woman on the floor. She looked up at Harry and noticed his face was pale and sweaty. "What did she do to you?"

The Time of Destiny

"Asked questions," he said shortly. "I'm fine."

"Madam Pomfrey will tell us how fine you are," she said tartly. She looked at the woman on the floor again. "And what did you do to her?"

"She's a reporter," he said, then lay back on his pillows again and closed his eyes. "Get Dumbledore."

"OK," she agreed.

Dumbledore walked quickly into the hospital wing, followed closely by Madam Bones. He took in the situation and said, "What's going on here?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Madam Bones said, glaring at the woman on the floor. "Who is this?"

"Harry says she's a reporter," Ginny said, holding her wand loosely again, but pointed at the Minister. "Are you really Madam Bones?"

"Yes," the Minister snapped.

"Tell Harry something that he knows you would know. He needs a password," Ginny said.

"I know who James Evans is," the Minister said instantly. "He went to see the giants and trolls with Professor Dumbledore." She glanced at the impostor on the floor and stopped herself from saying that James Evans was Harry in disguise.

"Harry?" Ginny said, turning to him, but keeping her wand on the Minister. "Is that good enough?"

"Grandfather?" Harry said. "Are you sure it's her?"

"Yes, very sure," Dumbledore replied. "Are you certain this is a reporter?"

"I think it's Rita Skeeter," Harry said. "Something about the way she questioned me, and the bloke with her – I think he was her photographer before."

"What bloke with her?" Madam Bones demanded. "Where is he?"

"Merlin took him," Harry said simply.

"Where?" the headmaster said.

"Dunno, he just flashed him out of here," Harry replied. He was tiring, his voice raspy and thin now.

"Call him and let's find out where he took the man," Dumbledore suggested.

"K. Merlin? I need you," Harry said, his voice a mere whisper now.

The Time of Destiny

"Are you all right, Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones said in concern.

"Not by half," Ginny snarled. She was angry with herself, angry with Madam Bones – both of them, actually – angry with Fate for the many difficulties in life Harry had faced so far.

"Gin – it's really her," Harry said suddenly. "This other one didn't care how I was, she just wanted a story."

Ginny sighed, then glanced up at Madam Bones, blushing a bit as she put her wand away. "Sorry."

"You look exhausted, Miss Weasley," Madam Bones said kindly. "Are you ill?"

"She's been watching over Harry," Dumbledore explained. "I'm sure she could use some rest." He peered at the girl over his half-moon spectacles. "Have you slept?"

"Yes, I have," she replied defiantly. "I've been studying, I've eaten, I've slept. I'm fine. Harry needs to eat, though," she said, looking sadly at the food now spilled all over the floor. She sighed and waved her wand, cleaning up the mess and stuffing all of it in the bin. She'd have to call a house-elf to bring him something. She'd thought it was safe to leave him for a little while, with Madam Pomfrey the only other person in the hospital wing. It was such fun to choose food she thought he'd enjoy, but she wasn't going to leave him for that long again.

Merlin arrived just then, landing in front of Harry and gazing at him expectantly.

"Hi," Harry murmured, stroking the beautiful bird's scarlet feathers affectionately. "Thanks, mate. What did you do with him?" Merlin responded to him with a variety of chirrups and musical sounds, which made Harry grin.

"What?" Ginny prompted.

"He took him to Sebastian," Harry chuckled.

"Sebastian didn't eat him, did he?" Dumbledore said in concern.

"No. He was still dunking him when Merlin came back."

"Eat him?" Madam Bones said, gazing at Dumbledore uneasily. "Who's this Sebastian?"

"Our squid," Dumbledore replied. He turned his eyes to the phoenix still standing protectively over Harry. "Merlin, old friend," Dumbledore said warmly, "thank you. Would you mind bringing him back now? If that's all right with Harry, of course," he added, bowing a bit in the boy's direction. Merlin, after all, was Harry's phoenix and if he were a real phoenix instead of the wizard Great Merlin permanently transfigured into a phoenix, he wouldn't listen to any wizard but his own. Publicly acknowledging Harry's ownership of the phoenix was necessary to maintain Merlin's secret.

"It's okay, mate," Harry told the bird. "Go on." With that, the phoenix flashed out of sight, returning soon after with a bedraggled, soggy man who was shrieking like a young girl.

The Time of Destiny

"Ah. Bozo, I believe?" Dumbledore said, recognizing the man as Rita Skeeter's favourite photographer. "And that means Harry's right – this must be Rita Skeeter. Am I correct?" he asked the man now shivering on the floor.

"I ain't sayin' nuthin'," he growled when he regained his composure.

"We won't need you to in a while," Dumbledore said calmly. "She will revert to her true form before long. But if you help us, things might go easier for you in court."

"I didn' do nuthin' wrong!" Bozo declared defiantly.

"I can think of quite a few laws you've broken," Madam Bones said, looking at him sternly. "Participating in the impersonation of a public official; accessory to a wide variety of things; sneaking into Hogwarts without permission – I could go on, but you do face at least three years in Azkaban for the obvious charges. I'm certain we can dig around a bit and find other laws you've broken."

"Yes, she's Rita Skeeter!" Bozo said, his eyes bulging. "Don't send me to Azkaban! It was all her idea!"

"Thank you. I will want a full confession from you, and to know who in my office told you I'd be here, and where you got my hair for the potion," Madam Bones said sternly.

"Yeah, sure!" he agreed, eager to please the Minister now. "It was Flora Fogg told us when you'd be here, and gave us some hairs she lifted from your cloak."

"Flora Fogg. She's one of the holdovers from Fudge's administration. She won't be employed for long," Madam Bones said, her face hard and stern. "Why did she do this?"

"Rita paid her," Bozo said. "Twenty galleons."

Madam Bones looked a bit ill and made a disgusted sound as she glared at Bozo, then at the woman lying wide-eyed and nervous on the floor. Madam Bones made a sudden movement that looked as if she was tempted to kick the other woman, but restrained herself. With a visible effort, she calmed herself, then turned to Harry.

"What did she say that told you she wasn't me? And how did you do that to her?" she said, glaring down at the trussed woman, a small smile playing around her lips. "That's quite an interesting hex. I suppose you got tired of listening to her?"

"What do you mean?" Harry said, trying to turn on his side and look at the woman on the floor. He groaned and gave up the effort.

"Oh, Harry! It's time for your potion," Ginny said, bending over him and wiping the pain-induced sweat from his face. "There was a note for me when I returned. Madam Pomfrey had to leave for a while – some Hufflepuffs bought some bogus Memory Enhancing Potion and are so ill that she had to go to their dormitories to take care of them." She shook her head in disgust. "She didn't think I'd be gone so long. It's my fault."

"No—" Harry began.

The Time of Destiny

"Don't argue with me," Ginny said sternly. "Madam Pomfrey and I didn't communicate clearly enough with each other and this," she gestured impatiently at the bound woman on the floor, "is the result. It won't happen again." She brushed the hair back from his damp forehead. "I know where your potions are. I'll go and get them for you." She looked up at Dumbledore. "Professor? Can you look after him for a few minutes?"

"Of course."

"Wait a minute. How do we know who you are?" she said suddenly.

Dumbledore led her outside the curtained area so Bozo and the impostor wouldn't see what he was doing, then flashed into phoenix form and back into himself again. "Is that good enough?"

"Yes," Ginny said in relief as she parted the curtains and returned to Harry's bedside. "It's hard, not knowing who to trust."

"Hopefully, those days are behind us now," Madam Bones said, looking significantly at Harry, "thanks to you, young man."

He returned her gaze, wondering what was going through her mind.

Ginny glanced from Dumbledore to Madam Bones to Harry and saw the pain in his eyes despite his best efforts to hide it. "I'll be right back!" she said, then dashed out to get his dose for him.

"So what did I do to her?" Harry said, curious despite his pain. The bound woman was still lying on the floor, just out of his line of sight.

"You don't know?" Dumbledore said with amusement. "Here, let me show you." With that, he Levitated the woman just high enough for Harry to see that she had a huge metal zipper where her mouth should be, and it was zipped tightly shut.

Harry laughed, then coughed, grabbing his chest in pain. "Oh no. That's funny. That hurts! Owwww." He grinned at his grandfather when the pain subsided a bit.

"How did you do this?" Dumbledore asked, genuinely curious. "I haven't seen this hex before."

"Probably because wizards don't use zippers unless they have Muggle clothes," Harry said, relaxing against his pillows again. "I told her to 'zip it' – I just wanted her to be quiet."

"What wand motion did you use? Just tell me," Dumbledore said quickly, holding his hand up in warning as Harry started to make a gesture.

"Oh. Yeah. Erm, it was kind of a diagonal slashing motion," he replied. He knew his magic was out of his control, dangerously so, if simply saying something and whipping his wand through the air could result in the woman's lips being literally zipped shut. He didn't dare make any gestures that could accidentally cast spells, with or without his wand.

The Time of Destiny

"Ah. Very interesting! We'll have to experiment with that when you're stronger," the headmaster said, looking quite amused. His expression darkened as he looked down at the woman on the floor. "You have bothered Harry for the very last time, I do believe. You endangered his life by coming in here."

"How so?" Madam Bones asked, looking from Dumbledore to Harry, who was now obediently opening his mouth for Ginny to give him his potion.

"He's not supposed to do any magic until he's stronger," Ginny snapped. "It could cause a serious setback."

"I see. Then her visit truly was life-threatening?" Madam Bones said, a thoughtful look on her face.

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed.

"Excellent. I've been looking for a way to put her in Azkaban for a long, long time. I think we finally have it," the Minister said with satisfaction. "How do you feel, Mr. Potter? Is the potion helping?"

"Yes," he said, but he was still pale, sweaty and breathing much too rapidly.

"I don't want to tire you. Let me get your testimony and then I'll take these prisoners and leave, all right?" she said kindly. He nodded. "I'll put a Recording Charm on this parchment," she said, pulling a small roll of blank parchment out of her pocket. "It will record your voice so we can use it as testimony in court. Is this all right with you?" He nodded. "Please answer verbally, so the Recording Charm can begin," she instructed.

"Yes, it's fine," he said in as strong a voice as he could.

"Now then, state your full name for the record, and then tell me what happened."

Harry told her the story as well as he could, but he was tiring and he still couldn't breathe that well. It took quite a while for him to explain everything.

"Well done, Mr. Potter. Thank you," Madam Bones said with a smile. "I was here to meet with Professor Dumbledore today, and apparently this assistant of mine decided twenty galleons was enough to betray both you and me. I suppose she thought no harm would be done. She will be sorry for making such a decision, I promise you that." She glanced at the woman on the floor, who had changed into Rita Skeeter just a few minutes ago. "I'll take these two out of your room and let you rest. I'm sorry you were disturbed."

"Thanks," Harry said, not knowing what else to say.

"Take care of yourself, Mr. Potter. I'll see you at the Leaving Feast," she said, then roughly hoisted Rita to her feet and prodded her in the back with her wand. "Move!" Madam Bones ordered, suddenly sounding very much like the Auror she had once been. Rita and Bozo trudged slowly out of the hospital wing, Madam Bones and Dumbledore right on their heels.

The Time of Destiny

"Well, that was more excitement than I needed this afternoon," Ginny said, sitting in the chair with a heavy sigh. "How are you?"

"Tired. Hungry. Sleepy," he admitted.

"You must feel awful to actually admit those things," she teased. "What would you like to eat? Or do you want a nap first?"

"Food, then nap," he said. A short time later, a house-elf arrived with a new tray of food, which Ginny fed carefully to her love. His meal was filled with soft laughter, quiet talk and smiles. After eating and drinking barely enough to keep his stomach from growling, he fell asleep.

Ginny sat back in her chair and sighed, wondering how she could possibly leave him to take her exams, if a trip to the loo and kitchen was long enough for him to be accosted by Rita Skeeter? She shook her head in frustration, then bent over him and removed his glasses. He'd drifted off while they were talking, and now was sleeping quite soundly. She ran her fingers lightly through his hair, then bent and kissed his forehead. "I love you," she whispered, then sat back in her chair, her hand on his arm, and fell asleep herself.

Harry's four days in bed passed very slowly. Exams were starting, so his friends couldn't stay with him. Dumbledore visited as often as he could, catching Harry up on what was going on in the outside world, telling him stories about his relatives, and building a grandfather-grandson relationship on top of the mentor-apprentice one. Since teachers and staff members, as well as students, were all so busy, Dobby came to sit with Harry so he wouldn't be alone. Anyone who passed through the curtains into Harry's enclosure was met with a fiercely protective house-elf who demanded several kinds of identification before allowing the person near his master. Harry was both touched and amused by Dobby's tactics and unwavering loyalty. Finally, Harry was free.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny escorted Harry to the Great Hall for his first meal after his recovery. They stayed close together, their hands on the wands in their pockets, ready for trouble, but the atmosphere in the Hall was cheerful and welcoming. People stopped by the table to greet Harry, who most had not seen at all since the battle except for that one brief moment before Blaise Zabini and his friends had attacked him.

"Hey, Harry!" Colin Creevey said cheerfully. "It's great to have you back! You feeling OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine now, Colin, thanks," Harry said with a smile.

"Harry! Welcome back!" Neville said excitedly. "I've missed you!"

"Thanks, Neville! It's great to be back. I missed you guys too. I heard you were brilliant during the battle," Harry said, grinning.

"Alex and I had a fight on our hands, yeah," Neville agreed modestly. "I can't believe Professor Snape survived. We were sure he was dead!"

"Yeah, that's what I heard," Harry agreed.

The Time of Destiny

"He's really different since he came back to school," Neville said, leaning in to speak more privately.

"Really? How?"

"I dunno, he's . . . not as nasty somehow."

"Neville's right," Ron agreed, shovelling another huge forkful of food into his mouth. "Snabe's nob islf – 's nobschub gt."

"Really," Harry said, amused.

Ron made a massive effort at swallowing. "Yeah! You wouldn't believe it."

"Harry!" Ravenclaw Alex McCullough said. "It's great to see you! Are you OK now? We heard you were in bad shape after the battle – and then that git attacked you when you returned to school! Unbelievable!"

"Hi, Alex! I'm fine, thanks. It's good to see you. I heard you fought brilliantly." Harry grinned at the younger boy, proud that Alex had managed his part of the battle as well as he had.

Alex blushed. "I didn't think the Healer Squad members would have to fight like that. I'm glad we had the training, too, or we would have been in serious trouble!"

"It's always good to be prepared for the worst," Harry said philosophically.

"Yeah," Alex agreed. After a few more minutes of conversation, he moved back to the Ravenclaw table.

Harry looked around the Great Hall, happier than he'd been in a long, long time. Everyone seemed glad to see him – except many of the Slytherins, of course, but at least they were leaving him alone. Those who'd been injured in the battle all seemed to be doing well. There were only a few people still on crutches or with canes. On the whole, everyone was in remarkably good shape for having been in battle just a few weeks ago. Despite their injuries, temporary or permanent, the overall mood was ebullient.

"It's exam time," Harry mused to Hermione. "Why is everyone so cheerful?"

"Because Voldemort's dead and you're back with us," she replied. "There are still people stressing over exams, of course, but the mood in the wizarding world at large is quite different now that Voldemort's gone. I've been saving the newspapers and magazines for you to read when you feel like it."

"Thanks," he said, thinking it might be a long time before he wanted to read about the battle and its aftermath.

"What are you going to do with your time now, Harry?" Hermione asked as she buttered her toast.

"What do you mean?"

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"You've missed too many classes to manage the exams, haven't you?" she said. "I mean, you'd planned to take the exams for the three subjects you continued after becoming Dumbledore's apprentice, right?"

"Yeah, I did."

"You've missed so many classes now, it will be difficult for you to pass N.E.W.T.-level exams, and you couldn't study much while you were in the hospital wing or St. Mungo's," she continued.

"I tried to study, but I kept falling asleep," he admitted. "And when you or Ginny or Ron read to me, it was just a pleasant buzz in my head. The words didn't stick."

"You were in a lot of pain and on so many potions, a lot of times you couldn't even speak coherently," Ginny said sympathetically. "It's no wonder you didn't understand what we were reading to you."

He smiled at her and nodded. "Yeah. I remember trying to tell you something very simple and I just could not find the words or get them in the proper order. It was quite frustrating."

"And rather funny to listen to at times!" she teased.

"That's right, pick on poor injured Harry," he whinged.

She stretched up and kissed his cheek, a happy smile on her face. "It's good to have you back."

"It's good to be back!"

"So what are you going to do?" Hermione said, getting back on track. "About your exams, or with your free time, whichever it turns out to be."

Harry thought a moment. "I don't know. You're right, I've missed too much class and don't have time to make it up now."

"Don't worry about it, mate," Ron assured him. "The Auror School doesn't care if you take any exams, remember? You already know more spells than some of them!"

"Yeah, but . . .," Harry began.

"But what?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Well – ever since we entered Hogwarts, we've heard about the N.E.W.T.s. It just seems odd to finish school without taking any."

"If you want to try, we'll help you study," Hermione promised.

"Tell you what," Harry said finally. "I'll just plan on taking the Potions N.E.W.T. and not worry about the others. That one's near the end of exams, right?" Hermione nodded. "So I have time to revise for it," he said optimistically.

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"You're crazy, you know that?" Ron jibed. "If I could get out of taking it, I would!"

Harry smiled at his best friend. He didn't expect Ron to understand. Harry barely understood it himself. "It's something I want to do. I can't explain it."

"Since you've missed so much class, I'll give you my notes to copy while Ron and I work on our Charms revision this morning, how's that?" Hermione offered.

"Great! Thanks," Harry said, amazed at how happy the thought of doing something normal like homework again made him.

Harry had studied hard and now was standing at his work station making Veritaserum, which was the task set for this N.E.W.T.-level exam. The test was three hours long, and he'd need every minute of that time to get the potion right. To be effective, the potion would need a full moon-cycle to cure, but the mixing itself took exactly three hours. He'd carefully laid out his ingredients in the order in which he needed to add them, and was opening the ingredient containers only when he was ready to use that particular item. This very useful system was something he'd learned while working for the twins in their shop. It worked much better than the haphazard way he and his friends had always worked, with ingredients lying all over the table, asking each other to pass the powered horned toad horn or the blistered ferret spleen when those things were needed.

He'd chosen to stand to work, rather than sitting on a stool as they normally did in class, because he could work faster and see his arrangement of containers better from a standing position. It was now nearly two hours into the exam, and Harry was fully concentrated on his work.

Snape came up from behind him, leaned toward his ear and murmured, "Are you all right, Mr. Potter?"

"Huh?" Harry said, so badly startled that he almost spilled his potion. "Sorry?"

"Are you all right?" Snape repeated.

"I'm fine! Why?" he said, locking his eyes back on his work so he wouldn't lose his place.

"You're pale. You're shaking. I think you need to sit down."

"*What?*" Harry said, finally giving the man his full attention.

"Professor Snape!" Professor Tofty said reprovingly. "Why are you disturbing that student?"

"He was discharged from the hospital wing recently. He looks pale and shaky to me. I think he needs to sit down." He waved his wand, Summoning a tall stool to him. He shoved the stool at Harry. "Sit."

Harry looked at the man in stunned confusion. *What the bloody hell is going on?* he wondered. He glanced at the stool and decided it would be easier to cooperate than to argue, so he sat down, then turned back to his potion. Where was he? He'd lost time talking to Snape and he

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needed every single second to finish this potion in the allotted period! What did he need to do now? What should he add next?

Calm down, he told himself sternly. *You can do this*. He took a deep breath and looked at his containers, one after the other. The lid was partly off of the container of powdered dragonfly wings. That was it. He'd been about to add that. No, wait. Was he closing that one when Snape interrupted him? He glanced up, glaring furiously at his professor's departing back as Snape prowled through the other work stations proctoring the exam. Suddenly, Harry's brain clunked into place and he remembered. *Add one pinch of powdered dragonfly wings. Stir seven times clockwise, two times counter-clockwise, then add three nasturtium petals and let it simmer for ten minutes. Pound three slices of dragon tongue quite thin, mince them, raise the heat on the cauldron, then add the tongue, stirring constantly for three minutes*. Great! He was back on track.

He glanced at his watch. He was working too slowly; he wouldn't be finished in time! Harry used his magic to speed up his motions in preparing the ingredients – that could be hurried with no problem, but the stirring and cooking had to be done with precision.

"Potter, are you quite all right?" Snape said a bit later, suddenly in his face again.

"What?" Harry responded, startled. "Yeah. Fine." He went back to work, doing his best to ignore the man.

"I know what potions you're still on for your illness, and when they're due. You're late," Snape hissed.

"I'm *fine*," Harry hissed back. "Please, let me finish my work!"

"Professor Snape, I must protest!" Professor Tofty said again. "Leave Mr. Potter alone!" The other students in the class were now watching the exchange between the two professors and Harry quite openly.

Harry glanced across the room at Ron and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Ron shrugged, not knowing any more than Harry what was going on. Glancing at Hermione, who was several tables away from both him and Ron, Harry saw her tilt her head toward her cauldron, indicating they should each get back to work. Harry nodded and sighed, then pointedly ignored the man still hovering near him and added his next ingredient.

Snape stalked to the back of the room and stood next to the wizened old man, shifting his weight from foot to foot uncomfortably.

"Professor, what is the problem?" Tofty said quietly. "Why are you bothering Mr. Potter?"

"I told you, he's just been released from the hospital wing. He's still on two potions, and I know he's past due for his next dose," Snape snapped.

"Is it life-threatening for him to be past-due?" Tofty asked acerbically.

"It could very well be," Snape growled, startling the older man.

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Tofty pondered a moment, then sighed and said, "He's of age, so you can't force him to take his potion if he doesn't want to. You've already asked him how he is, and he says he's fine. Now leave him alone so he can finish. If he feels the need for his potions, he'll say something, I'm sure. He's quite an intelligent young man. Let him make his own decisions."

Snape made a huffy, impatient sound, but simply crossed his arms and glared at Harry for the rest of the exam time.

Harry worked feverishly. Magically speeding up his preparation time had helped him regain the time he'd lost from Snape's interruptions and distractions. When Professor Tofty called time for the end of the exam, Harry sighed and smiled in satisfaction. He had a perfectly clear, odourless potion, with exactly the right consistency. He filled not one, but three crystal vials with his samples in case Snape damaged the one he turned in, as the evil git had done so many times before. When he finished labelling the vials, he handed one to Professor Tofty, who was going from table to table collecting samples in a rack.

"Are you feeling quite well, Mr. Potter?" Tofty asked in concern.

"Yes, I'm fine," Harry assured the man.

"Professor Snape is right. You do look ill," Tofty said, frowning as he studied the young man's face.

"I'm a bit tired, that's all," Harry replied. "Thanks." He started cleaning up his things, suddenly feeling a huge weight lift off his shoulders. He would never, ever have Severus Snape as a teacher again! That realization made him look up and grin happily at Ron.

Ron looked grumpy. Snape's interrupting Harry's work had distracted Ron greatly and he'd had a lot of trouble finding his place and moving on. Apparently he'd made a mistake at that point, so his potion hadn't turned out as well as he'd hoped it would. It was lumpy and had congealed a bit before he'd dipped out the sample to turn in. He knew he wouldn't get as good a grade as he'd hoped for, but at least, he hoped, he wouldn't get a "T" for "Troll," the absolutely worst grade Hogwarts teachers gave. He'd accept a "D" for "Dreadful" if he had to, but he'd prefer an "A" for "Acceptable." But a "T"? He sighed, then glanced up and saw Harry's bright grin. "What?"

Harry moved across the room and whispered in his ear, "We never have to take a class from Snape again!" then laughed out loud.

"Yeah, you're right!" Ron said, his heart lifting tremendously.

"What's he right about?" Hermione said, joining them.

As Ron started to respond, Snape called, "Potter! Come here, please."

Harry nodded and walked resolutely toward the front of the room.

"In my office," Snape said quietly.

"Why?" Harry said, suddenly on guard.

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"I have your potions here. I was making a new supply for Madam Pomfrey. You're overdue for them," Snape said, apparently annoyed at having to explain something that should be so obvious to his thick-headed student.

"Oh. Thanks," Harry said, following the man into his office.

Ron and Hermione moved across the room and hovered outside the door, which Snape left open when he saw them standing there. "He won't be long," he sneered.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but what's your password for Harry?" Hermione said politely.

"He saved my life," Snape responded immediately. "Happy?"

"Yes, thank you."

Snape turned back into his office. "Sit down, Potter, before you fall down," he snapped. "I have your potions over here. I'll measure out your doses." He matched action to words and soon turned to face Harry, a small vial in each hand. "Open."

Harry opened his mouth obediently and tried not to flinch too much at the awful taste of both potions. He coughed a bit, then choked out, "Thanks."

"Many people have gone to a great deal of trouble to get you well, Potter," Snape said silkily. "You need to take your potions on time for the next two days to ensure you don't have a relapse. A relapse of the Lead Lung Curse is nearly always fatal, you know."

"The Curse itself is nearly always fatal, too," Harry retorted before he could stop himself. He tried to amend his gaffe by adding, "or so I've been told."

"And yet you survived it. Don't tempt fate by having a relapse, Potter. You may not be so fortunate the next time."

As the Potions Master put the used vials in a rack on a shelf to be cleaned, his sleeve slipped back a bit, reminding Harry of something.

"Sir?"

"What is it?"

"May I see your Dark Mark?" Harry asked politely.

Snape frowned. "Why?"

"I remember removing it, but I didn't get all of it, did I?" Harry said. "I'd like to see what's left."

Snape pushed his sleeve up and held his arm out for Harry to see. The snake was the only thing that remained, and it was still quite stubbornly dark. There was no trace of the skull part of the Mark.

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"I had an idea, sir," Harry said as he examined the Mark. "May I try something?"

"You're supposed to be using only minimal amounts of magic, Potter, and you just spent three hours taking an exam," Snape warned him. "You'll overtire yourself."

"I'm not that tired, and I won't be using magic. I'll be using Parseltongue," Harry said, a curious look on his face.

"Harry," Hermione warned, "he's right. You used magic today to take your exam. You should rest."

"Speaking Parseltongue doesn't require me to use magic," Harry told her, glancing at her over his shoulder. "It's just talking. I'm not too tired to talk." She pressed her lips together and subsided into an unhappy silence. Harry looked at his professor again. "May I?"

"As long as you don't overexert yourself," Snape replied, holding out his arm and sitting in the chair opposite Harry's.

"I'll be careful," Harry promised. He held the man's forearm in both hands, supporting it with his left hand while cupping the right one over the image of the snake. He began speaking in Parseltongue, the odd, hissing sounds unnerving to those who heard it.

Ron and Hermione stood in the doorway now, watching their friend uneasily.

Harry stopped speaking and lifted his hand. The snake's image had gone from black to bright green and seemed larger, somehow.

"What happened?" Hermione cried. "It seems to be growing! It's brighter, and—"

"It's coming out, but it's fighting me," Harry said, his jaw getting that familiar stubborn set to it and his eyes fiercely determined as he shook his head. "But it *is* coming out." He cupped his hand over it and bent forward, concentrating hard as he went back to hissing in Parseltongue.

"I wonder what he's saying?" Ron murmured.

"Probably something like, 'go away!'" Hermione said with a shrug.

"That's a lot of talking for 'go away,'" Ron said, smiling down at her.

"I don't know what else he could be saying, do you?" she said, glancing up at her boyfriend.

"No."

"If you two don't shut up," Snape snarled, glaring up at them over Harry's bowed head.

"Sorry," Hermione said, chastened. She and Ron were joined in the doorway by Tofty, who began to question what was going on. "Come with me, Professor," Hermione offered, "and I'll explain. Harry needs quiet to work."

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"No, I don't," Harry said in his own voice. He turned and looked at her. "You're not bothering me."

"Are you all right?" she said, concerned. His face was pale, with bright red patches on his cheeks and a sheen of light sweat glowing on his skin.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said dismissively, then went back to work on Snape's arm.

Hermione gazed at him in concern, but knew there was no way to stop him once he decided to do something. She took Tofty out into the classroom and explained what was going on, and then the two of them returned to the office doorway, where Ron stood with his eyes wide, his jaw dropped, a look of horror on his face.

"Harry! Stop! Let go of him!" Ron cried, moving toward his friend.

"Don't touch him, Ron!" Hermione warned. "Remember what Dumbledore said."

"Yeah, I know. It could be dangerous if we touch him when he's like this," Ron said darkly. "Harry, please! Stop!"

Harry was surrounded by a bright golden aura, showing that he was using every bit of his magical power. Bright sparks came from his wildly blowing hair and his fingers, the sparks from his hand spiralling down to the snake's image on Snape's arm. He was still murmuring a long string of hisses. There seemed to be answering sibilance from time to time, almost as if he was conversing with the snake on Snape's arm. Harry's body was now shaking violently, but despite everything, he was still bent over Snape's forearm, concentrating on his task.

"Harry!" Hermione keened. "You're not supposed to use so much magic right now! Stop before you hurt yourself!"

"Potter, stop! Don't do this. Let go!" Snape said urgently. He'd been repeating this for some minutes, but apparently Harry was so involved in his spell that he couldn't hear him. The Potions Master tried again and again to pull his arm away, to no effect. Harry wouldn't, or couldn't, let go.

Finally, Harry gasped, clutched his chest and fell forward, out of his chair and onto the floor. The golden aura disappeared instantly. Ron, Hermione and Tofty rushed to Harry's side while Snape stared in shock at his now pristine white arm. There was no sign that there had ever been a Dark Mark on his arm. "I don't believe it," he murmured.

"MERLIN! Harry needs you!" Hermione called, holding her wand aloft. With a flash of light, the phoenix appeared, grabbed Harry's robes in his talons and took off for the hospital wing without being told what to do. Hermione and Ron held on to his tail and went along so they'd be able to tell Madam Pomfrey what had happened.

Snape sat gazing at his arm in shocked fascination for a moment longer, then stood, grabbed the cauldrons of potions he'd made for Harry's illness, and raced out of the door, followed slowly by the still-confused Tofty.

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"But what happened? What's wrong with Mr. Potter? Where's everyone going?" Tofty called plaintively as Snape raced away from him.

"Hospital wing," Snape snapped as he whipped around a corner, out of Tofty's sight.

The old man sighed, then trudged slowly up the many flights of stairs to the hospital wing, wishing he, too, had a phoenix to take him places quickly.

"He *what*?" Madam Pomfrey said in shock. "He was told he could only do small bits of magic for two more days! I thought he understood!"

"I know," Hermione said miserably. "Nothing we said would stop him."

"Miss Granger, call my brother and Bradford at St. Mungo's," the nurse said distractedly as she opened Harry's robes to examine him. Hermione ran to the fireplace to contact the healers.

"How is he?" Ron asked, worried. He'd just used the Famous Wizard Card to let Ginny, Remus and Dumbledore know Harry was ill again.

Snape arrived and set the new batches of potion on the bedside table, then bent over Harry next to Madam Pomfrey, his face, like hers, furrowed in concern.

"Do you have any ideas, Severus?" Madam Pomfrey asked as she frantically examined the unconscious boy. "What should we do next?"

"Is it just his lungs that are injured?" Snape asked after a moment. "Or is there something else wrong with him?"

"What else could be wrong with him?" she asked, giving him a startled look. "What happened?"

"He removed the snake from my arm, from the Dark Mark. It fought him. I think it was cursed and may have done something to him," Snape said darkly.

Hermione had just returned from calling the healers and gasped when she heard Snape's comment, but Ron was the one with the worst reaction.

"Well, of *course* it would be cursed," Ron said in disgust. "*Voldemort* put it there! What did he ever touch that *wasn't* cursed? Bloody hell, Harry, what have you got into now?" He moved away from the bed, pacing furiously, unable to watch his best friend suffer any longer.

Hermione followed him a few steps and tried to calm him. "Ron, he knew what he was doing," she began.

He whirled around and glared at her. "*No, he didn't!* He thought he was taking off something like a tattoo. The rest of it wasn't much more than a tattoo, he told me that. He didn't know the snake would come alive and talk back to him, or *curse* him! He just walked into it blindly, doing his hero thing, and now Ginny's going to make herself ill trying to save him again, and Harry . . . Harry"

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Ron shook his head, then rubbed his face hard, frustration, fury and fear making him tremble on the edge of tears as he stared at his desperately ill best friend. "Harry, you great prat, you were almost well! *Why?* Snape could have lived with that Mark for the rest of his life! *Why, Harry?* *Why* did you do it? It's not as if someone attacked you, or him! You did this one to yourself, mate! Sometimes you're your own worst enemy, do you know that? Damn!" He started pacing again, muttering, "Gah!" and "Shit!" and "Bloody damned freakin' hell!" under his breath.

Hermione was torn between trying to calm Ron down and hovering over Harry. She stood uncertainly halfway between them, glancing from the raging and grieving Ron to poor Harry, who was struggling valiantly for his life again. She noticed Snape and the nurse straightening up as they finished examining Harry. "How is he?" she asked hesitantly.

"Not good," Madam Pomfrey said darkly. "What do you think, Severus?"

"I'd give him the Spitting Daisy Poultice for now," he replied tersely. "I gave him the curse antidote potion and his pain potion after his exam. They were about an hour late. I don't know why he didn't take them during the exam. I told him he was past due for them."

"There's a rule against taking potions during exams, Professor," Hermione reminded him. "No potions of any kind, or you're disqualified from the exam."

"I would have known what he was taking and excused it!" Snape snapped.

"He had no way of knowing that," Hermione said miserably. "None of us thought about asking permission before the exam. We were too concentrated on doing well on it. We all knew the rules, Professor. Harry was just trying to follow them."

"He would pick *today* to start following the rules," Snape growled, thoroughly annoyed with Harry for finally doing what he was supposed to, rather than what was best for him.

A short time later, the hospital wing doors banged open. "What happened?" Ginny demanded as she stormed into the room, Remus and Dumbledore following her closely.

Hermione told them how Harry had been injured this time.

"Why would he do that? He could have waited a few days and been strong enough to do it," Ginny moaned. "Harry, what is wrong with you?"

"I think it's his 'saving people thing,'" Hermione said thoughtfully. "I believe he saw a chance to take care of the rest of Professor Snape's Dark Mark and wouldn't rest until he'd finished."

"How could you let him do it?" Ginny demanded, standing toe to toe with Snape. "He could *die* from this! Look at him! He looks awful! He can barely breathe! How *could* you?"

"I tried to stop him, Miss Weasley, but I couldn't get free. He . . . he wouldn't let go," Snape said, shaking his head in disbelief. He'd tried his best, but could not wrest his arm away from Harry's grip.

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"Did a simple Expelliarmus ever occur to you? I can't believe you let him hurt himself this way! I knew you hated him, but you may have *killed* him, you bastard!" She pulled out her wand, prepared to hex him, but Hermione grabbed her arm and stopped her. "Get off, Hermione! He deserves it!"

"You're not wrong, Miss Weasley," Snape said quietly, shocking all of them into momentary stillness. "I should not have let him look at it today. He . . . well, I made a mistake. I am very sorry. I'm doing everything I can to help him get well."

"Then get busy!" Ginny said, pointing her wand at him again.

"Ginny, put your wand away," Remus said patiently. He and Dumbledore had been conferring with the nurse while Ginny raged at Snape. "Hexes won't do anyone any good right now. Harry needs your strength, not your anger."

She lowered her wand and looked at her boyfriend, who was gasping for breath. Her shoulders slumped for a moment, but then she squared them and tried to think practically. "Where's the tank? We need to put water in it again."

"I don't think the tank will help this time. It's not just his lungs. His whole system has been attacked somehow," Madam Pomfrey said sadly. "He's barely hanging on."

"Well, do something!" Ginny demanded.

"Professor Snape gave him potions a short time ago, and I've just applied the poultice," the nurse replied. "We have to wait a bit and see if they help."

Marcus Pomfrey and Healer Bradford arrived minutes later, and checked their patient. They couldn't believe Harry had taken such a chance with his life, either.

"He did understand it could kill him to do anything more than minimal magic until he was completely well, right?" Marcus demanded of his sister. She nodded. "And he knew he'd be well enough to do any magic he wanted in two more days, didn't he?"

"Yes," she said, wringing her hands uneasily. She'd done everything she knew how to do and nothing had helped much so far. "I reminded him of everything you said. I can't imagine—"

"He said he just wanted to look at it and try the Parseltongue," Snape murmured, shaking his head. "He said it wouldn't take magic, it was just speaking in another language. I think he believed that. He didn't seem to think he was taking a risk of any kind."

"Harry's right, it really is just another language in a way. He shouldn't have to use magic to speak it," Bradford muttered, listening to the conversation around him as he examined his young patient. "I can't sort out how using Parseltongue would hurt him so badly."

"I can," Dumbledore said bleakly. He'd been standing quietly against the wall, watching his beloved grandson fight for his life, listening to what had happened, and wondering what had caused his collapse. He'd finally come to what he considered a logical conclusion. "I think it was a last attack from Voldemort."

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"*WHAT?*" everyone gasped.

He turned to Ron and Hermione. "You said it seemed as if he was having a conversation with the snake? You heard more hisses than just his?" They nodded. "Yes, that fits," he murmured, then stood lost in thought for a moment, watching the healers working frantically to save Harry's life.

Harry's lungs were hardening again and his breaths were coming in painful gasps. Bradford put a crystal funnel over the young wizard's nose and mouth and attached a bag to the small end of it, squeezing it every few seconds, which released a mist-like potion for Harry to inhale. Several breaths later, he was breathing a bit easier and his colour improved somewhat. Meanwhile, Marcus was casting spells on Harry repeatedly, with little effect. He growled in frustration from time to time.

Dumbledore watched their activity and sighed. "I suspect Lord Voldemort put a – shall we say 'security measure' – in the Dark Marks to ensure no one could remove them. He never reckoned on anyone like Harry caring enough to try to complete the task despite the obstacles involved." He smiled at his grandson sadly. "Harry willingly lays his life on the line to help other people. We need to talk him out of that habit," he said, winking at Ginny. She looked as if she could do with some cheering up.

She rewarded him with a watery smile. "You honestly think we could?"

"Not really. But it's worth the effort." He looked at the healers, who were now straightening up from their work and conferring with Snape. "How is he?"

When they finished their discussion with the Potions Master, Bradford turned to answer the headmaster. "I won't lie to you. It doesn't look good. There's something very seriously wrong with him beyond the excessive use of magic and the relapse of the Lead Lung Curse, but we can't tell what it is."

"Perhaps I can help," Dumbledore said. He cast the spell that enveloped Harry in a golden grid. "The brightest spots will be the most recently cast spells," he told the healers.

"I hadn't thought of a Spell-Revealing Charm," Bradford said, shaking his head. "It's an old method, but a good one. Here, look at this," he said, pointing to two particular spots. "Those are the spells you just cast, Marcus."

"Yes, and they did no good," Marcus sighed.

"Look here," Dumbledore said, prodding a particularly virulent-looking mass of green blobs near Harry's right wrist. "What are these?"

"I don't know," Marcus said, poking it with his wand.

"It looks like . . . it can't be, though," Bradford said, leaning in for a closer look.

"Like what?"

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"Look past the grid at his skin. Bloody hell. It's a snake bite," Bradford said in surprise. Numerous faint fang marks appeared to be tattooed across the network of veins on the inside of the young man's wrist. "Those marks didn't show up before. The grid brought them out. Amazing."

"He had his right hand over my arm," Snape said, looking stunned as realization hit. "His wrist was over the snake's mouth."

"His skin isn't broken! And the Mark was like a tattoo, not a real snake!" Hermione said, shocked by the healer's comment.

"A magical snake bite," Bradford said. "It's a spell that replicates the effects of a snake bite. I suspect these fang marks mean there's a magical form of venom in his body. Harry must have fought it off with his Parseltongue, or he'd be dead now." He turned to the nurse. "Poppy, I need a snake-stone. Do you have one?"

"Yes. Hang on," she said, hurrying to her office.

"What's a snake-stone?" Hermione said anxiously.

"It draws out the venom," Bradford said distractedly. "We'll need some sour milk or hot water, too."

"I know," the nurse called from her office. "I have milk, but it isn't sour."

"I can sour it, no problem," Bradford said. "Hurry!" He glanced up at Dumbledore, Remus and Marcus. "Do you know how to remove spells from these grids?"

"Yes," they all replied.

"Let's get started, then." He joined them in prodding the horrible green spots on Harry's grid, trying to wiggle them free from each other so they could be removed.

"But this *isn't* a real snake bite, nor real venom!" Hermione argued. "What possible good—"

"Trust me on this," Bradford said. He took the bowl of milk Madam Pomfrey handed him and muttered an incantation over it, souring it instantly. He turned to Ginny. "Hold this," he said, handing her the bowl. "His wrist must stay submerged until I tell you to move it. Keep your hand away from the milk."

"OK," Ginny said, pushing Harry's hand and wrist beneath the surface of the soured milk and holding it there, being careful not to touch the milk herself.

Bradford dropped the small stone Madam Pomfrey handed him into the milk, then stood watching the effect for a moment. The milk was turning a very pale shade of sickly green.

"What's that?" Ginny said, worried.

"The venom. The stone is working. You're doing very well, Ginny. Don't move," he said. He turned back to the grid over Harry's body and joined Dumbledore, Remus and Marcus in

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picking at the mass of green blobs hovering over his arm, trying to disentangle them from the grid lines.

"He took a lot of hits from the snake, and yet managed to keep the damage contained. How did he do that?" Bradford said, mostly to himself.

"We never saw the snake bite, or him react as if he was bitten," Ron said in confusion. "He was *talking* to the snake, and it talked back to him. Was it biting him when it was talking?"

"I suppose," Bradford said, still working on the blobs on Harry's grid. Suddenly, the entire mass came loose from the grid and disappeared. Harry's body flinched hard and he gasped when the spell was released.

"What happened?" Ginny said, desperately afraid for Harry.

"We just broke the snake's spell," Bradford said, "and what you're doing is removing the magical venom in his body. It wasn't a real snake, so it isn't real venom, but some kind of spell that mimics venom's effects. See? His colour is better. He's still suffering the effects of the Lead Lung Curse, but the poison is coming out of his system. Look at the snake-stone itself. Don't remove it from the milk, just tilt the bowl to bring it toward the surface a bit. It should be turning green. Is it?"

"Yes, the colour's quite strong," Ginny said in surprise. "The milk isn't as green as it was."

"The stone is absorbing the venom from the milk. The milk doesn't draw the poison out, but it activates the stone, which then takes the poison out of the victim. Snake-stones are an old but still useful remedy," Bradford said with satisfaction. "We couldn't possibly have come up with an antidote for that snake's venom quickly enough, if one could even be created." He glanced at Snape. "Did you know this curse was on the Mark?"

"I had no idea, or I would never have allowed Potter to try to remove it in the first place," Snape said, shaking his head. "The Dark Lord liked his little secrets. He often had surprises hidden within spells he cast on his followers. He thought they were funny, or that they would, at least, make us more obedient." As he spoke, his sneered, a look of loathing on his face.

"Nice guy," Ron said snidely.

"Indeed," Snape agreed.

Bradford pointed his wand at the bowl of milk and muttered an incantation which brought the stone to the surface. "I think that's finished," he said with satisfaction. "All right, let's get him cleaned up," he added, taking the bowl and stone away from Ginny as Madam Pomfrey handed the girl a towel to dry Harry's arm.

"Look," Ginny said as she wiped his arm. "The bite mark's gone!"

"Excellent! I think we caught it just in time," Bradford said. "He's beginning to improve now."

"How long before he's well again?" Ginny said.

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"He'll be in bed recovering for a day or two. When he's well, he'll need at least two more days of rest to make certain he has his strength back before he starts doing magic again. Then he should be fine. We'll want to examine him before he tries to do any magic, though," Bradford said as he passed his diagnostic crystals over Harry's body once more.

"Did Voldemort do permanent harm to him this time?" Ginny said cautiously.

"I don't know enough about this type of spell to know," Bradford replied honestly. "Headmaster, what do you think? Or Professor Snape?"

"Harry had to resort to Parseltongue to get the snake out at all, and apparently it required his full power to draw the Mark out completely. Now that the venom is out and the spell broken, I imagine the damage he caused by using too much power while he's still weak is the biggest problem he'll have to deal with.," the old wizard said.

"I agree," Bradford said.

Dumbledore studied his Potions Master for a moment, then said. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Snape said with dignity. "And I did not ask Potter to remove the remainder of the Mark. He said he wanted to see how much was left. The rest, you know. I could not get him to let go of my arm once his power had taken over." He thought a moment. "It was . . . it was as if his power took him over, really," he said. "I think he was trying to release my arm at times. He certainly didn't do anything obvious to call on that amount of power." He glanced up at Dumbledore. "When he killed Zabini, he was injured himself and wasn't truly in control of his magic. Could it still be out of his control?"

"That's very possible, Severus," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully.

Professor Tofty sat quietly across the hospital wing from the mad activity surrounding Harry's bed. He observed everything, absolutely astounded at what he was hearing. That boy was powerful enough to . . . ? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had left behind a curse that nearly . . . ? The old man shook his head in puzzlement and got up from his seat, walked quietly out the door and down the stairs. He had exams to grade. Whatever had happened to the Potter boy was more than he could get his mind around in one sitting. He'd have to think about it a while, perhaps ask Professor Snape or Professor Dumbledore some questions at some point. Such a nice boy. Such a shame that he was so ill. Professor Tofty sighed sadly, wondering why the good ones always had to suffer so.

Many long, agonized hours later, Harry finally woke up. Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Remus were seated close to his bed, all of them drowsing in their chairs. His grandfather was pacing at a distance, stopping from time to time to speak quietly to someone just out of Harry's line of sight. He couldn't see clearly anyway without his glasses, but Dumbledore was the only person he knew with a long white beard and hair like that combined with that energetic way of walking. Harry sighed and grunted a bit as he tried to change position, waking Ginny, who, as usual, had her hand on his arm.

"Hi there," she said with a warm smile. "Welcome back."

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"Hi," he murmured. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For this. I couldn't stop. Something locked me into that spell," he said, shaking his head and frowning. "I couldn't break free."

"Your grandfather has an idea about what it was. You'll be fine. You just need to rest," she told him, stroking his cheek softly. "Don't scare me like that again, OK?"

"I'll do my best," he vowed.

By this time, everyone else was awake and gathered close around his bed.

"Hey, mate!" Ron said cheerfully. "Good nap?"

"Yeah," Harry said, trying to grin. Trust Ron to find a way to make him smile.

"That was quite a dramatic finish to your last exam, young man," Remus said, smoothing his godson's hair off of his face. Harry grinned in reply. "It's good to have you back."

"We were so worried," Hermione said. "We tried to stop you, but—"

"I tried to stop, too," Harry replied. "I don't know why I couldn't. I tried as hard as I could to get away from it."

"I believe it was Voldemort's last hurrah," Dumbledore said mildly. "It's good to see you awake again." Severus Snape followed him into the enclosure.

"Thanks," Harry replied. "What do you mean, Voldemort's . . .?"

Dumbledore explained his theory and Harry's face lit up. "That was it, exactly! I couldn't get away. The snake was spouting curses and I had to do constant counter-curses or blocking spells, but in Parseltongue. That was hard! So the snake was an embedded spell like I read about in that book—?" He stopped himself before he mentioned the marvellous library in Godric Gryffindor's Chamber of Knowledge.

"Ah, you've read about it! Perhaps you can show me what you read sometime," Dumbledore said with a smile. "So you recognized what was happening?"

"After a bit, yeah, and I had read some counter-curses to use for such a spell, but they weren't working very well," Harry said ruefully. "And honestly, the snake was saying the spells so quickly, I didn't have much time to actually stop it."

"How did you know the incantations in Parseltongue?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I don't know. When I speak Parseltongue, I think in Parseltongue too. I suppose the incantations just got . . . translated somehow," he said with a shrug. "It was hard, though, because Parseltongue just isn't as fast a language as English or Latin. It was all I could do to block those curses, much less shut up that snake and get rid of it."

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"But you managed it in the end, Harry," his grandfather assured him. "You removed the snake completely. Well done!"

"Thanks," Harry said, smiling tiredly. "I couldn't control my magic, though. It got more and more powerful, and I knew I shouldn't do that yet. I knew I wasn't strong enough, that I'd hurt myself, but I couldn't stop it."

"Your magic was instinctively protecting you from Voldemort's curses. It took that much magic to overcome the spell he had put in the Dark Mark," Dumbledore said. "But I think you're right. We will work on your control again once you have your strength back."

"More private sessions, huh?" Harry said, smiling.

"It only seems fair, since your friends will be taking exams, that you should at least be in class," his grandfather said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I suppose," Harry agreed.

When things settled down around Harry a bit, Snape approached his bed. "Potter?"

"Yes?"

"May I have a word? If you're too tired, I can speak to you later," the man said diffidently.

"No, I'm fine. What is it?"

"I . . . well . . . um" Snape stopped and cleared his throat. "Thank you, Potter."

"No problem," Harry said with a weary smile.

Chapter 34 – New Beginnings

Harry's remaining time before he could do magic passed slowly, but at last, he was free. At breakfast that morning, Dumbledore stopped by their table.

"Harry? How are you feeling today?" he asked cordially.

"I'm fine," Harry said with a cheery smile. "Really, I feel great."

"Excellent! Then after breakfast, could you join me in my office? We'll start working on that control issue of yours."

"OK! See you then," Harry agreed.

"Why don't you bring Merlin," Dumbledore added. "Fawkes would enjoy his company."

In Dumbledore's office a short time later, Harry was eager to begin. "What would you like me to do first?"

"I'd like you to tell me exactly how it felt to remove that snake from Professor Snape's arm," Dumbledore replied as he sat in an armchair by the window. "I didn't ask you for details while you were ill because I didn't want to tire you. Now that you're healthy again, if your magic should emerge while you're telling the tale, it won't injure you. Go ahead."

Harry stood in surprised silence for a long moment, his head tilted to one side as he considered what he'd just heard. "If my magic should emerge – huh?" he said as he took a chair opposite his grandfather.

"We don't know what it will do, do we, Merlin?" Dumbledore said, addressing the phoenix sitting on the arm of a nearby chair. Merlin, too, was watching Harry carefully. He turned to the headmaster and chirruped a bit. "Yes, I quite agree, old friend," Dumbledore said with a smile. "No matter what happens, it will be fascinating. We'll worry about your magic when and if it gives us a problem. Do go on with the story, Harry."

"Uh, OK," Harry said. He was totally confused about what his grandfather was expecting his magic to do when he was just talking. He cleared his throat nervously, then began.

"Well, um When Professor Snape reached for something, his sleeve slid up his arm a bit and it reminded me I hadn't finished removing that Dark Mark. While I was ill, I wondered if Parseltongue would be a help. Parseltongue is so easy for me, I thought I could try it without it hurting me. But once I started, I felt as if I was, erm, trapped. It felt . . . it felt as if I was wrapped up in the coils of a big snake, as if it was crushing me. I couldn't get away from it." The memory made him shudder. He was so involved in the story, he didn't notice Dumbledore and Merlin's suddenly sharpened looks.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said carefully. "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

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"Seriously, Harry, tell me exactly how you feel," the old wizard urged. "Emotionally as well as physically."

Harry thought a moment before he answered. "Tense. Nervous. But I'm fine. I don't feel ill. Why?"

Dumbledore relaxed. "Nothing. Go on with your story."

"Erm, OK. It was hissing curses at me, and I was doing my best to counter them, but I'd never heard of some of the curses it used."

"I'm not surprised," Dumbledore commented. "Voldemort spent his lifetime studying Dark curses. You simply haven't had time to do the research he did. Go on."

"Um. . .well, I was doing the counter-curses as fast as I could, but it wasn't fast enough. I tried to go faster, and suddenly my magic just took over. I could feel it building – it went from me just using Parseltongue to being at full power so fast, it shocked me. And then I couldn't pull it back. I tried, but I was busy fighting the snake, too, and I just couldn't manage everything at once." He shrugged, then dropped his hands in his lap, looking at his grandfather hopefully. "That's it. So now what?"

"Now we go back to the beginning and teach you how to control your magic again, just as we did after the Refiner's Fire," Dumbledore replied. "What happened was this: you matured as a wizard and a man during the battle. Your aura emerging was a visible sign that your Refiner's Fire powers were fully developed at that point, although they're not fully trained yet. I explained this to you in the hospital, do you remember?" Harry nodded. "You were in control of your magic then because, despite being injured, you were essentially healthy and strong, since your injuries to that point were not life-threatening. The power grew gradually during the battle, rather than hitting you suddenly as it did in Professor Snape's office. Since then, you've been desperately ill and quite weak, yet you've used powerful magic several times, successfully, yes, but you weren't in complete control of it. Using powerful magic when you're as ill as you are weakens you further. That's why it took you so long to heal. Now that you're well, we'll work on control. Let's go down to our practice field, shall we?"

"Yes," Harry agreed, chuckling. "I'd rather not blow up your office again."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said, his moustache twitching as an amused smile creased his wizened face.

"Why did you ask how I felt a few minutes ago?"

"When you said it felt as if you were being crushed by the snake, small sparks came out of your fingers and your aura appeared very briefly," Dumbledore explained. "As soon as I distracted you by asking the question, they disappeared and you were fine after that."

Harry was stunned. "Why would it show up then?"

"Probably because you were under great emotional stress at that moment," the headmaster replied. "Our work on your control should help you with that kind of thing."

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"I hope so," Harry said fervently. "I'd hate to have sparks coming out of my fingers when I don't mean to."

Dumbledore smiled. "You'll be in good control again soon, Harry, don't worry. Let's try your Animagus transformation. Can you change into a phoenix?"

"I think so," Harry said, then did the change.

"Excellent! Let's flash down to the practice field, then," Dumbledore said. "Merlin, Fawkes, would you like to join us?"

Moments later, four phoenixes flashed from his office to the most distant field on Hogwarts' grounds, where Harry had learned to use his new wand. Two of the phoenixes became wizards again as soon as they arrived. The other phoenixes soared overhead, enjoying the beautiful day.

Dumbledore conjured a bag of feathers. "All right, back to basics," he said, smiling at his grandson. "Levitate one feather out of this bag."

"Old wand or new wand?"

"We can start with the old one if you'd prefer. Use whichever one you want."

"OK," Harry said, pointing his old wand at the bag and doing the "swish-and-flick" motion required while murmuring, "*Wingardium Leviosa*." He jumped back in shock when the bag exploded, all of the feathers turning instantly into flaming cinders that floated away on the light breeze, dissolving into ash within seconds. "Uh . . . oops?" he said, blushing.

"Oops, indeed! Let's try it again, shall we?" Dumbledore said, chuckling as he conjured another bag of feathers. "I suspect it was wise of you to choose the old wand for now." Harry grinned and nodded, holding his wand ready for the next try.

On the way back to the castle after several hours of working on Harry's control with both his old and new wands, Dumbledore said, "Have you tried flying yet?"

"No," the young man said, a hopeful gleam in his eye.

"Do you have your broom with you?"

"Always!" Harry said, grinning. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his Shrinking Charmed Firebolt Excalibur. "Here it is."

"Are you too tired?" the headmaster asked.

"I'm never too tired to fly!" Harry cried happily. "May I?"

"Please do. Just start off slowly, all right? I'll sit here and watch you," Dumbledore said, conjuring a comfy chintz armchair for himself. Fawkes and Merlin perched on the back of the chair, watching Harry expectantly.

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"Cool," Harry breathed, then enlarged his broom and mounted it.

From his posture, Dumbledore could tell Harry was ready to zoom off. "Slowly, Harry, at least at first. See how it feels."

"OK," Harry agreed then kicked off very gently, his broom moving at a snail's pace. "Is this slow enough?" he said with a cheeky grin.

Dumbledore chuckled. "How does it feel?"

"Too slow!" Harry retorted merrily.

"Then go a bit faster, but gradually. You need to test yourself bit by bit, not jump into things with both feet. You've been sick a long time, remember," the old man cautioned.

"I know," the young man said. He sped up little by little, spiralling slowly up into the sky, then began doing First Year manoeuvres, increasing his speed by larger increments as his confidence grew.

"How does it feel?" Dumbledore called.

"TOO SLOW!" Harry shouted, laughing.

"Then add a bit of speed. Just be careful, all right?"

"I will!" Harry said, then whooped with delight as he zoomed across the sky. "This is better!"

Dumbledore sat and watched the increasingly complex aerobatics going on overhead with delight. Harry was back! He certainly had excellent control of the broom. Apparently, the only areas where he still needed to work on controlling his magic were in casting spells and controlling his magic when experiencing strong emotions. The old wizard smiled with satisfaction. If Harry could fly, everything else would come in its time. The boy simply lived to fly, and Merlin's beard, wasn't he magnificent?

Harry pushed the Excalibur into a steep dive, heading straight down, then levelled off just a few feet before he would have crashed. He circled his grandfather at breakneck speed, then zoomed right over him, grabbing the old wizard's pointed hat and flying away with it. Harry's laughter floated on the light breeze that ruffled the old man's long white hair.

Dumbledore chuckled, wondering what the boy was going to do next. He didn't have to wait long. Harry flew toward him swiftly, braked in an instant, flipped upside down and placed the hat gently on his grandfather's head, grinning broadly all the while. Dumbledore laughed at the sight of the young man with his hair hanging down in a dark halo around his happy face. Harry righted the broom, then whooped with joy as he zoomed off again.

"I'd say you have good control of your flying," Dumbledore said at last. "Ready to go in?"

"If you insist," Harry said, landing lightly beside his grandfather's chair. "That was fantastic! I've missed flying." He put a Shrinking Charm on his broom, wrapped it carefully in the soft old handkerchief he kept it in, and put it back in his pocket.

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"You truly are the best flyer I've ever seen, and as old as I am, that's saying something," Dumbledore said as he Vanished his conjured chair and started walking beside his grandson toward the castle.

Harry smiled, touched by the compliment.

"I'd like you to consider something."

Harry looked at him curiously. "OK."

"What is your timetable like with the Lions and Auror School?"

"I have Quidditch practice on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and games on alternate weekends," Harry replied. "My Auror classes are on Monday and Wednesday evenings."

"So you do have some free time, yes?"

"Yes. I plan to come up on Tuesdays or Thursdays to visit Ginny, as well as the weekends I'm free. But I need to set some time aside to study, so I'll only visit her once or twice a week, not three times." He looked up at his grandfather, suddenly worried. "That will be all right, won't it? It just occurred to me – I don't know of anyone who's had such a frequent visitor. But I simply can't wait until the holidays to see her!"

"School rules dictate that you can't visit her so often," Dumbledore replied, "however, I think I have a solution to your problem, which will also solve a problem for me."

"What is it?"

"As I said, you are, by far, the finest flyer I've ever seen. And you are an outstanding teacher, as we learned from your work with the D.A. I seem to be short a Flying Instructor, since Madam Hooch's death. Would you be willing to spend one day a week teaching flying to the First and Second Year classes?"

Harry stopped walking and turned to look at his grandfather, his face alight with joy. "*Would I?* That would be fun! And then I could visit Ginny, right?"

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "I can rearrange the class timetables so that all the flying classes are on one day. You'll be given a small salary and will also have quarters so you'll have a quiet place to rest, study, or stay the night if you wish. You will, of course, have access to the Chamber of Knowledge whenever you want, and I'll be happy to work with you on more spells, if you have the time and interest."

"Wow! Thanks, Grandfather!" Harry cried. "That's absolutely brilliant!" His face grew thoughtful as they resumed walking. "I have a question."

"Yes?"

"I'll be making good money with the Lions. Could you use my salary to buy the school new brooms? Would it be enough? There's a new Comet that would be great for beginning fliers, and it isn't horribly expensive. The school brooms buck and stutter so much, it's hard for kids

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to learn to fly on them, and the ones who have to play Quidditch on them have a lot of trouble with them, too."

"That's a very generous idea, Harry, and a good one. Yes, if you'd like to donate your salary to buy the school new brooms that would be fine. Fill out an order form and give it to me during the summer. We'll have new brooms here in time for the next school term."

"Brilliant!"

A short time later, they entered the castle. Dumbledore led Harry down a corridor on the first floor, on the far side of the castle from the Great Hall. "Madam Hooch lived in Hogsmeade, but these rooms were her quarters here at school," he said as he opened the door. "The house-elves have removed all of her personal items, but I thought you might enjoy looking at her books on flying."

"Yeah, that'd be great," Harry said. His heart lurched a bit to see the sparse furnishings and simple décor that reminded him of the brusque, businesslike Madam Hooch. Frills would not have been her style. He lifted a book from the small book shelf and flipped through it. He stopped when he found a crumbling rose pressed between its pages. *A rose? Did she have a sweetheart?* Harry glanced up at his grandfather, the question in his eyes.

"Madam Hooch left no family, Harry. She was married many years ago, but her husband was killed by Voldemort in the first war," Dumbledore said sadly. "That rose must have meant something to her, for her to press it like that. If such things bother you, I'll have the books removed."

"No, that's all right. I want to remember her. She was a good teacher," Harry said, replacing the rose carefully where he'd found it, then shelving the book again.

"You can decorate these rooms however you wish," his grandfather said. "The bedroom's through there, the bathroom beyond. It's not as grand as the one in your home, but it should do quite nicely for the time you're here."

Harry looked appreciatively at the work table, the two chairs by it, the pair of comfortable armchairs by the fireplace. "I'll be fine here."

"Excellent!" Dumbledore said. "Madam Hooch's lesson plans are in the top drawer of her desk. Feel free to use those or make up your own. Since you have some free time before the end of term, you can look them over now if you wish."

"That's a good idea," Harry said, pulling the book out of the drawer.

"Well, then, I'll leave you to it," Dumbledore said, putting his hand on the doorknob. "By the way, you can set your own password on the door. I'll change the spell as I leave to have it obey you. Only the house-elves will be able to enter without your permission, and they won't come in when you're here. This fire is attached only to the intra-school Floo Network. If you need to make an outside call, you're welcome to use the fire in my office."

"Thanks!"

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"I'll see you later, then. Don't work too hard. You should rest after so much effort today," Dumbledore reminded him.

"I'll lie down in a bit," Harry promised. "Maybe I'll look at these books." His eyes roved the shelves as his mind began working on lesson plans. A sudden thought made him stop his grandfather from leaving. "Oh, wait!"

"Yes?" Dumbledore said, turning back into the room.

"If I bring my friends in here to visit or study, will it set off alarms?" he asked uneasily.

"No, Harry. Staff quarters do not include alarms," Dumbledore assured him, his eyes twinkling.

Harry blushed, but smiled. "OK. Thanks."

Dumbledore had been gone only a few moments when Harry checked the time to make sure Ginny wasn't in an exam, then called her on his ring. "Guess what?" he said when she answered.

"I haven't the foggiest. My brain is mush. That Herbology exam about did me in," she said, sounding quite tired.

"You look as if you could use a nap," he said, a grin tickling his mouth.

"Yeah," she yawned, "I could."

"Are you busy?"

"I have revising to do, of course," she said grumpily, "but I could do with a distraction for a while."

"Meet me in the Entrance Hall as soon as possible," he told her.

"Shall I bring Ron and Hermione?"

"Not this time. I'll tell them later."

"Good, because they want to go swimming this afternoon. I may join them. Since we can all do gills now, swimming is a lot more tempting as a study break. D'you want to come?"

"Maybe later. Come meet me now, and we'll talk about it," he replied.

"OK."

Minutes later, Ginny came running down the stairs to the Entrance Hall. "What's up?"

"I want to show you something," he said, grabbing her hand and leading her down the corridor.

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"What is it?"

"You'll see," he said mysteriously. He stopped in front of a door and cleared his throat importantly before saying, "Firebolt!"

"Firebolt?" Ginny said, puzzled, but then said, "Oh, OK," when the door swung open. "Where are we?"

"In my quarters," Harry said, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Your . . . quarters?"

"They were Madam Hooch's. They're mine now. I'm the new Flying Instructor for next term," he told her happily. "I'll be here every Tuesday to teach the First and Second Years how to fly, and can spend the rest of my time with you, or in here studying, or both! I can stay the night and flash back to London the next morning in time for Quidditch practice. Isn't it brilliant?"

"That's fantastic! How did this happen?"

"Grandfather asked me," Harry explained. "Come see my new digs," he said grandly as he led her toward the bedroom. "Bedroom here, loo beyond that door, comfy chairs in both rooms, books on flying, a place to do my homework and lesson plans. What more could I ask?"

"What more indeed?" Ginny said, impressed.

"Well, I know one thing more I could ask," he said, putting a gentle finger under her chin and lifting her face to his. "You."

"We'll set off alarms!" Ginny warned, pulling away from him.

"Grandfather said there aren't alarms on staff housing," Harry assured her.

"I guess we'll find out, then, won't we?" she murmured as their lips met.

They kissed hesitantly at first, both of them listening for alarms of any kind. Nothing! With a laugh, Harry swept Ginny up in his arms and carried her to the bed, where he plunked her down and plopped on the bed beside her, bouncing both of them merrily.

"Do you really think we can get away with this?" she said as he bent over her.

"He would have warned me if there was any danger," he replied, trailing kisses down her lovely throat. "Mmmm, you taste good."

"And that feels good," she sighed.

Something in her voice made him stop. "What's wrong?" he said as he straightened. "Oh, baby, why are you crying?"

"I . . . I . . . you were so sick, and I . . ." she sobbed.

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"Never thought we'd do this again?" he said softly. She nodded. "Me too, when I was awake enough to know how much trouble I was in." He kissed away her tears and got back to work, loving her in every way he could think of.

Finally, spent and sleepy, he buried his face in her neck and inhaled the lovely rich smell of his woman before settling his head on her shoulder. "I'm so happy." He was already falling asleep.

"Me too," she murmured, turning her head to rub her cheek against his hair. As she moved, she opened her eyes a bit, then gasped.

"Huh? Whassup?" he muttered sleepily.

"Your aura! It's out. And . . . and . . ." she looked around frantically. "We're floating, Harry!"

"What?" he said, alert now. He pushed away from her a bit and looked around. It felt as if they were on a solid bed, but the bed was a good six feet below them! He gasped as he felt the magic in him change. He held Ginny tightly to him and spun in midair so he was on the bottom, just before they crashed onto the bed. "OOF!" he said as her body knocked the wind out of his. "Are you all right?"

"Fine! You?" she said worriedly.

"Fine," he replied, then started to giggle. "Well, that was interesting."

"Yeah, it was! And fun!" she agreed. "Your aura disappeared when you sat up and looked around. Did you see it?"

"No. I can't see it," he replied. "I felt something change and knew we were going to fall, though. I wonder how that happened? I mean, we were floating in midair!"

"Yeah, and it felt like it, too," she purred, nuzzling his neck. "Let's try it again, see if we can repeat the experience."

"Oh, going into research mode now, are we?" he teased.

"This phenomenon is something I'd be willing to spend my life researching," she murmured just before kissing him quite thoroughly.

"Mmm, I'm with you," he agreed, and they repeated the "experiment." When they were both spent again, Harry flipped them so he was on the bottom and said "*Aresto Momentum*," slowing their descent back to the bed.

"At least five feet in height that time, six feet before," Ginny observed. "Hmm. Either you're getting tired, or getting used to whatever's causing this floating thing to happen."

"We could research this all night, if you want," Harry offered quite sincerely.

"I have studying to do. I'd better go," she said reluctantly.

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He lay on his side, his head propped up on his hand, watching her hair shimmer across her ivory skin as she picked up her clothes. "You are so incredibly beautiful. It's a shame you have to cover that body."

Ginny blushed and giggled. "I hope you always feel that way."

"I will," he vowed.

"What about when I'm old and fat and have wrinkles?"

"That will be just more of you to love," he said sweetly, "and I'll be a wrinkled bag of skin by then too. I am older than you, remember."

"Only a year," she reminded him.

"A year and eleven days!" he said with a laugh. "I suppose I should get up and do something useful." He groaned as he sat up. "I flew today for the first time. I'm a bit sore from it."

"And from me falling on you twice," Ginny teased.

"Yeah," he agreed with a grin. "So Ron and Hermione went swimming?"

"That's what they planned to do. D'you want to go swimming too?" she said as she finished buttoning her blouse.

"You need to study and I've already taken up some of your time," he said, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear. "And I've worked hard today, too. I guess it would be better if I waited a day or two to go swimming, so I don't push it too much." He sighed. "I'll be glad when I'm back to my full strength!"

"Me too," she said sincerely, "although you seemed pretty energetic this afternoon." She grinned at him wickedly, making him laugh. "It really is too bad that I have to get back to work."

"Come on, then," Harry said. "I'll take some of these books and the lesson plans to the Common Room and sit with you while you study."

"So then two grindylows attacked us!" Ron said excitedly that evening at dinner. "One of them got Hermione by the hair! It was awful! I started breaking their fingers to get her free – that's what Remus told us to do Third Year, remember?" Harry nodded. "Then Hermione pulled out her wand and did a spell."

"I remembered you telling us about the Second Task and the grindylows attacking you, so I used the Relashio Charm," Hermione added, looking quite pleased with herself. "They left in a hurry when that boiling water came their way!"

"Sounds as if you both had fun despite that little adventure," Harry said with a grin.

"Yeah, it was fantastic," Ron enthused.

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"Except for the bits of grindylow fingers stuck in my hair," Hermione said, making a disgusted face. "It took forever to get them all out, even with a Cleaning Charm."

"Except for that, we had a great time," Ron said with a happy smile. "I wish you and Ginny could have joined us."

"We were too tired to swim," Harry replied, exchanging a teasing look with Ginny, who grinned at him. "Maybe we can before term is over."

"Not many days left of term, mate," Ron said, looking around the Great Hall. "It's so strange to think we won't be coming back here."

"Harry will," Ginny said, bursting to share his news. Ron and Hermione had been so excited about their first swim in the lake with gills that they'd been talking non-stop ever since they sat down for dinner.

"Huh?" Ron said, a puzzled look on his face.

"What's she talking about?" Hermione asked Harry.

"Grandfather's asked me to be the Flying Instructor next term," Harry said with a grin. "I've got quarters and everything."

"Quarters?" Hermione said.

"Madam Hooch's quarters. They're mine now."

"You're moving out of the dorm? Before the end of term?" Ron said, looking shocked.

"No!" Harry replied, laughing. "But I'll be using them to plan class work for next year. She has loads of great books on flying. I'll show you around later, if you want."

"Yeah, cool!" Ron said.

"Congratulations, Harry!" Hermione said with a warm smile. "You'll be a wonderful Flying Instructor!"

"Thanks. I think it will be great fun!" he replied.

"But how are you going to do that along with playing Quidditch and going to Auror School?" Ron said, frowning as he tried to sort things out.

"We have Tuesdays and Thursdays off," Harry reminded him. "I was going to come up here to visit Ginny one or the other day every week anyway. I didn't know school rules wouldn't allow such frequent visits," he said with a rueful grin. "This way, I'm visiting her legally, and helping out the school. I'll be taking more lessons with Grandfather, as well."

"Wicked!" Ron said, grinning. "And another salary!"

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"No, I'm not taking the salary," Harry said. He explained the terms of his agreement with the school.

"New school brooms?" Ron said. "Ruddy brilliant!"

"I think the new Comet 450 will do very well, and it isn't that expensive," Harry said. "What do you think?"

"The Comet? Yeah, that would be a huge improvement over the old Shooting Stars the school owns!"

Talk turned to Quidditch, a conversation that continued all the way to Harry's new quarters. Ron and Hermione were appropriately impressed with his small office setup and living quarters.

"You're welcome to study here if you want," Harry offered. "It's quieter than the Common Room."

"Yeah, that would be great!" Ron said, plopping down in one of the armchairs by the fire. Hermione sat in the chair opposite him and they got back to the very serious work of revising for their exams.

Ginny sat across the table from Harry, re-reading a huge pile of notes while he perused the various books on the shelves. They passed a quiet, happy evening together.

Ron finally straightened up, his back cracking as he stretched. "I'm knackered. I don't think I can cram another thing in my head, either."

"It's late. We should go," Hermione said, looking at her watch. "This was wonderful, Harry! I got so much more done without the distractions of the Common Room! Too bad we only have one exam left."

Ron and Ginny both exploded. "Too bad?" "One exam?" "Are you CRAZY?" Harry laughed at their reactions.

Hermione's eyes widened and her cheeks turned pink. "Sorry."

Exams were finally over for everyone. Harry and Ginny were lazing in the shade of the beech tree. Ron and Hermione had gone to Hogsmeade, where Ron said he had an errand to do.

Ginny sat with her back against the tree's massive trunk, Harry's head in her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair, petting him as if he were a lap cat. He did his best imitation of a cat's purr on occasion, enjoying the attention immensely, then finally fell asleep.

Sometime later, he opened his eyes and saw her smiling down at him. "Hi," he said with a smile.

"Hi, yourself. What were you dreaming about?"

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"Dreaming . . . huh?" he said, waking up a bit more.

"You were muttering and smiling in your sleep," she said, stroking his cheek gently.

"What was it . . . um . . . oh! I remember!" he said. "I dreamed we were loads older, and we had children. They were great kids!"

"How many?"

"Seven. Twin boys, another boy, another pair of twin boys, then twin girls," he said, counting them off. "All of the boys had black hair, and the girls were redheads."

"Cool! I could live with that," Ginny said, grinning at his enthusiasm.

"Ron had three boys, the twins had two sets of twins each – all boys – and all of them looked exactly alike! It was bizarre!"

"Where were we, that you saw all these children together?"

"I don't remember. I do remember thinking it would be hard on the staff at Hogwarts when the kids all arrive – all of the oldest ones were all about the same age."

"How can that many kids all be the same age, Harry?" she teased him.

"I don't know, it was a dream! It didn't have to be logical," he said, chuckling.

"I think it's sweet, you dreaming about our children," Ginny said contentedly. "What were their names?"

"I don't know. I saw them more than hearing anything. I don't remember now what everyone was doing. It was like a big family gathering, a picnic or something, I don't know. There were so many redheads!" He laughed. "Can you imagine Snape's reaction to having that many Potters and Weasleys in school?"

"I'd love to see his face when they arrive," she agreed. "His look of horror would be priceless!"

"Yeah," Harry said, still chuckling. "When are Ron and Hermione coming back, do you know?"

"No. What was his errand?"

"Dunno. He did say they were going swimming when they got back. Do you want to go swimming later?" he said, lifting a tendril of her hair and tickling her nose with it.

"If you want to," she agreed, "but you seem to be pretty tired. Dumbledore worked you hard this morning, didn't he?"

"Yeah, we have to get my magic under good control before I leave school," he replied. "If it isn't, I'll need to stay a bit longer and work with him more, and I should be starting practice

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with the Lions in a couple of weeks. I need to get back to running around the lake to get fit for Quidditch, but Marcus says I have to wait a bit longer to start that." He shook his head in frustration. "It's taking such a long time to get back to normal. It's driving me crazy!"

"I know," she said sympathetically, "but you're making progress every day. And you nearly died several times recently. It's amazing you're as strong as you are now. Just remember that."

"I know, but it's just driving me mad. I wish I could wave my wand and have my strength back as well as my control. There are so many things I'd rather be doing than Third Year charms and resting so much!" he grumbled.

"You're not enjoying resting?" she said plaintively, teasing him.

He grinned up at her, knowing she was playing with him. "This is a great way to rest," he said, his eyes sparkling with mischief, "although there are other ways that are fun, as well."

"Those ways don't involve as much rest as this one does," she reminded him primly.

"Spoil-sport!" he teased.

They chatted about inconsequential things a few more minutes, and then Harry fell asleep again. Ginny played with his hair and stroked his cheek, thankful that he was regaining his strength as quickly as he was. She'd come so close to losing him. She shook her head, forcing that thought out of her mind, then leaned her head against the tree and dozed off herself.

"Why don't you go ahead to Scrivenshaft's," Ron suggested when he and Hermione reached Hogsmeade. "I'll get my errand done and catch up with you."

"What is this mysterious errand?" she teased. "You're being awfully secretive."

Ron's ears turned fiery red. "It's nothing important," he said, trying to act nonchalant. "I'll catch you up later, all right?"

"OK, see you in a bit, then," she said, an indulgent grin on her face as they parted. She had the feeling Ron wanted to get her an end-of-term present. She decided to pop into the Quidditch shop and get one for him, as well.

An hour later, Ron and Hermione finally found each other.

"Was your errand successful?" Hermione asked, a teasing glint in her eye.

"Erm, yeah, I think so," Ron muttered, blushing madly again. He cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders determinedly. "Let's head back, OK?"

"Sure," she agreed. She prepared to Apparate, but he put his hand on her arm, stopping her.

"It's a beautiful day," he said, smiling at her. "Let's just walk."

"OK."

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They walked hand-in-hand down the path that led to Hogwarts, greeting friends who were going to the village or hurrying back to school for some reason. When they reached the turnoff that led to the clearing where Harry had first changed into a thestral to get Ginny flying again, Ron tugged on Hermione's hand and said, "Come on."

"Where are we going?" she asked as she followed him through the trees to the quiet glade.

"Just . . . about . . . here," Ron said, taking a big breath and blowing it out before turning to face her. He let go of her hand and leaned heavily on his cane, lowering himself to one knee with great difficulty. His bad leg didn't hurt much anymore, but it still hadn't regained its strength.

"What are you doing?" Hermione cried, reaching out to help him get up. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm just not as . . . as graceful as I once was," he said with a hint of disgust as he took her hand in his. "Now let me get on with this so I don't screw it up, OK?"

"Get on with—oh!" she said, gasping when she realized her boyfriend was down on one knee in front of her, looking up at her with hope in his blue eyes and a small box in his open hand.

"Hermione, I've asked you before, but this time I'm doing it the right way," Ron said, swallowing hard and soldiering on. "Will you marry me?" He opened the box and a beautiful ring gleamed in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees overhead.

Tears filled Hermione's eyes as she looked from his beloved face to the ring that must have cost him his entire signing bonus with the Lions. "Oh, Ron! You didn't have to do this!"

"That's not what I wanted to hear, Hermione," he chided her. "I love you. I think you love me. Can you please, for once in your life, give me a quick, simple answer to a question?"

She laughed through her tears. "Yes! Yes, of course! I'd love to be your wife! I love you so much!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, throwing him off-balance so they both fell to the ground. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Are you all right?"

"Never better," he said, pulling her closer. "You finally agreed to marry me. I can't believe it!"

"Me, either," she breathed as their lips met.

Some time later, Harry awoke with a startled gasp.

"What is it?" Ginny said sleepily.

"Shush," he said warily. He fumbled in the grass for his glasses and put them on, his eyes scanning the small clearing and trying to see into the trees beyond, then across the lake. Pulling out his wand, Harry got up, staying low to the ground. "Stay here."

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, pulling her own wand.

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"I don't know. Just stay here," he said, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze as he crept silently toward the lakeshore. He hid in some bushes, then tried to locate whatever had made the hair on the back of his head stand up, glancing back at Ginny every so often to be certain she was still safe.

"Harry!" Ginny hissed as quietly as she could.

"What?"

"Your aura is showing! It will give you away!" she whispered.

"Damn," he murmured, looking around him. He wished he could see it when it was out. Ginny was right, it would give him away if there was an enemy nearby. He worked harder at controlling his magic while still trying to see, hear or feel who might be nearby. Suddenly he stood up. "It's Ron!"

"What?" Ginny said, startled.

"He's in trouble!" Harry cried, running toward the lake. "They're in the lake, and they're in trouble."

"How do you know?" She ran to join him at the edge of the lake.

As he bent over to pull off his shoes and socks, he held out his wrist with the watch she'd given him months ago. The hands for Ron and Hermione showed both of them in "Mortal Peril."

"How did you know? Did the watch vibrate or something?" She'd knotted her shoelaces by accident while trying to untie them, so she yanked her shoes off in frustration, then pulled off her socks.

"No, I sensed something, then checked the watch. I can't explain any better than that. I knew it was Ron, though," he said, tugging his shirt over his head and tossing it aside as he ran into the water. "You stay here. I'll Adfero you if I need Merlin or Dumbledore."

"No, I coming with you!" she cried, dropping her shoes and socks and running into the water.

"I can move faster if I'm not worrying about you, sweetheart," he said seriously as he moved into deeper water. "Please. And I do need you here to pass on messages. I can't call Merlin to come to me underwater. You can call him if I need him and he'll be safe. All right?"

"OK," she said in a small voice. "Be careful!"

"I will." He blew her a kiss, did his gill transformation and submerged. He swam as fast as he could, homing in on Ron's cries for help. *He must be trying to send Adferos*, Harry thought. *I don't know how else I'd hear him.* He sent an Adfero to Ron to let him know he was coming, and to keep calling so Harry could find him.

It felt as though he'd been swimming for hours when Harry finally found his friends. Hermione was curled up on the bottom of the lake, with Ron hovering over her, shooting

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spells at the huge group of grindylows that were attacking them. Harry pulled out his wand, pointed it at them and did the Relacio Charm over and over, sending boiling water at the grindylows surrounding his friends. He did his best to aim the spells so Ron and Hermione wouldn't be hit by the steamy blasts. Ron was doing the same charm, forcing Harry to dodge the boiling water coming from Ron's spells. Finally, the nasty little creatures gave up and cleared out.

Ron looked exhausted and heartsick. Harry squeezed his shoulder and bent over Hermione. Trickle of blood floated around her, coming from cuts on her forehead, arms and back. Her foot was stuck between rocks on the lake floor. Harry looked at Ron and pointed to Hermione, indicating with gestures that Ron should hold on to her while Harry Levitated the rock off of her foot. Soon Hermione's foot was free and the two boys swam back to where Harry had left Ginny, carrying the unconscious Hermione between them.

When they reached the shore, Harry and Ron removed their own gills and Ron removed Hermione's, then lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the lake.

"What happened?" Ginny cried as she ran to them.

"She's hurt," Ron said, his voice breaking. "I thought we were going to die down there. How did you know?" he said, looking at Harry.

"I sensed you calling for help," Harry replied, "and then my watch confirmed that you were in trouble. Did the grindylows do this?" he said, looking at the cuts all over Hermione's body.

"Yeah," Ron said darkly. "I was swimming a bit ahead of her. I guess 'Mione saw something on the bottom and wanted to see what it was. She was off before I noticed she wasn't with me," he sighed, shaking his head. "I heard something and looked round, and rocks had shifted. She was caught, and then the grindylows attacked."

As Ron spoke, Harry worked his healing magic on his best friend, sensing for injuries. He worked much more slowly than usual, since he still didn't have good control of his magic. He was afraid he'd hurt her if he wasn't extremely careful.

"Did the grindylows shift the rocks?" Ginny said in amazement.

"I don't think so. I think 'Mione stepped on one that tilted or something, and then her foot got caught between two of them," he said with a shrug. "There were so many grindylows! They attacked her before I could get to her. That's why she's cut up like that. One of them pounced on her and she hit her head on a rock. At least, I think that's why she's unconscious," he said worriedly. "How is she, Harry?"

"All I can find wrong with her is a broken ankle," Harry replied. He did a quick Ferula Charm on her leg, creating a splint and bandages. "That will hold her for a while, but she'll need some potion to heal it quickly. I can fix her cuts, though." With that, he changed into a phoenix and began dripping tears into her cuts.

"You finally remembered you can do that," Ginny said with a smile. "Well done, Harry!"

"What about her being unconscious?" Ron worried.

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"Madam Pomfrey can fix her up, don't worry," Ginny replied. "Harry can flash us there when he's finished healing her cuts. Look how quickly they're closing up! That's great, Harry!" she added encouragingly.

The phoenix changed back into Harry, who bent over Hermione again, making sure he hadn't missed any wounds. "OK," he said approvingly. He looked up at Ron. "Where are her clothes?"

"Over by Hagrid's," Ron said, pointing across the lake.

"I could Accio them, I suppose," Harry mused.

"Or we could transfigure her swim suit into robes," Ginny suggested, and the boys nodded.

Just then, Hermione woke up.

"Welcome back," Ron said tenderly. "How are you feeling?"

"Ow. My head! And my foot! What's wrong with me?" she moaned.

"What do you remember?" Ron said solicitously.

"I saw . . . I don't know. I remember grindylows," she said, her eyes confused.

"I'll explain later," Ron said. "First we need to get you to the hospital wing. Your ankle is broken."

"You probably have a concussion, too," Harry added, running his hand over her head checking for lumps. "Yeah. You have a real goose-egg here, Hermione."

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Sorry," Harry replied. "I wanted to make sure I didn't miss any cuts in your hair."

"Cuts? My hair? Huh?"

"Never mind," Ron said, bending down and putting his arms around her. "Harry's going to flash us there. Hold on to me."

"No, I'd rather be Levitated, if you don't mind," she said, gazing at Harry. "My ankle really hurts, and flashing can be a bit rough sometimes."

"No problem," Harry said. He looked at Ron and grinned. Hermione always wanted them Levitated to the hospital wing when they felt ill or were injured, and they always refused. She was about to find out why.

"OK, if you're sure," Ron said, winking at Harry. Ginny made a face at the two of them, but said nothing.

"It's the logical thing to do," Hermione insisted.

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"Here you go, then," Ron said, Levitating her carefully and moving her along in front of him as they started walking slowly around the lake.

Harry watched them go as he pulled on his shirt, socks and shoes, then Summoned Ron's cane and their clothes from across the lake. He caught up with them and wrapped Hermione in her robes, then handed Ron his cane and draped his robes around his shoulders.

"Thanks, mate," Ron said, sliding his arms into the sleeves and getting a better grip on his cane. "That's better." Ginny kept Hermione levitating while Ron put on his socks and shoes.

"Yeah, I thought those robes would feel good," Harry agreed, carefully not mentioning the cane. Ron had been hobbling along painfully before Harry gave him his cane. Now he walked with a much surer step.

Ginny grabbed Harry's hand and held him back a few paces as they followed Ron and Hermione. "Did you see?" she whispered.

"Yeah," he replied, grinning.

"OK, I just wanted to be sure you noticed too," she said, her eyes dancing.

Just then, Hermione moaned. "Ooooooh."

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, hurrying to catch up with her brother and best friend.

"I feel ill. Set me down, OK?" she said weakly. Her face was a nasty shade of green. Ron settled her gently on the ground, then knelt beside her, taking her hand in his.

"Is it your foot?" Harry asked, checking the spell he'd put on it to stabilize it.

"No, it's my stomach. It's the motion. It's like being seasick," she whinged.

"Take some deep breaths, you'll feel better in a minute," Harry advised her.

"Now you know why we don't like to be Levitated when we don't feel well," Ron said, smiling a bit.

"OK. You're both right and I'm wrong," she groaned. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK, Hermione. You haven't been hurt nearly as often as we have, so you just didn't know," Harry reasoned.

"And I do seem to need to learn some lessons the hard way," she agreed, her voice stronger.

"You look better now," Ron commented.

"I feel better. Harry, could you flash me there?"

"Yeah, hang on," he said, then changed into the phoenix. Moments later, all of them were in the hospital wing.

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"Now what?" Madam Pomfrey said. "And where's Mr. Potter?"

"Right here," Harry said playfully as he changed back into himself. "Miss me?"

"You haven't been gone long enough for me to miss you," was her tart reply, but then she gave him a dotting smile. She'd grown quite fond of Harry over the years. "What happened to Miss Granger?"

Before long, the tale was told and Hermione was on the road to recovery, having suffered only a mild concussion and the broken ankle, which Madam Pomfrey fixed in a trice, just as promised.

"Will I be well in time for the feast?" Hermione asked worriedly. With the delay in the school timetable caused by the battle and so many students being injured, the exams had been pushed back, leaving them only a couple of days between the end of exams and the end of term, rather than the normal two weeks. Their exam results would be owed to them after they left school.

"Yes, you'll be fine by morning," the nurse promised.

"Oh, good! I was afraid I was going to miss our last Leaving Feast!" Hermione said. "I'd hate that!"

"Yeah, me, too," Ron agreed.

When the nurse moved away, Ginny and Harry looked at each other and grinned. "OK, who's going to explain what that is on her hand?" Ginny demanded.

"What what is?" Hermione said, then blushed so hard, she was nearly as red-faced as Ron. "Oh . . . erm . . ."

"Hermione agreed to marry me," Ron said with quiet pride despite his flaming red ears.

"Congratulations!" Harry said sincerely. "May I kiss the bride?" he added, leaning over Hermione, who blushed again. He gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek, then straightened up and shook Ron's hand while Ginny hugged Hermione.

"When's the wedding?" Ginny said eagerly.

"We haven't talked about it much," Ron said, glancing at his fiancé shyly, his cheeks as red as his ears now.

"Actually, we haven't talked about much else," Hermione laughed.

"I'd like to get married right away, but Hermione wants some time," Ron said with a shrug.

"She needs time to plan it and get things ready, you great prat!" Ginny scolded him. "Have you told Mum and Dad yet?"

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"No, I just asked her today. That's why we had to go to Hogsmeade. I had to pick up the ring so I could ask her properly," Ron replied, blushing again.

"It's beautiful!" Ginny said, looking at the lovely ring. It was a diamond with a small sapphire on either side in a dainty setting.

"Well done, mate," Harry said with approval.

"Mr. Joyero takes good care of us," Ron said.

"Harry? I need to ask you something," Hermione said suddenly.

"What?"

"Would you walk me down the aisle? Give me away?" she said, her eyes imploring.

"Of course! I'd be honoured," he replied with a grin.

"Hey! I wanted you to be my best man!" Ron protested.

"I can do both," Harry said, laughing. "I'll walk her down the aisle and then stand up with you. How's that?"

"Works for me," Ron agreed.

"Ginny, would you stand up with me?" Hermione said.

"Of course! Just let us know when and where!" Ginny grinned happily. "Mum's going to be over the moon about this!"

"You think?" Hermione said cautiously.

"Yeah. She loves you, and she knows you love Ron. She'll be very happy about it," Ginny assured her. "Do you have any idea when you want to get married?" she asked Hermione.

"I always thought a fall wedding would be nice," she said hesitantly. "It's just. . .well, I always thought my parents. . ." She stopped and sighed. "I can't right now."

"I understand," Ginny said sympathetically. "We're all still in shock over everything. It's best not to rush into things."

"That's what I thought, yeah," Hermione agreed.

"The twins are going to throw you a wicked bachelor party," Harry told Ron with a mischievous grin.

Ron groaned. "I can imagine! You will look out for me, won't you? So I'm not a butterfly or something worse on the day I'm supposed to be married?"

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"Yeah, mate, I'll look out for you," Harry assured him. "And you'll have to do the same for me when it's our turn."

"Since Hermione wants to wait, we could do a double ceremony when Harry and I get married next year," Ginny suggested.

"That would be cool," Ron agreed, "but I don't want to wait that long."

"We'll think about it," Hermione said. "Thanks for the offer – it would be fun! Have you set a date?"

"As soon as possible after school is out!" Ginny said with a grin. "Mum's checking with the church in Ottery St. Catchpole. Since Voldemort is gone and Order members can be seen together now, we can have the fancy wedding in a church I've always dreamed about."

"That's wonderful!" Hermione said, smiling at her friends. Ginny was glowing, and Harry was blushing but looking quite pleased at the whole idea. "Harry, what do you think of a fancy church wedding?"

"I told Ginny and her mum I'd do anything they want but sing," he reminded her, making all of them laugh.

"Harry? I want you to sing to me during the ceremony!" Ginny teased.

Harry looked at her, laughter in his eyes, then burst into a horrible warble, acting the song out as he sang:

"Little Bunny Foo Foo,
Hopping through the forest
Scooping up the field mice
And boppin' 'em on the head."

He managed to totally demolish the song's melody and made his voice sound like a hippogriff in excruciating pain. His gestures were equally dramatic. His friends' reactions were everything he could want them to be. They were laughing so hard, they were holding their sides and wiping tears from their eyes. He stopped singing and gave them a very smug smile as he bowed with a theatrical flourish.

When she was finally able to calm down, Ginny said, "Erm . . . no. That's OK."

"I warned you!" he said with a mischievous grin.

"I happen to know you have a lovely singing voice," Hermione said, gazing at him reproachfully when she was able to stop laughing.

"How would you know that?" Harry said, astounded.

"I've heard you sing with Merlin," she replied.

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"And I've heard you humming when you're working on stuff – your mosaics, working in the twins' shop, sometimes when you're reading Quidditch books," Ron added. "And in Potions a few times, as well. There's nothing wrong with your voice."

"Well . . . that's different," he said, blushing.

"And I've heard him too, but if he doesn't want to," Ginny said, smiling sweetly, "it's no problem. I just enjoy provoking him every so often. You never know how he'll respond!"

Harry made a silly face at her, then drew her into his arms. He held her close and leaned down by her ear, then sang softly, "I love you, I always will, but if you think I'm singing in front of people, you're wrong. . . ." His voice was melodious and sweet, as was his smile when he pulled back to grin at her.

"You can sing just for me then," she said, sliding her arms around his neck. "I expect frequent concerts!"

"I'll see what I can do," he agreed.

The Leaving Feast was delicious, as usual. The Great Hall was decorated in Gryffindor scarlet and gold, since they'd won the House Cup again. The Quidditch Cup sat at Professor McGonagall's place. She smiled at the students in her House proudly. Who knew when such a fine group would pass through her House again? She was going to miss those who were leaving the school.

The staff table was crowded with staff and guests. Madam Bones was there, along with a photographer, a reporter and a clerk. Seven wizards wearing official-looking badges were also at the head table. The school buzzed with speculation about these strangers. Their robes were of widely varying designs, making them look quite foreign.

"Who are those people?" Hermione wondered.

"No idea," Harry replied uneasily. He'd had some bad experiences with strangers at Hogwarts, and hoped these people weren't going to add to that list.

Arthur, Molly, Charlie, Fred and George Weasley were seated with the Gryffindors, since the staff table was so full. Arthur, Molly and Charlie had received their awards, and Bill's, at an awards ceremony held for the Aurors and Order members the previous week. The twins would get their awards with the D.A. members they'd trained. Now George leaned across the table. "I heard McGonagall talking to Professor Sprout in the corridor. Those are officials from other countries!" he said eagerly.

"Why are they here?" Ginny asked.

"Dunno. There are a lot of them, aren't there?" George said, looking up at the staff table again.

"Yeah," Harry said darkly. He had a bad feeling about their presence – not that they were dangerous, but that they were somehow going to be involved with him. He'd much rather sit at his place and watch than be involved in the proceedings, but he knew from Madam Bones'

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presence that he'd probably be more involved in the evening's festivities than he'd like, if given the choice.

Remus caught Harry's eye and tilted his head toward the side of the room. Harry looked puzzled, and Remus started to rise from his seat, again tilting his head that way. Harry stood up and met his godfather in the doorway to the small room off the Great Hall where Harry had first met with the other Tri-Wizard Champions.

"I see you've noticed our guests," Remus said with a smile. Harry nodded. "As you might have guessed, they're here for you. They have awards for you from their governments. I don't know exactly what's involved, but I do know that you don't like this kind of thing. However, your grandfather and Madam Bones have both asked me to talk to you about this. It's very important that you cooperate and appear grateful for whatever they give you. If you don't, it will insult not only these people, but their countries, which could cause an international incident. You can do what you want with what they give you when this is over, but for now, just accept everything graciously, all right?"

Harry sighed. "I'll do my best."

"That's all any of us can ask," Remus replied. "I'm proud of you, lad. You're receiving some tremendous honours tonight, and every one of them is well-earned." He smiled and clapped the young man on the shoulder.

"What are they going to do?" Harry said as he glanced back toward the Great Hall. He was a bit worried about all the ceremonial accoutrements that were being set up in front of the staff table.

"The Minister and these other officials are going to give out medals and other awards," Remus said. "Nothing to worry about. You don't have to make a speech – unless you want to, of course. But all they expect of you is to stand straight and tall and say 'thank you' and shake the hands of those who give you things. You can do that, right?" He grinned teasingly at Harry.

"I guess it'll be easier than some things I've done," Harry agreed, smiling ruefully.

"That's my boy," Remus replied, squeezing his shoulder. "I'll let you get back to your friends now."

"Thanks for the heads-up," Harry said as they parted.

"Not at all. Try to enjoy this a bit, will you?" he teased.

"I'll try," Harry said, grinning.

"What was all that about?" Ginny asked when Harry sat back down.

"Just my godfather trying to make certain I remember to say 'please' and 'thank you,'" Harry said with a shrug.

"Huh?"

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"Tell you later," he said, noticing that his grandfather had stood and was approaching the podium.

Dumbledore did his usual welcome speech and then read out the House Points. Gryffindor had won by a landslide this year. He passed out various school awards, then commended the D.A. on their performance in battle.

He lifted his goblet, his face suddenly solemn. "Please lift your goblets to honour those who fell in battle. Susan Bones of Hufflepuff."

"Susan Bones," the crowd said. There were tears and sniffles at the Hufflepuff table. Susan had been well-liked, a sweet and pleasant girl. Harry saw Madam Bones remove her monocle and wipe her eyes as her niece was named. He glanced at Ron, then Neville, and saw them gulping hard. They'd both enjoyed dating her.

"Fiona Ryan, Gryffindor," Dumbledore said, and the crowd repeated her name. The Gryffindors grieved for Fiona, who had been a fine Quiddich player as well as a very popular girl.

"Zacharias Smith," Dumbledore said. As the Hufflepuff boy's name rang across the hall, Harry thought about all the times Smith had annoyed him, Ginny, Ron and Hermione in D.A. meetings. He'd been quite an unpleasant person in many ways, yet he died trying to protect two D.A. members who were injured and lying helpless on the ground. His sacrifice bought enough time for Aurors to kill their attackers.

"Madam Hooch," the headmaster said, naming the only staff member who'd died, and the last of the Hogwarts casualties of this battle. Everyone was glad the list of students and staff who'd died was so short this time

"These were good people who died doing their part to help us break free from the oppression brought about by Lord Voldemort and the Death Eaters," Dumbledore said, looking around the room with a fierce light in his eyes. "These students all had bright futures ahead of them. Madam Hooch was a fine teacher. Remember their sacrifice and do whatever it takes to never let such evil get even a toehold in our world again." With that, he turned the podium over to Madam Bones.

It took the Minister a moment to calm herself and get down to business. Susan's death had hit her hard.

"Once again, the Ministry of Magic is humbled by the magnificent display of courage and skill shown by the leaders and members of Dumbledore's Army," she began. "I have medals here for those who participated in the battle, as well as for those who were wounded. These awards are for both students and staff. Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, would you come forward to receive your medals and help me present them to your fellow warriors?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other and got to their feet. Although he no longer needed a cane, Ron was still limping badly, and always would. Harry slowed his gait to match Ron's, and they once again marched shoulder to shoulder up to the staff table, accepting their medals from Madam Bones with good grace.

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"Those who were wounded, please get your medals from Mr. Potter, and a battle medal from me. These medals will be sent to the families of those who died in battle, as well." The Minister's voice broke as she said this. She would be the one receiving Susan's medals since Susan's parents had been killed by Death Eaters earlier in the year. She swallowed hard and went on. "Those of you who fought in the battle but weren't wounded, please get your medals from Mr. Weasley."

Soon there were two queues snaking down the centre of the Great Hall. Dumbledore called off the students' and staff members' names as they received their medals. Finally, they were all back in their seats, looking at the Minister of Magic expectantly. She still had a number of boxes on the table from which she'd been awarding medals.

Harry and Ron looked at Madam Bones questioningly. They'd learned from the previous year's awards ceremony that they might not be finished with their work when they'd handed out medals to the D.A.

"Neville Longbottom and Alex McCullough, please come forward." When the two boys were standing before her, Madam Bones said, "These two gentlemen were on the Healer Squad. They were attacked while trying to help injured classmates. Their courage in that fight, and the lengths they went to in order to protect their patients, have earned them the Golden Star Award. Mr. Longbottom earned this award last year as well, which proves he is consistently courageous. Well done, Mr. Longbottom! Well done, Mr. McCullough. Thank you for your service to our people." She pinned the awards on their robes and shook their hands. Neville blushed madly and Alex simply looked stunned. They turned to face the crowd and allowed the applause to wash over them for a moment before starting for their seats.

"The Ministry is pleased to present a posthumous Golden Star award for courage to Zacharias Smith, who died while protecting two other students. Mr. Smith's award will be sent to his family."

"The Ministry is pleased to present a posthumous Golden Star award for courage to Madam Rolanda Hooch, who gave her life while protecting her Flying Squad members. Since she has no family, her award will go to Hogwarts' Trophy Room.

"Fred and George Weasley, if you would come forward please?" Madam Bones said. She turned to Harry and Ron beside her and handed each of them a heavy bag.

Fred had received medals along with the D.A. members, since he'd led the Flying Squad after Madam Hooch died. Now he and George walked to the front, George still limping slightly, and stood in front of Madam Bones, Harry and Ron.

"On behalf of the Ministry of Magic, I would like to award you these Crystal Cauldron Awards for the weapons you created, and for your excellent training and leadership of the Flying Squad," Madam Bones said as she pinned medals on both men's robes. "These medals include a cash award," she said, nodding to Harry and Ron, who handed over the heavy bags of gold, one to each twin. "Thank you for your service to your country, gentlemen."

"Thank you, Minister," both twins said politely. When they took the bags of gold from Harry and Ron, their eyes lit up with glee. There were loads of galleons in each bag. They could fund weapons research, or a huge variety of new joke products with this much money. They

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grinned at each other and silently agreed, with Voldemort gone, joke products were once again on the front burner! They sauntered back to their seats looking quite pleased with themselves.

"Professor Severus Snape, please?" Madam Bones said next. Snape strode quietly to the front of the staff table. "For many years now, Professor Snape has done a difficult and thankless job as a spy embedded within Voldemort's ranks. In doing so, he performed a tremendous service to the wizarding world, at great personal risk. He also offered his life to save that of a student during the recent battle. For these acts, I am pleased to award him the Order of Merlin, Second Class. Thank you for your service to your country, Professor."

"Thank you, Minister," Snape said, bowing his head so she could place the ribbon around his neck. Once the medal was in place, he straightened up and squared his shoulders. After shaking hands with the Minister, Harry and Ron, he walked back to his place with great dignity.

Snape looked more like an eagle than a bat now, Harry thought curiously, more regal, less sneaky. Could all the years of being a spy have made him the way he'd been? Or was it the Dark Mark's influence that had darkened his soul? Snape was still not a happy, cheerful person, but there was a distinct difference about him since the removal of the Dark Mark.

"Miss Hermione Granger, Miss Ginny Weasley, would you come forward, please?" Minister Bones said. Hermione and Ginny walked to the front, standing nervously in front of her. "Turn around, ladies, and stand by these gentlemen," she added, nodding toward Harry and Ron.

The girls stood by their boyfriends, waiting to see what would happen next. They didn't have to wait long.

Madam Bones looked at the four students, then waved her wand, conjuring four tall stools behind them. "Please, sit down. I know you gentlemen haven't been out of the hospital long, and I do have some things to do before I'm finished with you up here." She smiled warmly at them as they sat down. When they were settled, she turned back to the audience.

"Harry Potter came up with an ingenious method of destroying Lord Voldemort," Madam Bones began. "Those of you who were at the battle may have seen it, but most of you were busy fighting and probably didn't have the chance to observe some truly remarkable magic. He created a sphere around Voldemort, and at a certain point, these three friends joined him and cast spheres over his. Then he put a spell inside the sphere that somehow distilled the evil out of Voldemort, thus killing him. That's the simple version. I'd like to show you the film we took of the scene now."

She nodded and Mr. Filch opened a screen on the side wall behind the Slytherin table. Everyone turned to face it. The torches and candles all dimmed with a wave of Dumbledore's hand as a flickering light came from a magical projector. Soon, larger-than-life-sized figures played out the last scenes of Voldemort's life. Harry's aura burst suddenly from his body in a glorious aurora of pulsating golden light, then spread to both sides of the screen, making the view of Hermione on his right and Ginny on his left a bit hazy. Due to the height and angle of the camera, which was shooting from behind Harry's back and at least twenty feet in the air, Ron's bright red hair glimmered where the top of the aura thinned as it rose into the sky. Huge

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golden sparks flew from the ends of Harry's hair and fingers in a nearly constant stream. His robes billowed wildly in a wind created by his magic. The film shifted to another camera's point of view, now watching from behind Hermione. Inside the sphere, Voldemort could clearly be seen screaming and spinning in place. Ghosts passed through Harry's shuddering back into his wand and thus, into the sphere.

The Great Hall was filled with gasps and murmurs as people watched the scene before them. When Seamus, Katie and Cho appeared, people from their houses cried out and pointed at their ghosts.

Harry sat as still as a statue, his eyes locked on the screen, his face a ghastly white. He'd seen photos of this same scene, but they didn't have the impact of the huge images before him. He felt as if he couldn't breathe. The sight of his aura scared him – what must other people think of it? There could be no doubt about the tremendous power he possessed. Would people be afraid of him now?

He looked at the images of his friends as they stood steadfastly around the sphere, doing their best to help him. Ginny's face and Hermione's posture looked frightened but determined. Ron was stoic. Harry could see in Ron's face the knowledge that this spell might very well kill him, yet he stayed rock-steady, willing to give his life to help his friend. Harry blinked hard, knowing what was coming in just a few seconds, not wanting to watch it, and yet he knew he must. There it was – he and Ron both stepped between the girls and the sphere, and Harry pushed the sphere away from them as much as he could. Then the image on the screen flared as if the sun had burst, making the screen blank for a few seconds. The cameras had kept rolling. When images reappeared, there was Ron on the ground, his big body covering Hermione, protecting her as well as he could. His leg was a mangled, bloody mess. Ginny lay still off to one side, Harry actually farther away, thrown a distance by the blast.

Harry felt a small, trembling hand slide into his. He glanced down at Ginny and squeezed her hand comfortingly. He appreciated the distraction she'd just provided. He'd been lost in the horror of the image on the screen. It was good to be reminded that they'd all survived, they were all sitting here nearly whole, as healthy as any of them could hope for this soon after the battle.

Harry went back to watching the film. When he saw the girls destroy Malfoy, he glanced down at Ginny, then leaned around Ron to look at Hermione and whispered, "Well done!" Both of them smiled at him in response.

His eyes hardened when he saw Dumbledore talking to Riddle. He heard the collective gasp in the Hall as Voldemort died and Dumbledore rid the world of his body forever.

The film rolled on relentlessly. Harry wondered why they hadn't stopped it there. He looked around and noticed that all eyes were still on the screen. Many mouths were gaped open in shock. There wasn't a sound in the room except for the quiet whirr of the projector.

He turned his eyes back to the screen and watched the procession of ghosts stopping to pay their respects to him. His heart turned over when he saw Casey merge with Ginny and bend down to kiss him. *Oh, Casey, he thought, it was so unfair that they killed you. I'm so sorry.* He swallowed hard, and shook his head slightly, trying to control his emotions, then felt Ginny release his hand and lean her head against his shoulder, her arm wrapped around his waist. He

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glanced down at her and saw her looking up at him, love in her eyes. He smiled in return as he draped his arm around her shoulders and hugged her, glad of the comfort she always provided.

Harry made himself look at the film again. This might be the only time he'd see it in his life, and he was determined to see the whole thing, at least this once. Ginny had told him everything she knew about what had happened, but seeing it himself – he found it heart wrenching, and yet uplifting, somehow. All of those people cared enough about him to come and help him in his time of need. He smiled at the image of his parents sitting with him, and grinned for a moment when Sirius made his parting comments. Marcus had given Harry the parchment he and Ginny had written, noting what Harry had said about being "between." Harry was glad to have read that, because it brought the images fresh to his mind, so he could remember them. He cherished the memory of hugging his mum and dad, how strong and healthy they'd felt, how well Sirius had looked, the scent of his mother. It was almost worth nearly dying to feel their arms around him again, hear their voices, see their smiles.

Finally, the film ended and the lights were raised again. The Hall remained silent for several long moments.

"As you saw," Madam Bones said, breaking the absolute quiet, "Harry Potter and his friends did something truly remarkable. Therefore, the Ministry is pleased to present Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger with the Order of Merlin, Second Class, for courage far above and beyond anything we could hope for, as well as a remarkable achievement in magic well beyond N.E.W.T. standard." The three of them stood as she moved in front of them and hung the beautiful ribbons around their necks, the huge golden medallions glinting in the torchlight.

"The Ministry is also pleased to present full scholarships to Auror School to Harry Potter and Ron Weasley; a full scholarship to Oxford Wizarding University for Hermione Granger; and one to St. Mungo's Healer School for Ginny Weasley. Cash awards have also been deposited in Gringotts in the name of each of these young people," she told the audience, then turned to smile at the four astonished faces beside her.

"Thank you!" Hermione breathed excitedly.

"Yeah, thanks!" Ron said, his face split in an amazed grin.

"Wow," Ginny whispered. "A full scholarship?" Madam Bones nodded. "Thanks!"

"Thank you, Madam Bones," Harry said to the minister, who was standing beside him. "That's very kind of you."

"It's the least we can do," she said with a smile. She shook hands with all four, then told Ron, Hermione and Ginny they could go back to their seats at the Gryffindor table. "Mr. Potter, I need you to stay up here a bit longer." He stifled a sigh and nodded.

Madam Bones turned back to the audience. "These guests," she said, indicating the group of people at one end of the staff table, "are emissaries from countries that also suffered from Lord Voldemort's attacks. They have come to thank Harry Potter for ridding the world of this monster." She stood to one side and introduced wizards and witches from France, Germany, Austria, Albania, Spain, Rumania and Bulgaria. Each one shook hands with Harry, murmured

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something in more or less heavily-accented English, then hung a heavy gold medal around Harry's neck. Several left large bags of gold on the table beside him, as well. The Austrian emissary presented Harry with a bag of cut emeralds, rubies and other precious stones.

When the procession of foreign dignitaries ended, Madam Bones put her hand on Harry's arm, keeping him in front of the Hall a bit longer.

"Harry Potter, as you all know, was awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class last year. We have had no higher award than that in our history, but the Ministry felt it was time to create one, specifically for this purpose. It is my great honour to present the first-ever Nebula Award to Harry Potter for destroying the most evil wizard the world has ever known. This medal," she said as she pulled a huge golden medallion from a familiar red box with gold ribbons, "was created by Mr. Anthony Joyero of Joyero Jewellery in Hogsmeade. It is a one of a kind piece. No mould was made, so there can never be another award exactly like this, which is what the Ministry intended." She turned to Harry and continued speaking as she fastened the ribbon around his neck. "Harry Potter, please accept this award with the heartfelt gratitude of the Ministry of Magic and the entire wizarding world."

"Thank you," Harry replied, shaking her hand warmly as the Great Hall rang with applause and cheers.

"Would you like to say anything, Harry?" she asked as she released his hand and the Hall quieted.

"Erm . . . yeah, OK," he said. She stepped away from him and he lifted his eyes to the crowd. "Um . . . I want to thank the Aurors who came to fight with us. They saved a lot of students' lives, and they helped us train in practices, as well. You D.A. members, Fred and George, Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin – you were brilliant. Thank you for all you did. I honestly could not have managed this without the help of all of you, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix. And Ron, Hermione, Ginny – there's no way to thank you for everything. There's no greater love than to be willing to die to help your friends, and you three did that for me." He stopped and cleared his throat. "I'll spend the rest of my life trying to repay you for that. Thanks." He glanced at Madam Bones, blushing a bit. "That's all."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," she said, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. She turned to face the crowd again. "Thanks to this modest young man, we are free from the horrors of the worst Dark wizard the world has ever known. Let's show Harry Potter, and the heroes who helped him, our gratitude for our newfound freedom!" She led a huge round of applause, which included many cheers and whistles.

Harry blushed madly and hung his head a bit, but as the cheers rolled on, he raised his eyes and looked around the room. He wondered if these people truly understood the sense of freedom he felt now that Voldemort was gone. Maybe they did. Certainly the atmosphere in the school was different, with people laughing and smiling more than usual even during the long, exhausting days of exams, from what he'd heard from his friends. The staff looked less harried, more rested, more cheerful than he remembered from years past. Yes, there was grief over those who had died, but the dark shadow that had covered every aspect of their lives for so long was gone now. Somehow, colours seemed brighter, crisper, food tasted better, and even serious things didn't seem quite so serious anymore.

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Harry stood and gazed at the cheering crowd and finally relaxed and smiled a bit when he saw Ginny's face. She was standing on a bench to see him over the taller people standing around her, applauding and cheering as hard as everyone else in the room. His eyes locked with hers and he felt her love envelope him, lifting his spirits in a way nothing else could.

Harry was sore from so many people pounding him on the back in congratulations as he tried to make his way to Ginny, Ron and Hermione. Suddenly, Ginny wriggled between people and stood in front of him. She took his hand and managed to lead him through the crowd, with only occasional stops to congratulate other award winners or speak to well-wishers. Ron and Hermione met them in the doorway.

"Party in Gryffindor Tower tonight!" Dean called as he passed.

"We'll be there soon," Ron said, grinning at his friend. He was enjoying all the attention and was reluctant to leave the Great Hall.

Harry smiled at his friends, then glanced down at Ginny. "I need to stop by my quarters for some books. We'll see you later."

"OK," Ron said, turning to speak to other people who wanted to congratulate him and Hermione.

Harry and Ginny shook a few more hands, accepted a few more compliments, then managed to escape down the corridor to his quarters. When they got inside, Harry began fighting with the clasps on his ribbons, cursing fluently as he did so.

"What's wrong?" Ginny said, surprised by his sudden change in behaviour.

"These things are tangled in my hair!" he growled, tugging at a clasp impatiently.

"Sit down, let me do it," she said calmly. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't want to create an international incident," he said with a crooked grin. He moaned in relief as some of the medals came free and dropped into his hands. "Thank you! They were breaking my neck!"

"Oh, poor baby. Do you have too many medals?" she teased.

"Yes!"

"Well, I think it's nice that everyone is so grateful for what you've done for them," she replied, finally freeing him of the last medal. "There. That better?"

"Yeah, thanks," he said, rubbing his neck.

"May I see the Nebula Award? It looked interesting," she said, looking at the mound of medals in his hands.

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"Sure," he replied, carefully separating that one from the rest. He smoothed the ribbons, knowing that at various points in his life he might be required to wear at least some of these medals again.

"Oh, Harry, have you looked at this?" Ginny breathed. "I could see it was beautiful from a distance, but Mr. Joyero outdid himself this time!" She held the medal out for his inspection.

Harry took the medal and looked at the large blue-grey cabochon stone set in the centre. It sparkled as if it had tiny lights inside it. "Wonder what kind of stone this is?" he mused.

"Did you see what's in the middle of it?" she prompted.

He looked closer. A nebula showed just off-centre in the stone, glorious pinks, yellows, blues and greens surrounding its deep golden core. Constellations were suspended around it, their light the sparkles Harry had noted at a distance. "Wow, that's amazing!" he said, impressed more than ever with Mr. Joyero's talents. The medallion itself was spectacular, a sunburst shape at least four inches across. It was emblazoned with griffins and phoenixes, spangled with good-sized diamonds and rubies. A large Gryffindor lion was carved on the back, with words engraved around the edge of the circle enclosing it. The words read, "The Nebula Award, proudly presented to Harry Potter by a grateful nation, in thanks for his destruction of Lord Voldemort." The medallion hung from a red and gold ribbon with a large ruby on the golden catch.

"That must have cost a fortune!" Ginny said, admiring the medal.

"Yeah," Harry said. He smiled. "This one and the Order of Merlin are the only ones whose catches didn't pull my hair. I wonder if he makes the Order of Merlin medals as well?" He lifted his Order of Merlin, looked at the back and grinned, then looked at Ginny's as well. "Congratulations by the way," he said as he lay the medal back on her chest. "Yes, they both have his mark on the back. See?" He showed her the jeweller's stamped logo, a slanted "J," hidden in the decorative swirls carved near the edge.

"He must be a really famous jeweller to make these for the Ministry," Ginny said, impressed. "Wonder why he lives in Hogsmeade if he's so famous?"

"Because he likes it up here, I suspect," Harry replied. "Wouldn't you rather live here than London?"

"Well, I wouldn't miss the cold," she replied, "but yeah, London isn't my first choice of places to live. But we'll be fine on Grimmauld Place for a while," she added bracingly.

"Yeah," he said, smiling at her with love in his eyes. "We'll build our house in Godric's Hollow in time for the children to grow up there."

"There you go, talking about children again," she said, sliding her arms around his neck.

"We're going to be so happy together," he said with satisfaction.

"Um-hmm," she agreed as she kissed him. "Let's be happy together now."

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Harry laughed, delighted with her playful nature. "Your parents are waiting for us to join the party in Gryffindor Tower," he reminded her.

"They'll wait," she breathed, kissing him more deeply.

Harry groaned with pleasure, laying the medals on the worktable, then lifting Ginny in his arms and taking her into his bedroom. He set her gently on his bed, then turned and put extra wards on the door to his quarters and changed the password so no one else could enter.

"Now then, where shall I start," he said, his eyes roving from her head to her feet. "I know. I'll start at the bottom and work my way up." He tugged off her shoes and socks and kissed each toe, then the top of her dainty foot, and then nibbled on the side of her ankle, making her giggle.

"Harry, we really don't have a lot of time," she reminded him as he worked his way slowly, tantalizingly up her leg.

"Are you enjoying this or not?" he asked, licking the back of her knee.

She moaned. "Yes, but . . ."

"Hush, woman, and let me be creative," he said, biting her knee gently. He soon had her groaning and sighing in ecstasy.

"Come here, you," she said huskily, pulling him up to kiss her.

As they became one, Harry felt his aura activating and glanced up, noticing they were floating again. He laughed, filled with more joy than he could have imagined, then casually waved his hand to take control of the levitation they were experiencing. When they were both spent, he lowered them carefully to the bed.

"Getting the hang of this flying thing, eh?" Ginny teased.

"Flying?"

"Flying, levitation, whatever it is," she said, smiling. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He nuzzled her neck, drinking in the dizzying scent of her hair and skin. He sighed happily.

"We'd better go soon," she reminded him.

"Yeah, I know," he murmured, wishing he never had to move again except to love her more.

A short time later, they climbed through the portrait hole and were hit with a wall of sound. Gryffindor's Common Room was full of people celebrating the end of term, new awards, the simple joy of being alive, young and relatively healthy. Molly, Arthur, Fred, George and Charlie Weasley were enjoying the party along with Remus, Tonks, Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore.

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Harry blushed to see the huge group of adults in the Common Room. He'd known the Weasleys would be there, but Dumbledore or McGonagall might question them a bit closely about where they'd been. He knew Remus and Tonks would just smile at him.

"HARRY!" several people called when they noticed him and Ginny in the doorway. Drinks were pressed into their hands, and trays of food passed by, which they refused. Both of them had their hands full of Harry's medals as well as some books from his quarters. He was wearing the Order of Merlin and the Nebula Award, but carrying all of the others.

"Harry, dear, why aren't you wearing your medals?" Molly asked when she saw him.

"They were pulling my hair," he explained with a shrug, "and they're awfully heavy on my neck."

"Why didn't you just shorten your hair then?" she asked reasonably.

"That would have hurt!" he whinged. "They were caught pretty badly. It took Ginny quite a while to get me untangled." This was the excuse they'd come up with for their lateness.

"Oh, you poor dear!" Molly sympathized, patting his cheek. "I do understand. Let's see them, then."

He and Ginny held out the medals in their hands and let Molly and many others examine and exclaim over them.

"You went off and left all those bags of gold and jewels on the table, mate," Fred told Harry casually, "so we just helped ourselves."

"Good!" Harry said with a grin.

"The twins are teasing you, Harry," Arthur said with a tolerant smile. "Madam Bones said she'd deposit it in your account in Gringotts so you wouldn't have to carry it home."

"That was nice of her," Harry replied. Truthfully, he wouldn't have minded much if the twins had taken his gold, but then again, he was going to have a family to take care of in a few years. His priorities would be changing soon. He would have a new house to build, and probably quite a few Hogwarts educations to pay for, if they managed to have the large brood of children they hoped for. He needed to start planning for a life of freedom he'd never really thought he'd have. He looked at Ginny and grinned. He couldn't wait to get started on his future!

The next morning, Professor Dumbledore stood by the line of carriages saying goodbye to his departing students and guests. The Weasleys, Minister Bones and most of the dignitaries had stayed in guest quarters overnight and would ride the Hogwarts thestral-drawn carriages down to Hogsmeade before Apparating home. Harry, Ron and Hermione wanted to ride the Hogwarts Express one last time, so rather than simply flashing to Grimmauld Place, they were riding the carriages to the train station.

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"Dear boy," Dumbledore said as he stood by Harry's carriage, "I am so looking forward to your return as a teacher. Come and see me when you can, all right?"

"I will. Thank you for everything. I'll send you tickets to our games," Harry promised. Dumbledore extended his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry pulled him into a hug. "Come and visit soon, Grandfather. You're always welcome."

"Thank you, Harry, I'll do that. Safe journey." Dumbledore gave him a final pat on the back and Harry climbed into the carriage, choosing a backwards-facing seat. He leaned out of the window waving at his grandfather until a turn in the road hid the old wizard from sight. Harry sat back in his seat and leaned his head against the glass, watching the castle as long as possible.

At the train platform, Hagrid stood waiting to see everyone off. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione went to tell him goodbye.

"Hogwarts won't be the same without you lot," Hagrid said, wiping tears from his eyes with his polka-dotted handkerchief.

"We'll miss you, Hagrid," Hermione said.

"Come and see us. We're all staying with Harry until the Burrow is rebuilt," Ginny added.

"You'll have a houseful, then, won't you, Harry?" Hagrid said, smiling at his friend.

"Yeah, but it will be fun," Harry agreed.

"I can't imagine Hogwarts without yer, Harry. It seems as if it was yesterday when I firs' told yer that yer were a wizard."

Harry smiled up at his friend. "For me, as well. But you won't have to imagine Hogwarts without me for long. I'm the Flying Instructor next term."

"I heard that! Congratulations! But you won't be up to your usual shenanigans if you're a teacher, now will you?" he teased.

Harry shrugged. "I suppose I'll have to behave a bit better than usual," he agreed. "Thanks for everything, Hagrid. See you."

"See you, Harry," Hagrid said, pulling the young wizard into a bone-crunching hug.

Once on the train, they found a compartment and settled the huge bag of sweets Mr. Honeyduke had sent them on the floor under the window between the seats. Harry chose a backwards-facing seat again as Ginny, Ron and Hermione left to do their Prefect, Head Boy and Head Girl duties.

"Are you all right?" Ginny said a bit later as she entered the compartment to find him with his face pressed hard against the glass.

"I can still see Hogwarts," he said wistfully, "but it's almost – there, it's out of sight."

The Time of Destiny

"What's wrong?" She sat next to him and took his hand, looking at his sad eyes in concern. "You'll be back next term."

"I know," he said, trying to smile. "It's just that it won't be home anymore. This is the first real home I ever had."

"We'll have a wonderful home soon," Ginny assured him.

"Yeah, we will," he agreed, wrapping his arms around her as she snuggled against his side. He kissed her, glad as always that she was so good at getting him past the hard spots in his life.

"Snogging again?" Ron teased as he and Hermione entered the compartment. "Ten points from Gryffindor for that, mate."

"Right," Harry said with a laugh. "Want to play some Exploding Snap?"

"Yeah!" Ron agreed. "Chuck us a chocolate frog, OK?"

Harry pulled four frogs from the bag of sweets Honeydukes had sent to thank them for killing Voldemort and handed them to each of his friends. He laughed when he discovered he had gotten one of his own Famous Wizard cards.

The cheeky image of Harry waved madly when he saw the real Harry. "Look at the back!" little Harry said.

Harry turned the card over and saw they'd added several lines to his credits: "Survivor of The Refiner's Fire. Multiple Animagus by age 17. Killed Lord Voldemort, the most evil wizard the world has ever known, at age 17. Winner of the Nebula Award for this deed. Seeker for the London Lions." His other awards were listed as well. Harry turned the card back over and looked at the photo, which had been updated to show him in his London Lions uniform.

"Don't you go getting a big head," Harry warned his small photographic self, which made a face at him in return. Harry handed the card to Ginny, who pocketed it gleefully after looking at the changes on it. Soon a raucous game of Exploding Snap was underway, which was always good for whiling away the time on the train.

Harry smiled at his friends: Ron, who was busy trying to pile up points before his cards exploded; Hermione, who was watching Ron with amusement and love in her eyes; and Ginny, who was playing with as much excitement as the boys, and winning at the moment. Could anyone have better friends? And they were going to be a family, all of them, for the rest of their lives. He felt his heart swell with contentment, then got back to the serious business of winning the game.

The End

Epilogue – Part 1: The Post-Hogwarts Years

Five Years After Harry Graduates from Hogwarts

Harry Potter strolled down a busy street in London, looking in the shop windows for something special for Ginny, his wife of four years. The present wasn't for any particular occasion – he just wanted to get her something. It was always such fun to surprise her with pretty things. He wanted something unusual – he wasn't certain what, but it had to be completely wonderful. He'd already searched Diagon Alley and was now checking the Muggle shops. If he didn't find something soon, he'd Apparate to Hogsmeade and visit Tony Joyero again, but he really wanted something *different*. But what?

As he passed a shop's doorway, a woman bustled out, bumping into him and dropping her packages.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Harry said, bending down to help her pick up her purchases. As he handed them to her, their eyes locked. Their faces bore equally shocked expressions.

"Harry? Is it really you?" Aunt Petunia breathed. "It is you, isn't it? You look wonderful! How are you?" They hadn't seen each other since Harry had left Number 4 Privet Drive for the last time six years ago.

Taken aback by her seeming friendliness, Harry hesitated before answering. "Um . . . I'm fine, thanks." He handed her the rest of her packages and straightened up, studying her face uneasily.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"Shopping," he said with a shrug.

"I thought you might have moved to Scotland for some reason," Petunia said, shaking her head with a rueful smile. "Do you live near here?"

"In London, yes. I work here," he said, beginning to relax a little. He didn't know why she was being so friendly, but he wasn't going to be the one to cause a problem.

"Do you have a few minutes? Can we go for a coffee and have a chat?" Petunia said, glancing around. "There's a little coffee shop over there."

"Yeah, I eat there every so often," Harry replied. "Yes, we can get a coffee. I have a bit of free time."

"Wonderful!" Petunia enthused.

They crossed the street chatting casually about the weather. When they got to the shop, Harry led Petunia to a booth in the back and sat with his back to the wall, scanning the other patrons of the shop briefly before relaxing.

Petunia noticed what he was doing. "Are you still in danger? I thought you finished off that Voldie-whatsit years ago. Didn't you?"

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"Yes, I did, but I've never stopped being careful. There are still dangerous people in the world. How do you know about Voldemort?" he asked curiously.

"I saw wizards in the streets dancing and cheering when I was out shopping one day. When I noticed them, I asked one of them what was going on. He told me Harry Potter had killed the Dark Lord and they were out of danger now, so they were celebrating. I asked him if you were all right and he said you were in the hospital, but we were interrupted and before I could find out how you were. And of course, I had no way to contact anyone in your world, either. A few weeks later, I saw a family standing and staring at our house. I asked them what they were doing. They told me they'd heard this was the house where Harry Potter grew up, and they wanted to show their children that heroes can come from the most humble beginnings, even a Muggle house." She shook her head and chuckled a bit. "I didn't know quite what to say to that. I asked if you were out of the hospital, and they gave me a copy of your newspaper. It had a long story telling about the battle, your injuries, and saying you'd recently been released from the hospital and were expected to make a full recovery. It praised you to the skies, Harry. I was so proud of you."

Harry was stunned. "You were? Why?"

"Because you did what nobody else could do. You rid the world of that monster. The copy of the paper they gave me listed all the atrocities he'd done over the years. He was a horrible man, wasn't he?"

A pained expression flashed across Harry's face, gone as almost as quickly as it appeared. "Yeah," Harry said darkly.

The waitress appeared, smiling warmly at Harry. "Hiya, handsome! The usual?"

"Yeah, black coffee. Thanks, Marie," Harry said, smiling at her.

"Scone? Biscuit? Toast?" she prompted.

"Just coffee for me. What would you like, Aunt Petunia?" he said politely, a bit annoyed that the waitress was fawning on him and ignoring his aunt.

"Oh, this is your auntie?" Marie said, smiling at Petunia. "Are there any more like him at home? He's a peach, he is!"

"Um," Petunia said uncertainly.

"Marie, we only have a little while to chat," Harry prompted her.

"Oh, right, ducks! What'll you have, missus?"

"Coffee will be fine, thank you," Petunia replied. She watched the waitress as the woman's attention turned back to Harry. Was this a witch who admired Harry because he was a famous hero? Or did Harry have this effect on Muggle women too? He was certainly a handsome young man despite that awful scar. As he gestured while speaking, Petunia noticed something odd about his hand. She waited for the server to leave before asking about it.

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"What happened to your hand? It looks burned," she said, nodding toward his right hand.

"That's a Glamour to hide what's really there. I try to make it look normal when I'm among Muggles, but they resist the Glamour Charm to the point where my palm looks red," he said with a shrug.

"They? Who? Muggles? Sorry, you've lost me," she said in confusion.

He glanced around the shop, then slid his hand toward his aunt, waved it briefly and let it rest palm up for a moment so she could see the griffins and phoenixes branded there. "Them."

Petunia gasped, then swallowed hard. "Is that . . . a tattoo or something?"

"No," he murmured, replacing the Glamour Charm and folding his hands together on the table. "There are griffins and phoenixes carved on my wand's handle. They branded me when I was doing the spell that destroyed Voldemort."

"It looks painful," she said sympathetically.

"It was for a while. It only bothers me now if I use my full power for something, and I rarely have to do that," he said casually.

"Full power?"

"Think of . . . um . . . a weight lifter picking up the heaviest barbells he can. He has to use his full strength to move them, right?" She nodded. "But in the course of his normal life, he rarely needs to use such strength. The same is true for me. I rarely need to use my full power. When I do, I feel the animals on the wand handle kind of dancing in my palm, and the ones in my palm will vibrate in response to that. It's a weird feeling, but it doesn't hurt. I'm used to it now. And when they do that, they give me even more power. These animals are talismans for me, that's why the wandmaker put them on the handle. Nobody knows why they dance in my hand, or why they branded me."

"Oh," she said, not quite understanding everything he'd said, but grateful that he'd tried to answer her question. She decided to get on more comfortable conversational ground. She noticed the gold ring on his left hand. "Are you married now?"

"Yes, I married Ginny Weasley," he said, his face softening in a smile at the mention of her name. "We've been married four years now."

"The little redhead?" He nodded. "You look very happy, Harry. I'm glad."

"Thank you," he said. Deciding he might as well be polite since she was trying so hard to be sociable, he asked, "How've you been?"

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine," she replied with a smile.

"Here you go, ducks," the waitress said, setting their coffee down carefully. "I brought you a plate of scones, as well. My treat."

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"Marie, you didn't have to do that," Harry began.

"How many handsome young men bring their aunties to a coffee shop?" she said reasonably. "I'm impressed! And I'm hoping you'll find a brother or cousin or something somewhere to send my way if I'm nice enough to you."

Harry laughed. "Sorry, there's only me, and all my brothers-in-law are married now. But thanks."

"No worries, ducks. I'm just glad you come in here to brighten my day from time to time," she said, waving breezily as she walked away.

"I suppose you could offer her Dudley," Harry said, grinning at his aunt.

"He's not her type, if she likes you," Petunia said, sighing. The waitress was pretty and sweet and simply not the kind of girl who interested Dudley.

They were silent for a few moments, then Harry decided he should do the polite thing. "How is Dudley?"

"He's fine. Working at Grunnings, you know," Petunia said with obvious pride.

"That's nice. Is he married yet? I suppose I should have asked before suggesting he might suit Marie," he said with a self-deprecating smile.

"Oh, no, he's not married," Petunia replied. "Still living at home."

"Ah," Harry said, not knowing what else there was to say about Dudley. "And Uncle Vernon?" he asked cautiously.

"He's . . . he's changed since you talked to him in the hospital, Harry." She glanced around a bit, then leaned toward him and whispered, "Did you put a spell on him?"

"No! I didn't do anything but talk to him. You were there, you saw—"

"But you're a very powerful wizard," she whispered carefully. "I thought you could just, I don't know, wave your hand or blink or something to cast a spell."

Harry snorted with laughter. "Well, sometimes waving my hand will work, but no, I don't blink to cast spells. And I didn't put any spells on Uncle Vernon. So he's healthy now?"

"Fairly healthy, yes. He simply refuses to exercise, but he's eating better."

"How has he changed?"

"He's rarely angry. It's just amazing," she said with a smile.

Harry snorted again. "That's probably because I don't live there anymore."

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"No, it's more than that. I can't explain it, but he's . . . he's *softer* somehow. He doesn't take things as badly as he used to." She sipped her coffee, then sat studying her hands a moment. "He saw that newspaper article about you."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just watched her, waiting for her to continue.

"He asked me if I'd heard from you, or if I'd heard how you were since the article was published. The paper was about a month or two old by then, you see. I'd put it in a drawer and he found it while looking for something."

"Why does he care how I am?" Harry said, not believing for a minute that Vernon Dursley had any interest in him other than making sure he stayed as far from Privet Drive as possible.

"He knows you saved his life, Harry. He was told repeatedly by the doctors that the condition of the arteries in his heart was remarkable, given the condition of the veins in the rest of his body. You did that, and he knows it. You did a miracle for someone you had no reason to care about. He had a lot of trouble accepting that at first, but he finally came to terms with it."

"Erm," Harry said intelligently. He didn't know what to say next.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be bringing up bad memories. How have you been? What are you doing now? Where do you work? What does your wife do?" she said.

Harry sat and thought for a long moment. She seemed to be sincerely interested. What was the danger here? What could she do to him? Nothing, really. He took a deep breath and decided to do the polite thing and answer her questions. "Ginny's a healer. That's the same as a doctor," he said.

"Oh, like a doctor! Good for her," Petunia said warmly. "And you? What do you do?"

"I'm a professional Quidditch player, Seeker on the London Lions," he said, smiling a bit. "You remember the Quidditch game you saw at the Weasleys'? That kind of thing, only on a much bigger scale and much, *much* faster!" His eyes twinkled as he spoke about the job that gave him such joy.

"You really love it, don't you?" Petunia said, tilting her head to study his face. "It shows."

"There's nothing like flying!" He grinned for a moment, then blushed a bit, surprised at how unguarded he was being with his aunt. He looked at her pensively for a moment, wondering at the oddly normal conversation they were having.

"Have you been on this team since you left school?"

"Yes. I teach flying at Hogwarts, too. That's just one day a week, but it's great fun for me. I like teaching." He smiled, thinking of all the excited young faces that greeted him every Tuesday during the school term.

"Are you going to teach full time at some point?"

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"I might. I really enjoy it. But I'll probably be an Auror for a while first." Seeing her puzzled look, he explained, "I finished Auror School a few years ago. They're Dark wizard catchers . . . erm, sort of like MI-5, I think."

"You're a spy?" she said in surprise.

"No, not really. It's more like a policeman who goes after the worst criminals, I guess you could say."

"How can you do that and play Quidditch?"

"I go on assignments for them in the off-season, but I won't start as a full-time Auror until I stop playing Quidditch," he replied easily. "Most professional Quidditch players last about ten years or so, then move on to other careers."

"Why?"

"Injuries, or just slowing down from age," he replied. "Ron and I – Ron Weasley, remember my best friend? He's Keeper on our team. He and I went to Auror School together, but we're hoping to last ten to fifteen years on the team."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" she said supportively. She didn't understand everything he was talking about, but he sounded happy, and that pleased her. "So you'll both be Aurors afterwards?"

"Maybe. Ron's beginning to think he'd like to work for the Ministry in some other capacity, possibly in the Department of Magical Sports. Or he might like to coach a pro team. I might like to do that too, actually. I'm captain of the team now," he said with pride, "and he and I both were on the English National Team for the World Cup last season. We won – we beat France quite handily."

"Congratulations!" Petunia said, wishing she had more understanding of what he was talking about. "You look so different now," she mused.

"Different how?"

"Well, I honestly forgot about your beard, so I'm not used to it, of course, and I forgot about the grey stripes in it, as well. You look quite distinguished, actually, and I do like your hair long like that," she said. "The biggest difference is, you look . . . peaceful. Happy. Relaxed, I suppose. It's nice to see you this way."

"I am happy. I love my wife, I love my work, and things are going well for me."

"I'm so glad. Do you live in that house you inherited?"

"We've been living there, but we'll be moving soon. We're building a house on the land I inherited from my parents. Ron and Hermione bought the land next door and are building there." He smiled, his eyes seeing a not-too-distant happy future. "Our kids can play together. We're going to build a Quidditch pitch at the back of the property."

"Kids? You have children?" Petunia said in surprise.

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"Ginny's expecting twins," Harry said with obvious pride.

"Oh, Harry! Congratulations," Petunia said with a smile. "And your friends – do they have children yet?"

"Ron and Hermione already have a baby. He'll be six months older than our twins."

Petunia studied the contented face across from her. "No wonder you look so happy."

"Yeah," he agreed with a blush.

"Harry?" Petunia said hesitantly after another long moment of silence.

"Yes?"

"Could I come to one of your games sometime? I enjoyed watching you and your friends play. A professional game would be quite exciting to see."

Harry studied her, suddenly suspicious. She wasn't acting at all like the woman who'd tormented him for so long. "Why?"

Petunia was nonplussed. "Why what?"

"Why are you being so friendly? Why do you care what's happened to me and my friends?" he asked, hating to be distrustful, but with their shared history, he didn't know how else to behave.

"I learned a lot when you and your godfather and that woman stayed with us. She had a strange name, what was it?" she said, thinking hard.

"Tonks. She's my godmother now. She married Remus. They have two children," Harry replied. "What kind of things did you learn?"

"Well, all the things she showed us about you, for one thing. And that your people do keep their word. As long as we behaved ourselves, none of you were any trouble at all, really. I didn't think that at the time, of course, but thinking over it after you were gone, I realized what an idiot I was. I wish I'd been a better hostess. Of *course* you needed someone to look after you if you'd been hurt, and *I* don't know anything about wizard medicine. And I suppose it's only logical your government would send someone to protect you if they thought we were mistreating you. It took me a long time to sort that out, and you can imagine what a shock it was to me once I realized . . . well . . ."

"That's amazing, Aunt Petunia. What a turnaround," Harry said, impressed.

"Yes," she agreed, a bit uncomfortably.

Harry sat quietly, studying the woman across from him. His mother, from all he'd heard about her, was a very kind woman. What would she want him to do about her sister's request? It didn't take him long to work that out. "If you want to come to a game, you're welcome. I'll give you a pass to the family box. Those are the best seats in the stadium. The Weasley family

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is huge, so we have the largest box in the stadium as well. There's always room for one more." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ticket. "Directions to the stadium are on the back. It's just outside London, near Fulham, actually. Do you have a pen?"

"Yes," she said, reaching into her purse.

"Thanks. It would look funny for me to pull a quill and pot of ink out here," he said with a mischievous grin as he took the pen from her and began to write something on the ticket.

"Harry? Would you mind terribly if Vernon and Dudley came too?"

He sat back in shock. "Erm . . . would they want to?"

"I think so," she said hesitantly.

"They'd be surrounded by Weasleys. I don't know if Uncle Vernon and Dudley would enjoy that or not," Harry said hesitantly, wondering if he could rein in his twin brothers-in-law and keep them from hexing both his uncle and cousin.

"If they're as polite to Vernon and Dudley as they were to me before I acted so badly at their home," Petunia said carefully, "I think we'll get along fine."

Harry tilted his head, studying her again. She truly seemed sincere. "Who are you and what have you done with my aunt?" he teased, a crooked grin on his face.

"Sorry?"

"Just kidding. If you want passes for them, too, I'll be happy to give them to you. You should warn them that they'll be surrounded by people who care about me – not just the Weasleys, but the fans – and they need to behave or they'll be in trouble." He gave her a very serious look. "I mean that."

"I understand," she said. "I'll have a good long talk with them before I allow them to come with me. But I will be there, Harry. I want to see you play professionally."

He smiled. "It's a lot different than the game you saw before. If you enjoyed that, you'll be blown away by a professional game. It's wicked fast." He handed her the tickets. "I've written 'Potter-Weasley Family Box' on these three tickets. I'll have Ginny watching for you outside the stadium." He thought a moment. "Well, she's extremely pregnant, so she may not feel up to that. Hmm. If she can't do it, Hermione or Mr. or Mrs. Weasley will be waiting for you outside. You know all of them, and I can trust them to take good care of you. The stadium will look like a huge, abandoned aeroplane hanger to you. Remember, that's just a Muggle-Repelling Charm. It's actually quite beautiful. It's the newest Quidditch stadium in the UK. Try to be there at least half an hour early. Ron and I pop up to the box about twenty minutes before the game to see the family, so I'll see you then, and again after the game. All right?"

"Yes, thank you, Harry." Petunia studied the passes in her hand, a look of amazement on her face. "These have pictures of you on them!"

The Time of Destiny

He shrugged and blushed a bit. "Yeah, that's how they know who's given out the passes. We each get some to give out every week."

"It's a wonderful picture! And it moves! You're waving at me!"

"Wizard pictures always move, and paintings usually talk to you – you can have whole conversations with them, mirrors, all kinds of things," he murmured. "It's fun being a wizard."

"It sounds like it," she said with a smile.

"Well, I need to go. I have to teach a class at the Auror School this afternoon – that's why I'm in town – and I did want to find something for Ginny first," Harry said as he threw some Muggle money on the table to pay for their coffees and stood up. "It was good to see you again."

"Good to see you too," Petunia said, standing and trying to arrange her parcels.

"Let me help you with those," he said, chuckling as the slippery plastic bags started to slither out of her grasp.

"Oh, thank you! But I don't want to make you late," she said.

"I've still got some time. Did you drive?"

"Yes."

"Where are you parked? I'll help you get these to the car," he offered.

"Thank you! I'm just around the corner, actually," she said as they reached the door of the shop.

"Bye, ducks!" the waitress called. "Don't forget to dig up a relative for me!"

"I'll see what I can do, Marie," Harry said with a grin as he followed his aunt out of the shop.

"Is she . . . one of your kind?" Petunia asked when they were outside.

"No, she's a Muggle. I'm here a lot because the Auror School is around the corner, and their coffee is terrible. I usually pick up a cup to take with me on days I'm there for meetings or to teach," Harry replied.

"What do you teach?"

"Defensive spells, mostly. Some battle strategies. I'm not as good at those as Ron, but since their baby came, he wants to stay at home more, so I'm teaching the rest of his classes for him. This is the last week of term, and I won't be teaching next term, since the twins will be here by then." He smiled and blushed, obviously delighted at the thought of having his very own family.

"Will you still teach at Hogwarts?"

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"Yes, that's just takes Tuesday momings. I have Tuesdays off from the team. It gives me a chance to visit with my grandfather, too."

Petunia stopped and stared at him. "Your WHAT?"

"Oh. I forgot you hadn't heard. After Voldemort died, Professor Dumbledore told me he's my great-great-grandfather. He kept the relationship a secret for several generations to protect us. My dad didn't know, nor did his mum. Her mum was Grandfather's daughter. Her husband was killed during the war with Grindelwald, and . . . well, it's complicated, but those are the basics." He shrugged. "We're building a suite onto our house in Godric's Hollow for Grandfather to live in once he retires from Hogwarts."

"When is he retiring?" Petunia said, still trying to get her mind around the fact that the powerful wizard who'd made such changes in their lives by dropping baby Harry on their steps was Harry's great-great-grandfather.

"Not for several years, but we want him to spend holidays with us and so on, so the children will get to know him well," Harry said comfortably. He looked at her, knowing what was on her mind. "And the reason he couldn't keep me, the reason you were the one who had to take me in, was that it was my *mother's* sacrifice that saved me, her blood that protected me, so I had to be with someone of her bloodline for that protection to work. And if he'd revealed he was my grandfather, he and I would have been in even more danger."

"How could you possibly have been in more danger than having the most evil" She was at a loss for words.

"Anything's possible, Aunt Petunia," Harry said reasonably. "I mean, look at us. We're having a pleasant conversation. Who would have believed that six years ago?"

She smiled. "You're right. Ah, here we are," she said, getting out her keys and opening the boot of her car.

As she did so, five young ladies who'd just emerged from a nearby car hurried over. "Harry Potter? Is it really you? Right here on the *street*?"

"Hello," he said calmly. *Fan girls*, he thought with a sigh.

"Could we have your autograph?" one girl asked. She was wearing a London Lions t-shirt with Harry's number superimposed on the lion's mane.

"Sure. What do you want me to sign?" he said. "Do you have a pen?"

"Here," the girl said, holding out a felt-tip marker. "Sign my shirt?"

Harry grinned at her cheekiness. "OK. Turn around."

"No, here!" she said, standing boldly before him and arching her back so her t-shirt tightened across her breasts. The other girls giggled and watched with great interest to see what Harry would do.

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"I'm an old married man, ladies," Harry said patiently, smiling at each girl in turn. He looked back at the girl waiting to have her shirt signed. "Your backs will have to do." He turned the girl around and wrote his name on the back of her shoulder, then did the same for her friends.

"Thanks! See you at the next game!" the girls called cheerfully as they moved away. They giggled and looked at him over their shoulders from time to time until they were lost in the crowd on the sidewalk.

"Did you know them?" Petunia said as they settled her purchases in the boot.

"Just by sight. I think they're part of my fan club," he said with a sigh. He looked at her quite seriously. "I didn't want a fan club, but some people started one – well, several, actually, and the team management wanted me to cooperate with them. To save me time and energy, they managed to talk the clubs into merging, so now there's only one for me to deal with. I see those girls at the games whenever we play in London. The girl in the Lions t-shirt follows the team from game to game unless we play up in Scotland." He shrugged. "I don't understand the whole fan thing, but they do bring new people to the games with them, and they keep getting others interested in the team, so that's all good. It only takes me a little time to be nice to them. And nearly all of them have been very kind to me, and they treat Ginny with great respect, as well."

He closed the boot and started to move away. "I'll see you on the weekend, then," he said, lifting his hand in farewell.

"Yes, see you then," Petunia promised. She watched him walk away, her mind whirling. She was simply stunned that the tall, well-dressed young man who exuded such self-assurance was her nephew. If someone had told her he'd grow into someone famous enough to have fan clubs, self-confident enough to handle adulation with ease, and kind enough to be polite to old enemies like the aunt who had mistreated him for so long, she would never have believed it. Yet it was true. Amazing.

"You're kidding!" Fred Weasley said when his sister told him who she needed to meet outside the stadium. He shifted his infant son a bit in his arms. "The bleedin' *Dursleys*?"

"Coming to watch *Harry* play?" George said in equal disbelief.

"Language, Fred," Maeve, Fred's wife, chided him. "The babies."

"The babies are babies," Fred protested. "They won't understand."

"Time to start new habits, luv," his wife said mildly.

Fred and George had met Maeve and Caitlyn O'Kelly on a business trip to Ireland, twin red-headed girls who were as stubborn and funny as Fred and George themselves. It was no time at all before there was a double wedding. Both girls being very much like Molly in many ways, babies soon followed, twin boys in both cases, all of them redheads, so identical that they looked like quadruplets. Molly was delighted to be surrounded by so many grandchildren all at once. Fred's babies were three weeks older than George's, and Ron and Hermione's son was the oldest of all of them, four months older than the twins' twins. Charlie, too, had finally

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found someone who suited him, a quiet Welsh girl from the region where the Welsh Green dragons bred. Megan was a strong girl who enjoyed the outdoor life Charlie preferred. They'd been married less than a year.

"But the Dursleys!" George said in disbelief. "How could Harry do that?"

"He says his aunt has changed, and she told him his uncle had changed as well," Ginny told them. "Nothing was said about Dudley being any different, but I'm sure he'll behave himself if he's sitting in the same box as you two," she told her twin brothers with a grin. "Just behave, for Harry's sake, all right? You know the cameras will be on this box since the crowd knows we're his and Ron's family. Let's keep things as pleasant as possible, all right?"

"We can't hex them even a little bit?" Fred pleaded. "Dudley's such a git!"

"Fred Weasley!" Maeve snapped. "Language!" Molly, sitting behind them, chuckled and then smiled at her daughter-in-law with great approval.

"Sorry, dear," he said, then leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, nuzzling his other son's downy head where it rested on her shoulder.

"It's time for me to go wait for her," Ginny said, looking at her watch and starting to heave her awkwardly pregnant body out of her seat.

"I'll go," Arthur said. "You need to stay off your feet."

"Thanks, Dad," Ginny replied gratefully as she sank back into her carefully cushioned seat. Her entire family was coddling her during her pregnancy. As petite as she was, carrying twins was quite uncomfortable for her.

Arthur Weasley stood outside the stadium, rocking on his feet, his hands clasped behind his back. He was wearing his best Muggle attire – striped trousers, a Lions t-shirt and a brown leather bomber jacket. He saw a car pull up and park in the row and three very uneasy-looking people get out.

"Mrs. Dursley, Mr. Dursley, how nice to see you again. Arthur Weasley, perhaps you remember me?" Arthur said politely, greeting them with his hand extended.

"Yes, so nice to see you again," Petunia said carefully. She shook the man's hand a bit nervously, then prodded Vernon to do the same. "You remember our son, Dudley?"

"Yes, Dudley, how are you?" Arthur said, offering his hand. Dudley drew back in fear. "Now, that will simply not do, young man," Arthur chided him sharply. "You're going to be sitting in the best seats in the stadium. People will be watching us, and there will be photographers taking pictures of us all the time, catching our reactions to the game because we're Ron's and Harry's family, and they're the stars of the team. You need to put a good face on it if you're going to be in the family box." He held his hand out again and Dudley finally shook it. "That's better. Harry is giving you an opportunity few Muggles ever have. Please don't make him regret it." Arthur had planned to be as polite as possible to these Muggles, but they already

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had him worried. He was as protective of Harry as he was of his own children, and he would not allow these people to spoil the day for any of his family.

"They play a sport in there?" Vernon said, eyeing the decrepit old hanger in front of him warily.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let me cast the charm that will allow you to see it properly," Arthur said as he pulled out his wand. He frowned at Vernon and Dudley when they flinched at the sight of it and waited for them to get hold of themselves before casting the spell on the Dursleys so they could see the stadium as it was in reality. When the spell was done, he grinned at the Muggles' expressions. He knew they'd seen a manky old building before, and that now, the gorgeous stadium was revealed to them. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Oh, my," Petunia breathed, looking up at the immense structure. "It is beautiful!" White cloth arced elegantly over the seats to protect spectators from the sun. Colourful flags flew from numerous poles around the walls. Each entryway was flanked by paintings of a gold lion rampant on a scarlet field, with "London Lions" arched above the door itself.

"I'm so looking forward to the game," Petunia said as they followed Arthur toward the door. She hoped Vernon and Dudley would lighten up soon. They'd both agreed to come. They'd sounded interested in the game, at least a little. She'd done the best she could to prepare them. She crossed her fingers, then smiled at herself for doing something so childish.

Arthur noticed her crossed fingers. He leaned toward her. "It works, you know."

"What?" she said, startled.

"Crossing your fingers," he said, laying his finger next to his nose and winking at her. "Let's go in, shall we?"

After everyone greeted the new arrivals and they all settled in their seats, Ginny made her way to the Dursleys seats and offered them an open cardboard box.

"Hello, Ginny. It's nice to see you again. What's this?" Petunia asked, smiling at the extremely pregnant young woman.

"Nice to see you, too. This box has rosettes to show you support the Lions. Harry sent them up. He also made sure we have pennants, banners, flags, hats, whatever you want. Help yourself." She smiled and set the box down. "I hope you enjoy the game. Thanks for coming. It means a lot to Harry." She placed a supportive hand on her stomach. "Settle down," she sighed, giving her hugely swollen stomach a maternal glare.

"When are you due?" Petunia said politely. "Congratulations, by the way. Harry said they're twins. How exciting for you!"

"Yes, I can hardly wait," Ginny replied, her eyes warm and happy. "I'm due in a couple of weeks. These two seem to want to dance today. I'd better sit down again. Please excuse me." She smiled graciously, then went back to her seat in the front row beside Hermione.

Cheers broke out in various places around the stadium.

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"What's happening?" Petunia asked Molly Weasley, who had just sat down beside her.

"Ron and Harry have come into the box, and people have seen them," Molly said, waving at her son and son-in-law, who were down at the front kissing their wives. The two young men were already in uniform. They straightened and waved both hands at the crowd, who cheered much more loudly now that their attention was being returned by their heroes.

Ron came striding up the stairs, his son in his arms. "Hi, Mum, Dad!" His eyes slid across his parents to the Muggles beside them. "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley. Dudley. Harry said you'd be here today. I hope you enjoy the game. Thanks for coming."

"Thank you," Petunia said graciously.

She elbowed Vernon, who nodded and said, "Yes, it should be interesting."

"Dad, have you explained the game to Uncle Vernon and Dudley yet?" Harry asked as he joined Ron near the senior Weasleys.

"I was just beginning to. We have plenty of time. We'll make certain they understand what they're seeing, don't worry," Arthur assured him.

"Great!" He turned to the Dursleys and smiled hesitantly. "Uncle Vernon. Dudley. How are you?"

"Very well, thank you," Vernon said a bit stiffly.

"Fine," Dudley said, then clamped his mouth shut.

Harry saw this and grinned. "I've made the twins promise to behave today. Fred and George, that is. There are so many twins now, I suppose I need to specify which ones," he said with a laugh as he grinned at his mischievous brothers-in-law a few seats down. "You'll be all right, don't worry. I'm glad you made it."

"Thank you for the tickets," Uncle Vernon said with a small, uneasy smile. "I understand these are the best seats?"

"Absolutely," Ron said, "Harry's Team Captain and he gets the best seats because of that. Our whole family gets the benefit of it."

George looked from Vernon's nervous face to the Weasley/Potter family, which filled the box quite well. The only non-redheads were Harry, Hermione and the Dursleys. "If you don't feel as if you fit in, we can give you red hair just for the length of the match," he offered, grinning.

"George," Harry warned, but his eyes were laughing. "You promised."

"And so he did," his wife, Caitlyn, agreed. "He'll behave."

"Have you met everyone?" Harry asked the Dursleys politely. Seeing their blank faces, he made the introductions, explaining who was married to whom, and which of the babies being passed around belonged with which parents.

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"Harry!" a man's voice called from the side of the family box. "How are you, mate?"

"Dan! Good to see you. How's the band doing?" Harry said, going to greet Dan Jacobs, leader of the band, Toads in the Loo, who had become a good friend of Harry's.

"Blooming, mate, just blooming. The new album's gone double-crystal. Thanks for the commentary you wrote for it! Your name always helps us sell albums."

"Hey, you know I love your music! I was happy to help out," Harry said, grinning at his friend. "And your music sells itself, I don't have a thing to do with it."

"Whatever you say, mate," Dan said, "just as long as you keep doing liner notes for us!"

"No problem."

"How's Ginny?" Dan asked, leaning around Harry to wave to her. "Looks as if she's about to burst!"

"Yeah, the babies are due in a couple of weeks."

"You're one lucky bloke, you do know that?" Dan said, punching Harry lightly in the shoulder.

"Yes, I do," Harry replied, glancing over his shoulder at his wife. He turned back to shake hands with Dan. "Enjoy the game!"

"I intend to! Win it for me, will you? I've got quite a few galleons on it!"

"I'll do my best," Harry assured him, grinning.

"Harry!" Ginny called suddenly. "It's time!"

"*What?*" he cried, leaping down the steps and across the length of the box to her. "It's time?"

"For the match, silly! You need to go!"

He relaxed visibly. "Whew! You had me worried there!" He bent down and kissed her soundly, sparking cheers all over the stadium. "All right, see you lot later!" he said, waving to the rest of the family and the stadium in general, and then following Ron down the stairs to the locker room.

Vernon and Dudley sat with their jaws dropped, as they had for the last two hours. They couldn't believe they were watching men and women zooming around at well over a hundred miles per hour – sometimes over two hundred miles per hour, if Arthur Weasley was to be believed – and on brooms! And despite being on brooms, they were playing quite a rough-and-tumble game! Those "bludgeons," or whatever they were called, knocked people nearly off their brooms with regularity, yet the game didn't stop. The players stuck like another coat of varnish to their brooms and played despite injuries that would have felled someone in a rugby game. The Dursley men were impressed in spite of themselves.

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And Harry – what could they say about Harry? They'd seen him cruise high overhead for long periods, then suddenly dart among players or dive straight toward the ground, always managing to pull up within a hair's breadth of disaster. Petunia screamed every time he did this, but Vernon and Dudley just held their breath, shocked that anyone would willingly get on a stick, go a hundred feet in the air and then point the stick straight down and race toward earth at two hundred miles an hour! And then to pull out of the dive as neatly as he did! Astounding!

Harry had been fainting during those dives, but when he finally saw the Snitch, all pretence was gone and he tore after it, going much faster, flying with even more abandon than he had before. When he caught it and spiralled upward with the small golden ball clutched in his upraised fist, the roar of the crowd was deafening. The Dursleys found themselves swept up in the emotion of the throng and stood up, cheering and waving their pennants as wildly as anyone else. Petunia even joined the chant of "HAR-RY! HAR-RY! HAR-RY! HAR-RY!" that filled the stands.

The teams landed and shook hands, then left the field. Harry and Ron were nearly off the field on their way to the locker room when Ginny cried out and collapsed in her seat. Despite all the noise, Harry heard her, attuned as his senses always were to her. He looked up at the stands and saw her writhing in her seat, holding her stomach, Hermione bent over her solicitously.

"Ginny!" he cried, then leapt onto his broom and flew up to the family box. He jumped off of his broom and knelt beside her. "What's wrong? Are you OK?" Ron landed just behind him.

"I'm in labour," she said, a sheen of sweat on her face.

"It's time?" he said, aghast. She nodded.

"She's been having contractions every so often throughout the game," Hermione said, "She's a healer – she should have known! But she said you needed her here for luck and refused to leave."

"And so I do, you silly girl, but we need to get you to the hospital now," he said, love shining in his eyes. "Are you up to flashing?"

"Yes, please," she said miserably. "I'd like that."

"OK," he said. He glanced up at the rest of the family. "I have to take Ginny to the hospital. She's having our babies! See you there!" With that, he changed into a phoenix, grasped her robes in his talons and flashed out of sight.

"What just happened?" Vernon said in confusion. "Where did that bird come from?"

"Ginny's in labour," Molly said, obviously worried. "The bird was Harry. He took her to the hospital. The babies are two weeks early. Come on, Arthur, let's go."

"We'll take Richard," Maeve told Hermione, handing the baby in her own arms to her husband. "You go on, she'll need you."

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"Thanks!" Hermione said, passing the baby and his diaper bag over to her sister-in-law.

"Give her our best, and kiss those babies for us!" Caitlyn said. "We'll go to Harry's house and keep the children there. You lot go on."

"We'll help you get them to Harry's," George told his wife, "and then we'll go to the hospital. Maybe by then, the messy part will be over!"

"Messy part, my eye!" his wife said tartly. He rewarded her with a cheeky grin and a repentant kiss.

As the Weasley twins and their wives packed up baby things so they could leave, the Dursleys stood where they'd been left, looking a bit lost. Vernon turned to his wife. "The bird was Harry?" She simply nodded as she watched the activity around them.

"Um – how are you getting to the hospital?" Petunia asked Molly as the other woman finished gathering up her things. Petunia knew not many wizards had cars. "We can drive you if you like."

"That's all right, dear, we can Apparate," Molly said with a watery smile. "Oh, my baby's having babies! I simply can't stand it!"

"Thank you for the offer," Arthur said kindly. "Erm . . . would you like to come? You're Harry's family, after all."

"Could we?" Petunia said hopefully. "We wouldn't want to be in the way."

"With so many of us, three more won't make much difference. And Remus, Tonks and Albus will want to come soon too, I'm sure," Arthur said. "Come along, I'll ride with you so you can get into the hospital. Molly, you go with the boys. I'll tell Tonks to drop off her children at Harry's house with the others."

A few hours later, a weary but delighted Harry stepped into the Waiting Room. "Identical boys," he said happily. "Loads of black hair. Ginny swears their eyes are going to be green, but I can't tell. She says they look like me."

"Poor little tykes," Fred jibed, making his brothers laugh and his mother scowl at him.

"How's Ginny?" Molly asked.

"She's very tired. She had a rough go for a while, but she's going to be fine. The healers were very pleased with everything," Harry said.

"Identical twin boys!" George chortled. "More twins for us to corrupt!"

"But people will know which twins to blame when these two get, shall we say 'creative,' since they aren't redheads," Fred pointed out.

George grinned wickedly. "Ah, there is that. Perhaps we can dye their hair."

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"You'll have to fight their mother over that one," Harry warned them, laughing as he spoke. "She seems rather pleased that they aren't redheads." He noticed the Dursleys sitting quietly in the corner. "I didn't know you came. Thanks!"

"The Weasleys invited us," Petunia said, a bit unnerved by some of the strange maladies they'd seen on people passing by: a woman with something shaped like a bird trying repeatedly to emerge from her forehead, a child floating near the ceiling, her mother chasing after her trying to pull her down, a man who couldn't stop doing cartwheels, many others. The receptionist who'd told them where to wait had "Sneak" in purple pustules across her face, badly hidden by heavy makeup. Petunia wondered what the story was behind that affliction. The sight of that young woman had made Hermione and Ron smile for some reason.

"It was nice of you to come, and to wait so long. The babies are nursing now, but you'll all be able to see them in a few minutes." He moved across the room and hugged his grandfather, godfather and godmother. "Thanks for coming! Where are the kids?" he asked Tonks.

"At your house. The twins are taking care of them," Tonks replied, kissing him on the cheek. "Twin boys, Harry! I'm so happy for you!"

"Thanks!" he said, his face glowing with joy. He turned back to the senior Weasleys. "Mum, would you and Dad like to come in now? Ginny said she'd like to see you."

"Oh, yes!" Molly said, leaping to her feet. She and Arthur followed Harry through the swinging doors and down the corridor to Ginny's room. Ginny was busy learning how to nurse two babies at once. A twin in each arm, she looked exhausted but radiant.

"Oh, Ginny, they're beautiful!" Molly enthused, tears coursing down her face.

"Well done, dear," Arthur said, smiling fondly at his daughter.

"They look like Harry!" Ginny said with delight. "Aren't they gorgeous?"

As the women chatted, Arthur asked Harry, "Have you held one of them yet?"

"Yes. I was afraid I'd break him! I'm glad the twins and Ron and Hermione already had babies so I had a bit of experience with them," Harry said, smiling broadly.

"Sweetie, could you take Siri?" Ginny said a few minutes later.

"Sure," Harry said, taking a baby from her arms, then handing it to Molly.

"Siri?" Molly said, looking up from the precious bundle in her arms.

"He's the younger one. Sirius Albus Potter. And this one is James Arthur Potter," Ginny said, handing the infant to Harry, who deposited him in Arthur's arms. "We'll call them Jamie and Siri."

"What wonderful names!" Molly said, tears streaming down her joy-filled face as she kissed her new grandson for the first time.

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"James Arthur?" Arthur said, his face glowing with delighted surprise. "You named him after me?"

"Of course!" Ginny said, smiling.

Molly was busy examining her newest grandson. "Oh, he has tons of black hair, just like his father."

"And the same cowlicks that won't let Harry's hair lie down," Ginny said with a fond smile.

"Poor blokes," Harry said, chuckling.

"I love your hair!" Ginny said, laughing at him.

"You don't have to live with it!" he countered.

"Oh, yes, I do!" she retorted, then yawned hugely.

"You're tired, baby," he said, relenting. "We can go back to poking fun at my hair – and now our boys' hair – when you've rested a bit."

"Our boys," she murmured, reaching for Harry's hand and smiling at the picture her parents made as they cuddled their newest grandchildren.

Eleven years after Jamie and Siri's arrival

After twelve years as the best Seeker England had ever seen, Harry was now in his fourth year as the coach of the London Lions. He'd decided coaching was in his family's best interest after suffering a serious injury that landed him in the hospital for several days. The sight of Ginny's exhausted face after dealing with their children alone for so long, as well as worrying herself sick about him, was enough to make him decide to stop taking chances with his health. And honestly, all the injuries he'd suffered throughout his life, whether from Quidditch, battle, or ambushes when Voldemort was trying to kill him, were beginning to slow him down a bit anyway, now that he was in his thirties. He and Ron had played for England in three World Cup games during their Quidditch careers, winning handily every time. They'd both been active Aurors in the off-season, and had taught at the Auror School as well, Harry teaching defensive spells and advanced flying techniques, Ron teaching battle strategies. They'd backed off of their Auror duties as their families grew, finally retiring from the Auror ranks to play Quidditch full time when the strain of worrying about them and caring for all those children alone so often showed on their wives' uncomplaining faces.

Ron now worked for the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ginny had finished Healer School and worked as a healer for a couple of years before starting their family. Hermione had finished Oxford Wizarding University and had become a writer, writing new school books as well as revising many textbooks and "Hogwarts: A History." She was also writing fiction books for the Muggle market, telling wizarding stories as if they were fairy tales.

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Harry continued to teach flying at Hogwarts on Tuesdays, as well, a part-time job that gave him a great deal of pleasure. As he locked the broom cupboard after his last class of the day, Harry saw his grandfather approaching.

"Hi," Harry said cheerfully.

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore said with warm affection in his voice. "Ready for the school term to be over?"

"Yes," he replied. There were only a few more weeks before the summer holidays began. "I'm looking forward to spending more time with my family over the summer. This will be Jamie and Siri's last summer before starting Hogwarts, so I want to spend as much time with them as possible. I can't imagine not seeing them until Christmas."

"Except on Tuesdays," Dumbledore said with a smile as he and Harry turned toward the castle.

"Yes, except on Tuesdays," Harry agreed.

"I wanted to talk to you about that," Dumbledore said, stopping and looking at Harry seriously.

"What is it?" Harry said, a bit unnerved by his grandfather's suddenly earnest demeanour.

"I'm going to retire, Harry. I'm slowing down, getting too old to manage things here anymore. And I, too, would like to spend more time with my family." He smiled at the younger man. Harry and his children were nearly all the family Dumbledore had left now. His brother, Aberforth, had died a few years ago. The only other relative he had left was Minerva McGonagall, a distant cousin.

Harry grinned. "I told you when we built the house in Godric's Hollow that the extension on the back was yours whenever you wanted it. I meant that. It's yours. We'd love for you to live with us, not just visit."

"Oh, dear boy, I don't want to put you and Ginny out that way," Dumbledore began.

"If you don't want to live with us, that's your choice, but it wouldn't be putting us out. We would be thrilled to have you there all the time. You know we all love you."

Dumbledore blinked hard, fighting back tears. "You are too kind, Harry, really. Thank you. If you and Ginny are serious—"

"Absolutely."

"Then I'd be honoured to live there. Thank you," the old wizard said sincerely. He pulled Harry into a hug and held him for a long moment, then released him. "That wasn't why I told you I was retiring, actually, but what a lovely thing for you and Ginny to do."

"It's our pleasure, Grandfather," Harry said sincerely.

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"Well," Dumbledore said, clearing his throat, "what I really wanted to speak with you about was a change in your position here. Minerva will be the headmistress. I would like you to teach Transfiguration. You can continue to teach the flying classes as well, if you'd like."

"Transfiguration? Me?" Harry said in surprise. "But—"

"Who better? You're an outstanding teacher, as well as a multiple Animagus. Your grades in Transfiguration were fine. I know you're best at Defence against the Dark Arts, but Remus—"

"I won't take Remus's job," Harry said firmly. "That's his as long as he wants it."

"You will be a fine Transfiguration teacher, Harry. Will you consider it? You won't need to live here. You can still flash home every evening. And you'll be here with Jamie and Siri – you'll be their teacher." He held this thought out like a carrot before a horse, tempting his grandson.

"You know all the right buttons to push, don't you?" Harry laughed.

"I do my best," the old man agreed, chuckling. "Will you do it? Of course, we can't pay you as well as the Lions do."

"You know that doesn't matter to me," Harry replied with a grin. "I'll need to talk it over with Ginny. She'd be glad to have me home on weekends, anyway. Coaching the Lions keeps me pretty busy, and with games at the weekends—"

"I do understand. Let me know your decision as soon as you can, all right?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "When do you want to move in with us?"

"Sometime during the summer, I think," his grandfather replied. "I'll need to tidy things up here a bit before handing the job over to Minerva."

"All right. We're looking forward to having you there," Harry said, giving his grandfather's shoulder a gentle squeeze. He cringed inwardly when he noticed how frail the old man's shoulder felt under his hand. His grandfather must be around 170 now, which was old even for a wizard. Harry was glad that Dumbledore would spend his remaining years with his family. It would be good for all of them.

"I'm home!" Harry called as he entered his big, rambling house in Godric's Hollow. He grinned as a sea of children converged on him.

"Dad! Dad!" "Daddy's home!" "Guess what I did today!" "Pick me up, Daddy!" his children called. Soon Harry was carrying his five-year-old twin girls, Lily and Molly Elizabeth, known as "Beth," with his seven-year-old boys, John and Brian, each riding one of his feet, and his nine-year-old son, Dan, bouncing around him as he made his way through the house. When Ginny met him in the living room, he bent over as much as he could with young ones in his arms to kiss her.

"Have a good day?" she asked as she began detaching children from him.

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"Yeah, great!" he replied. He always enjoyed his days at Hogwarts. "How about you?"

"Well, I found we needed a better locking spell on the broom shed," she said with a rueful grin. "The girls had your old Excalibur out and nearly got it flying!"

"They're only five!"

"Never underestimate the power of a determined redhead," she said with a smile.

"I learned that lesson years ago," he chuckled as he watched his green-eyed daughters pick up their kittens and settle in their little rocking chairs, holding the kitties like babies. "They seem to be OK."

"Yes, they're fine. So's your old broom."

"I hate to think what could have happened if they'd managed to get that broom flying," he said, his stomach clenching nervously at the thought. The Excalibur had been his first professional Quidditch broom and still went over two hundred miles per hour, but it shuddered badly at times now.

"Me, too. I had a good talk with them and gave them chores to do as punishment. But it's time you put them on real brooms instead of the baby brooms, I think. They need to learn how to be safe with real power under them."

"I'll start them off this weekend. You don't want them to have a flying lesson on the same day they got in trouble for flying without permission, do you?" he teased.

"You know I don't," she said, poking him in the ribs.

"Ow, you've wounded me, woman!" he said, grabbing her and pulling her down on the couch.

"Family pileup!" Dan cried, his blue eyes dancing. Suddenly Harry and Ginny were covered in a laughing, squirming pile of children. Harry rolled the entire mass onto the floor, cushioning their fall with an Arresto Momentum, then began a tickling session with as many kids as he could reach. Those out of his reach soon got close enough to get in the fun.

"Where are Jamie and Siri?" Harry asked when he caught his breath.

"They were playing in Ron's back garden the last time I saw them," Ginny said, without concern. Harry had placed strong wards around both properties and their home Quidditch pitch so that no one could enter without the adults giving them permission, and the children couldn't wander off the property either. Harry and Ron were both famous and wealthy enough that they felt the need for extra protections for their families. He'd also gotten permission to teach their children some elementary defensive spells they could do with the small training wands he'd had Mr. Ollivander make for them. The wands were spelled to only do those defensive charms Harry had asked Mr. Ollivander to put in them. Harry and Ron had also taught their children how to fly as soon as they were coordinated enough. Each of them carried a Shrinking Charmed broom in their pockets at all times, so they'd be as safe as possible wherever they went. The brooms were spelled to enlarge with a simple password, but only when given by either the broom's owner or one of their parents.

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Just then the family heard a commotion outside.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did NOT!"

"Did too!"

"Did *NOT*!"

By this time, Harry and Ginny were standing in the doorway, their children peeping around them to see what was going on. Jamie and Siri were trudging toward the house, Siri red-faced with fury, Jamie looking quite guilty. Siri had rhubarb growing out of his ears.

"What happened?" Harry said, giving his boys a stern parental stare.

"I didn't mean to do it," Jamie began.

"Did too!" Siri growled. Sometimes Harry thought Sirius Black had come back to life in his namesake. Siri had a laugh like a bark and growled when he was angry, just like Sirius.

"What did you do, Jamie?" Harry said patiently.

Jamie reached into his pocket, his head hanging low and a look of guilt on his face as he pulled out his dad's first wand.

"Where did you find that?" Ginny snapped, grabbing the wand from the boy's limp fingers.

"We were poking around in the barn and found it in an old box," Jamie replied miserably.

"Jamie thought he could do spells because he's been reading Aunt Hermione's books!" Siri said indignantly.

"Aunt Hermione would be the first to tell you that reading spells doesn't necessarily teach you how to do them," Harry chided him. He was having trouble not smiling at Siri's plight. He looked quite funny with rhubarb coming out of his ears.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Ginny said, waving the wand and ridding her second son of the offending vegetables. "When are you two going to learn that magic isn't a game?"

"When we go to Hogwarts," they intoned together.

Ginny had to stifle a laugh at their serious reply. She caught Harry's eye and saw that he, too, was on the verge of giggles. She forced herself into strict parental mode. "Jamie, you will clean the stables by yourself for the next three days as punishment. Siri, you were involved too, weren't you? You didn't tell Jamie to put it back, did you?" The boy shook his head miserably. "Fine. Then you can de-gnome the garden by yourself for the next three days."

The Time of Destiny

"Three days?" Siri said in horror. "But I didn't do anything! I'm the victim here!"

"And if you'd either talked your brother into putting the wand back, or told your mother or me that he had it, you wouldn't have been walking around with rhubarb coming out of your ears, would you?" Harry said reasonably. "I think you're equally guilty."

"But – but – but –" Siri protested.

"Children, are all of you paying attention?" Ginny said, looking at the rest of her brood. She got solemn nods all around. "If you see one of your brothers or sisters doing something like this, you need to get him or her to stop, or come tell your dad or me. Is that clear? Magic isn't something to play with. You can really hurt each other if you cast spells incorrectly."

"That's true," Harry agreed, having been the victim of many miscast spells.

"Now go on and do your chores. We'll have dinner in an hour," Ginny said, sending her children out of the house. "Jamie, Siri, get started on those jobs."

"Yes, Mum," the two oldest boys chorused.

Each child had his or her own jobs to do on their small farm. Some weeded the garden, some fed the chickens or gathered eggs, others fed the dogs, cats and horses. The children scattered to do their evening chores, leaving Harry and Ginny alone in the house.

"Ah, alone at last," Harry teased, nibbling on Ginny's neck.

"Not for long!" she said, giggling as he gently tickled her, then plucked at her buttons, loosening the top one and peeping inside her shirt as if there was a wondrous treasure hidden there, an impish gleam in his eyes as he planned his next move. She was delighted that Harry, without the threat of Voldemort hanging over him, had become a playful, funny man, always ready for some mischief. She rarely saw the serious side of him anymore, and his flaming rages were a thing of the past.

"You have a reprieve for now, m'lady," he said, kissing the end of her nose delicately, "but we have an appointment later." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively at her, making her laugh, and carefully re-did the button he'd undone. "I love your laugh. Actually, I love all of you," he said, holding her close.

"Lucky me," she said, relaxing against him. "I love you too."

"Good thing," he said, kissing the top of her head. "I don't know what I'd do if you didn't."

"You'd court me and get me to love you all over again," she said with tremendous confidence, leaning back in his arms to look up at him.

"Yes, I would," he agreed pulling her into his embrace again. He just held her quietly for a few minutes, savouring the feeling of his lovely wife in his arms. Finally, he released her, and said, "We need to talk."

"What's wrong?" she said, instantly on guard.

The Time of Destiny

"Nothing," he said with a smile. "Grandfather's retiring and that's going to cause some changes in our life."

"Did he agree to come and live with us?" She loved Dumbledore as much as Harry did, and the children adored him.

"Yes, he did. He was very touched that I asked him," Harry replied. He went on to tell her about the job offer.

"Transfiguration? You'll be brilliant at that!"

"It will mean seeing the boys every day," he said with a smile. "I'd like that. But what do you think? Is it all right with you?"

"To have you home on weekends, and for you to be able to keep an eye on our kids and nephews? You silly man, why did you even need to ask?"

"Because it wouldn't be fair to agree without talking with you."

"Take the job, Harry," Ginny encouraged him. "You were an excellent teacher at the Auror School, and you've got plenty of experience teaching children from being the flying instructor at Hogwarts all these years. You'll do a wonderful job."

He smiled. "Thanks. I was hoping you'd say that."

The next week, Dumbledore visited Harry, Ginny and their family in Godric's Hollow. Ron, Hermione and their three boys joined the Potter clan for dinner. All three boys looked like Ron, although Will, the middle son, had brown eyes like his mother and his Aunt Ginny.

As everyone relaxed in the living room after a wonderful dinner, Ron smiled and said, "I had some news today."

"You've had that 'I have news' expression all evening," Ginny chided him, chuckling at his blush. "I wondered when you'd get around to telling us what it was."

Despite his reddened ears, Ron smiled with quiet pride. "I've been named head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. It will be in the paper tomorrow."

"Congratulations!" "Well done!" "Good for you!" Ginny, Harry and Dumbledore said, as Hermione beamed.

"That's a well-deserved promotion," Harry said, reaching over to clap his best mate on the back. "What you've done there already has been amazing. I can't wait to see what you do as head of the department!"

"Thanks," Ron said, blushing even more. "I have a lot of ideas. I'll want to talk them over with you sometime, Harry."

The Time of Destiny

"Yeah, sure!" Harry agreed. They discussed Ron's promotion a bit more, then Ginny asked Hermione how her new book was coming along.

"It's finished actually," she said with a smile. She turned to Dumbledore, who all the Weasley children now called "Grandfather" like the Potter children. "It's the first of that new series of text books. Actually, I have most of the others nearly completed as well. I work on each of them as ideas come to me, so they're all fairly well along. I'm hoping to release them as a complete set. My publisher's quite excited about it."

"Wonderful!" the old wizard said. "I can't wait to read them."

"I have the manuscript for the first one here, if you'd like to hear some of it," she offered. With everyone's encouragement, she pulled a huge roll of parchment from her bag. "The title is 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,'" she said, glancing at Harry a bit uneasily.

"I thought you said you were writing some new text books," Harry said suspiciously.

"I am. They'll be added to the curriculum in History of Magic," she replied. "Professor Binns has been trying to tell your stories from memory, so I decided to write them down, one per year for all your years at Hogwarts. Now he'll have to get the facts straight."

"You're kidding, right?" Harry said, frowning.

"No, I'm not." Hermione looked at Harry warily.

"She's got a Muggle publisher interested in them as kids' books, too," Ron said with obvious pride. He seemed to have missed Harry's displeasure with the news.

"Ron's read through them," she said hurriedly, hoping Harry wouldn't blow up about this. He'd been even-tempered for so many years, she'd nearly forgotten about his rages, but she could see he wasn't at all happy right now. "He thinks they're fine. Honestly, they won't embarrass you, Harry. I wouldn't do that to you."

"Harry, you are an important part of our history," Ginny said, putting a gentle hand on his arm. "Children need to learn the truth about those times."

"What are the other titles?" Dumbledore asked Hermione with an encouraging smile.

"'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,' 'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,' 'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,' 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,' 'Harry Potter and the Refiner's Fire,' and 'Harry Potter and the Time of Destiny,'" she replied, glancing at Harry apprehensively.

"'The Time of Destiny'?" Harry said, his scowl deepening. "Isn't that a bit . . . pretentious?"

Hermione huffed a bit, impatient with his apparent thickness. "What part of that title isn't true?" she said tartly. "It was your destiny to deal with Voldemort. That's where I got the title."

The Time of Destiny

"Erm, Hermione?" Ginny said hesitantly, glancing at all the young faces around them. "How, um, detailed are those last two books?"

"I put everything in," Hermione said, frowning in confusion at her sister-in-law. "Why?"

"Not the bits about . . . well, you know," Ginny breathed, her eyes wide with horror. "Surely not."

"Oh!" Hermione said, understanding at once. "I, erm, glossed over those bits. I'm writing them for children, not the adult market."

"OK, good," Ginny said, relaxing again.

"You're sure about that?" Harry insisted, frowning at his best friend. "There are some things" His voice trailed off as he saw the laughter in Ron's and Hermione's eyes.

"We feel the same way, don't worry," Ron said. "I talked to her about it – and then I read the manuscript, as well. No worries."

"What are you talking about?" Brian asked innocently.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other. Ginny leaned forward to answer her son's question. "You know how sometimes you do things you don't want us to know about?" The little boy nodded. "Well, there are some things your dad, Aunt Hermione, Uncle Ron and I did in school that we don't really want everyone to know about either. So those things shouldn't be included in the books. OK?"

"Wow! Like what?" John, Brian's twin asked excitedly.

"None of your business, young man," Ginny said, doing her best not to blush. Ron, Hermione and Harry all chuckled and did their best to fight the rising colour in their faces. "You just need to remember that we were young once, too."

"You were?" Beth said, looking quite surprised at such a revelation.

"Yes, they were," Dumbledore said, hugging her for a moment. "Even I was young once, long, long ago, and there are a great many things I did then that I haven't even told your father." He chuckled and shared an amused look with Harry.

Jamie looked at Siri and their best friend, Ron's eleven-year-old, Richard. "Boy, they must be hiding some good stuff! Look at them blush!" he murmured. The other boys giggled.

Hermione shook back her curls and smiled at Harry. "Ron's right. I cleaned it up. Don't worry."

"Aunt Hermione, what's the name of this book?" John said, trying to get back to what sounded like a fun thing to do.

"Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone," she replied.

The Time of Destiny

"What's a Philosopher's Stone?" Dan said.

"You'll learn that in the story," she replied. "May I read it to them?" she asked Harry.

Harry sighed and sat back on the couch with his arms folded across his chest. Jamie, Siri and Richard were staring at Harry with fascination. He could just see the same thing happening hundreds of times over with the many students at Hogwarts.

"Dad?" Jamie said quietly. "We'd like to hear the story. May we?" Siri nodded his agreement.

"Yeah, Dad, please let Aunt Hermione read her story," Dan agreed, scooting over to sit next to his older brothers. Ron and Hermione's nine-year-old, Will, sat on the floor next to Dan, gazing raptly at his Uncle Harry. Cliff, the Weasleys' five-year-old, squeezed between Harry's sons John and Brian. Lily and Beth scrambled up into their grandfather's lap, settled in comfortably and looked at Hermione expectantly.

Harry sighed again. "Go ahead, Hermione. You seem to have an eager audience."

She began the tale, surprising Harry with the amount of detail she remembered from so many years ago. She was using everyone's real names, too – his, Dumbledore's, McGonagall's, Hagrid's, the Dursleys—

"Hermione, you've used all of our real names," Harry said abruptly.

"Yes, I did. They're history books, Harry, so I have to use the real names and the true information. I can't make things up for these books."

"What about the ones for the Muggle market?" he said. "Some Muggles may remember me, you know, and the Dursleys—"

"These books have been cleared through Madam Bones herself," Hermione explained. "There will be a Confundus Charm on them so the names will read differently for Muggles than for wizards. 'Dursley' will read as 'Douglas,' 'Privet Drive' will read as 'Province Drive,' the Asher family will be the Arnolds, 'Harry Potter' will be 'Hal Pipping' – that kind of thing."

"'Hal Pipping'?" Harry said with a grimace. "That's an awful name!"

"I can change it. This is the original manuscript. The spell is already on it, but I can still change the names. What would you like?"

"I don't know. Erm . . . why not 'James Evans'?" Harry suggested.

"I mention James in the seventh year book when I tell about your visit to the giants," she explained.

"*Giants*?" Dan squeaked. "Dad, you never told us about visiting giants! Real giants? Bigger than Hagrid?"

"Yes, twice as big as Hagrid," Harry assured him. "I'll tell you about it later, all right? I need to finish this talk with Aunt Hermione right now."

The Time of Destiny

"All right," Dan said, putting his arms around his bent legs and watching his father avidly, apparently willing to wait however long it took to hear the giant story.

Harry smiled at his son, then turned back to Hermione. "How about, erm, James Harrison? Harry James? No, that's too close to reality. Um . . ."

"Why don't you let Hermione deal with it, love?" Ginny suggested. "She's the writer, after all."

"But 'Hal Pipping'?" Harry cried in obvious disgust.

Ideas for names for Harry's character were tossed around until the children protested.

"Dad! We want to hear the rest of the story! Please, can Aunt Hermione read some more?" Brian said.

"Go ahead, Hermione," Harry grumbled, leaning back on the couch and bracing himself for what was to come.

As Hermione began reading again, her words wove a magic spell around all of them. The children listed wide-eyed and eager to hear what happened next. Ginny and Ron reacted with grins or grimaces to the various incidents, depending on what was happening. Dumbledore laughed aloud from time to time, sometimes muttering, "So that's what really happened," with amusement.

Harry stayed braced for the worst, watching everyone's reactions carefully. Finally he relaxed and began to enjoy the tale himself.

When Hermione reached a good stopping point at the end of a chapter, she marked her place with a piece of paper and closed the book. "It's getting late, so I suppose I should stop there."

"No!" "What happened next?" "Why did—?" the children complained.

"Sorry, you lot, but it's late and you need to go to bed soon," she said, delighted by their eager, happy faces. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yeah!" they cried.

"Good! Thanks for letting me read it to you," Hermione said, smiling warmly at them.

"Will you read us more tomorrow?" "Please, Aunt Hermione!" "We want more!" came the protests from the young ones.

Hermione was laughing now. "All right, I'll read more to you tomorrow." She glanced shyly at Harry. "Well?"

He reached across the couch to her and took her hand. "It's wonderful, Hermione. Really."

"You don't mind?"

The Time of Destiny

"I mind, but there's not much point in that, is there? If someone's going to tell the story, it should be you. You were there for nearly everything, and Ron and I told you about what you didn't witness yourself," he replied. "Good luck with it. You're going to be famous in both the wizarding and Muggle world."

"Thanks," she breathed, a delighted grin on her face. "I use a pseudonym for the Muggle editions of my books, since they're supposed to be fiction. If the author's name was the same as one of the characters, people might suspect it was real, so 'Hermione Granger-Weasley' will only be famous as an author in the wizarding world."

"And we can say we knew you when you were a bushy-haired know-it-all," Ron teased, tugging on his wife's neatly styled hair. She'd finally found a hair product that tamed her curls into shining waves without a great deal of effort.

She made a face at him and smacked him gently on the leg.

"I think Professor Binns' classes will be much more entertaining when using your books, Hermione," Dumbledore said. "Good work."

"Thanks," she said, blushing prettily.

Epilogue, Part 2: Back At Hogwarts Again

Hermione's books were a huge hit in the wizarding world, and were the only textbooks most Hogwarts student read all the way through before school ever started. Many students were even buying the complete sets rather than only the one for their year, they were enjoying the stories so much.

Everyone knew Harry Potter taught flying once a week at Hogwarts. The returning and new students were eager to get to school where they could see Harry Potter in person from time to time and ponder the amazing story of his life. With luck, maybe he'd tell them even more stories than were in the books.

Conversely, the Potter and Weasley children, having heard many parts of the stories from Hermione, didn't bother to read more than bits of the first book – they had too many fun things to do before starting Hogwarts to stay inside reading, nor were they greatly impressed with their parents' fame – Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were just "Mum and Dad" or "Aunt and Uncle" to these kids, nobody "special" the way they were to other children in the wizarding world.

During the Welcome Feast, the students were delighted to learn that Harry Potter would not only teach the flying class on Tuesdays but would also be their new Transfiguration professor. They'd get to see him every day during the week! An excited buzz flowed across the Great Hall when that announcement was made. A similar buzz had filled the Hall when the older students saw the new First Years trooping in. In the middle of the pack were two boys with black hair, green eyes and slight dimples in their chins, the spitting image of Professor Potter. They had to be his sons!

Almost as fascinating to stare at were the four identical redheads, who were sticking close to the Potter boys and one other redhead who looked enough like the other four to be their brother. Fred and George's boys truly looked like quadruplets, and took great delight in fooling people about who was who. The only ones at Hogwarts who would ever be able to tell them apart were their brothers and cousins – and their Uncle Harry. Even the Lupin children, who had grown up as part of the Potter-Weasley clan, had trouble knowing which twin was which. Ron and Hermione's son, Richard, looked like Ron but had Hermione's temperament and personality. He, Jamie and Siri were best friends and went everywhere together

People at every House table craned their necks to see the Potter boys. Even the Slytherins hoped the Potter boys would be sorted into their House. Harry's popularity as Flying Instructor crossed all House boundaries. He'd finally managed to create some unity among the houses, as he'd tried to so many years ago with his proposed All-Star Quidditch Game, which had become a fixture of the school calendar since he'd been teaching flying.

All of the Potter and Weasley boys were sorted into Gryffindor, joining Remus and Tonks' two children, Seventh Year Matt and Fifth Year Bonnie. Matt was Head Boy and Bonnie was a Prefect.

The Gryffindor table rocked with cheers as each Potter or Weasley was sorted into their house. Each boy was welcomed to the table like a returning hero of some kind, which made all seven of them blush brightly.

The Time of Destiny

"They're getting a wonderful welcome," Remus murmured, leaning close to Harry.

"I hope it doesn't go to their heads," Harry said, a parental line of worry appearing between his eyebrows.

"I don't expect your boys to become arrogant because they're the sons of 'the Great Harry Potter,'" Remus said with a laugh.

Harry was still worried. "Look at all the attention they're getting. Everyone's staring at them."

"You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

Harry nodded. "Ginny and I talked about it, and tried to prepare them as much as we could."

"Good. They'll be fine, Harry," Remus assured him. "Matt and Bonnie will look after them. And they'll all look after each other, too. You know that."

"I know," Harry said, watching the reactions of the Gryffindors and even the students at other House tables as his boys settled into their seats. People were standing up to try to catch a glimpse of them. Harry sighed, then glanced at his godfather and gave him a sad smile. "I just don't want them to go through what I did when I started here."

"They learn how to deal with your fame, Harry," Remus told him. "They'll be OK." He squeezed the younger man's arm reassuringly. "Don't worry so much about them."

"And who are you to talk? I know you worried about Matt and Bonnie when they started here. I was here every Tuesday, remember?" Harry teased.

"I remember. You're just being a good dad," Remus replied with an easy smile. "They're growing up. Give them a bit of space to adjust. They'll manage."

"OK," Harry said, turning to watch his boys again. Their ears were pink with embarrassment at all the attention they were getting, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Maybe everything would be okay. He hoped so.

After the Welcome Feast, all of the First Years clustered in the Gryffindor Common Room, waiting to be told where their rooms were. Two Third Year boys shouldered their way into the nervous group of new students, stopping in front of Jamie and Siri.

"You're Professor Potter's kids, aren't you? You look just like him," the bigger boy said, offering his hand to Siri. "He's a cool teacher. I'm Mark Stevens."

"Hi. I'm Siri, that's Jamie," Siri replied shyly as he shook the older boy's hand. The other Third Year was having the same conversation with Jamie.

"Siri? What the bloody hell kind of name is *that*? It sounds like a sodding *girl's* name," a rough voice called from just behind the Third Years. He and two other bullies moved toward the Potter boys.

The Time of Destiny

Siri swallowed hard and moved closer to his twin, who was also looking up at the hulking boy now towering over them. "It's short for Sirius. Jamie's short for James. We're named after our grandfather and our dad's godfather. Our family uses nicknames for us to avoid confusion," Siri explained as calmly as he could.

"Did you just say our cousin has a girl's name?" Tim, Fred's oldest boy shouted over Siri's quiet reply, his hands already fisted.

"Yeah, I did," the rough-voiced boy snarled. "What are you going to do about it?"

"This!" Tim cried, then leaped onto the aggressive older boy with his twin and twin cousins right behind him. Not wanting to be left out, Jamie and Siri joined right in, with Richard standing aside wearing a worried frown that would have made Hermione proud – at first. When he saw his cousins were holding their own against the three bullies, he joined in, throwing punches with the best of them. You didn't grow up in as big and rowdy a family as the Weasleys without learning how to fight properly.

"Stop it right now!" snapped Bonnie Lupin, pointing her wand at the mass of writhing boys.

"All right, that's enough," Matt Lupin said as he waded into the melee and started to pull Weasleys and Potters out of the pile. "Give over, lads, you've taught them a lesson they won't soon forget," he added, laughing as he tucked a squirming Weasley twin and a still-furious Potter twin under each arm and deposited them firmly in squashy armchairs by the fire. "Stay there!" he ordered those two as he went back to pull more bodies from the still fighting pile.

"Enough!" Bonnie cried, shooting water from her wand into the scuffle, getting her brother and several other non-combatants wet at the same time.

"Bloody hell, Bonnie, watch where you're aiming that!" Matt growled. He had another set of twins, matched or mismatched, he didn't care which, under his arms. He plonked them down near the fireplace to dry off and went back to get the last three out of trouble.

"What's going on in here?" Remus said as he came through the portrait hole. He was Head of House for Gryffindor now that Professor McGonagall was Headmistress.

"Sorry, Dad," Matt said, sighing as he set another pair of Weasleys on their feet, then grabbed the arm of the last Potter twin and pulled him to the side with the rest of his family. Jamie snatched his sleeve away from Matt's hand and stood next to his twin, his hands still fisted, his nose bloody and a beautiful black eye beginning to bloom. Siri and the Weasleys were all in about the same condition and continued state of rage. Matt looked them over and shook his head, giving his father a wry grin. "We had a spot of bother here."

Remus looked at the unrepentant faces of the quads, as the family called Fred and George's oldest sets of twins, then at Richard, whose face was still a furious red, then at Jamie and Siri, who bore identical resentful looks as they glared at an older boy across the Common Room. Remus turned to the older boy. "What happened, Mr. Gedding?"

"Nothing," the boy said, his tone and attitude surly as he wiped blood from his nose with his thumb.

The Time of Destiny

"Did you provoke these boys somehow?" Remus demanded. "I know them. They usually get along well with everyone. What caused the fight?"

"They're just titchy gits, that's all," Gedding replied. He was an angry, round-shouldered hulk of a boy, covered in pimples and with thin, greasy hair. His two buddies weren't much better. Everyone wondered how they got into Gryffindor in the first place.

"They may be little, but they're not gits," Remus said sternly. "They're First Years. You older students are supposed to help them settle in, not get in fistfights with them their first night here!" He glared at the bullies, then turned to the Head Boy, doing his best not to grin at the Weasleys, who were calmer now and were comparing black eyes and other injuries with pride. The Potter boys looked unsettled and confused as well as angry. Remus sighed, then turned his eyes from them to his son. "Mr. Lupin? What can you tell me about this?"

"I'm not sure what started it," Matt replied. "I was beginning to give out room assignments, and then noticed the raised voices and before I knew it, they were fighting."

"Who started it?" Remus asked. Matt shrugged, not wanting to rat on his adopted cousins. Remus turned to Jamie and Siri. Siri looked the most uneasy, so he would probably be the easiest to get the story out of. "Siri?"

"What?" Siri snapped, his angry, stubborn expression exactly like his father's.

"What happened? Who started it? And are you all right?" Remus asked, growing more concerned. Harry's boys were normally cheerful and easy-going.

"My name's Sirius," Siri snarled.

"Oh, my apologies, Mr. Potter," Remus said, suppressing a smile. "Sirius. I will remember."

"Thank you," Siri said, relaxing a bit. His shoulders drooped as he looked up at his father's godfather with sad eyes.

"And I'm James," Jamie declared hotly, still glaring furiously at the bullies.

"I understand," Remus agreed.

"You do?" Jamie said, startled into looking up at the man.

"Yes, I do," Remus said with a smile. He now had a good idea what had happened and no longer needed the young boys. He turned and glowered at Gedding and his chums, then said to his son, "Mr. Lupin, do you have the room assignments for these boys?"

"Yes, Professor," Matt replied.

"Then take them upstairs while I deal with Mr. Gedding and his friends."

"Right," Matt replied. "You lot, come with me," he said, gesturing to the Weasleys and Potters.

"All of us?" Richard said. "I thought there were five to a room. There are seven of us."

The Time of Destiny

"The quads will be in one room, you three in the next one up, and you'll have some other roommates, as well. I'll show you where you belong. Come on," Matt said kindly, leading the cousins upstairs and getting them settled in their rooms.

"A fight? Already?" Harry said when Remus told him about the incident the next morning before class. "Are they all right? What happened?"

"They're fine. They were rather proud of their battle scars. An older boy provoked your boys, and one of the quads actually started the fight," Remus said, his eyes amused, "but nobody knows which one – and those who do know aren't telling."

"Siri said his name is Sirius? Somebody must have made fun of his name," Harry said sadly. "With all the odd names people give their children in the wizarding world, you wouldn't think someone would pick on them for their names."

"Oscar Gedding started it," Remus said, watching for Harry's reaction.

"My boys and the Weasleys took on *Oscar Gedding*?" Harry snorted with surprised laughter. "And all of them survived? That boy makes Crabbe and Goyle look dainty!"

"They all survived, and they actually got the better of him and his two best friends," Remus said, laughing as well. "They looked quite upset to be bested by ickle firsties in front of other people, even if it was seven against three."

"Those boys may try to get them alone and really hurt them," Harry sighed, a worried frown on his face.

"It's possible. We'll just have to keep an eye on Gedding. I gave him a week's detention and took points away, as well."

"That's about all you can do," Harry agreed.

Harry gave the First Years filing into his class a friendly smile. His smile faded when he saw nearly all of them stare at his scar, then look nervously at each other before tentatively taking seats as near the back as possible. He noticed many of them were giving his boys and the Weasleys a wide berth, as well. He sighed, then shook his head when he saw the injuries on the faces of his sons and nephews. Black eyes and minor cuts covered all seven of their faces. Fred and George's boys were as cocky as their fathers and wore their wounds like badges of honour. Jamie and Siri – No, Harry corrected himself, *James and Sirius* – refused to meet his eye. Richard looked up at Harry warily, obviously aware that they should be in trouble with their normally easy-going uncle.

"Good morning, class," Harry began. A few muttered "good mornings" were scattered about the room, but the whole group seemed subdued even for First Years. "I'm Professor Potter, and this handsome fellow," he added, gesturing to Merlin on his perch near Harry's desk, "is Merlin. He's my phoenix and will be with us in class most of the time. You are now in Transfiguration Class. We'll be learning a lot of interesting things this year. Can any of you tell me what Transfiguration is?"

The Time of Destiny

Richard raised his hand hesitantly. Harry was surprised no one else even tried. "Yes, Richard?"

"It's changing one thing into another, Uncle Harry – I mean, Professor," Richard said, his ears instantly flaming red.

"Very good. Can you give me an example?"

"Well, you can change from a man into a phoenix," Richard said quietly, giving a Harry a look that plainly said, *you know this, why are you asking?*

"That's a good example, Richard. Five points to Gryffindor," Harry said with a smile, grinning more broadly when he saw the delight on the face of Hermione's son when he realized he'd won House Points in his very first class! "Can anyone else tell me another kind of transfiguration?" George's oldest son, Sean raised his hand. "Yes, Sean?"

"Our dads make joke products that transfigure," Sean said proudly. "Wands into rubber chickens, swords into fish, hats into birds, and so on. And some of their sweets are Transfiguration Tasties, like the Canary Creams, Butterfly Bon-Bons and so on."

"Well done, Sean! Five more points to Gryffindor," Harry said with approval. He turned to the Slytherin side of the room, where several hands were raised. "Yes?"

"Is this how it's going to be? You playing favourites with your family?" one boy demanded.

"And your name is?" Harry prompted.

"Steven Glass," the boy said reluctantly.

"Mr. Glass, I asked a question and the only raised hands I saw were Richard's and Sean's. If I'd said 'Mr. Weasley' instead of using their first names, there would be a great deal of confusion, since there are five 'Mr. Weasleys' in the room at the moment." Harry said this with an easy smile. A small titter of laughter flitted through the Gryffindors in response to his comment. "It's to my advantage that I know these boys, so I know who I'm calling on," he added, giving his nephews a warning look. Tim was wadding up a piece of parchment and glaring at the Slytherins. Luke, his brother, saw Harry's look and poked Tim, which made Tim subside with a guilty smile at his uncle. Harry raised one eyebrow at Tim, and the boy tossed his wadded up parchment in the waste bin, then sat with quill in hand, as innocent a look as possible on his face.

Harry glanced around the room. They were still staring at him avidly. He sighed, the uncomfortable feeling of being studied like an interesting beetle washing over him, something he hadn't felt in a long time. His years of playing Quidditch had put him enough in the public eye so that people had become friendly toward him rather than just staring when they saw him. Now they were back to staring. He sighed again, then got back to work.

"Transfiguration is changing one thing into another. They can be related objects, or completely unrelated. You can change only part of something rather than the whole thing, if you want. For instance," he said, pulling a small cat and a rabbit out of wicker baskets on the floor and setting them gently on the desk, "I could use a Switching Spell to change the ears

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between these two animals." He pulled out his wand and tapped each animal, resulting in a black cat with white bunny ears and a white bunny with black cat's ears. "Like that." The class laughed at the funny look on the cat's face as it noticed its long ears. Harry smiled, glad they were beginning to relax with him a bit and get interested in the subject at hand. "Now, I'm sure they'd prefer their own ears, so I'll switch them back," he said, tapping them once more with his wand. Instantly, each animal had its own ears and looked quite relieved. Harry stroked both animals, soothing them a bit before putting them back in their baskets.

"We'll begin by turning toothpicks into sewing needles," he said, then had two students pass around the toothpicks for each student to work with. Harry instructed them on how to do the spell, then walked around the class, giving individual help where needed. Patrick, George's second son, managed to set his toothpick on fire twice, which made the whole class laugh. Patrick laughed the loudest and seemed quite proud of his singed eyebrows.

Jamie was having trouble with the spell. As Harry bent over his son's desk to help him, the boy hissed, "I can do it myself."

"Go on, then," Harry said, straightening up. His son's attitude puzzled him. Jamie and Siri were affectionate children and normally loved any lessons Harry gave them, from flying to simple magic to working with tools to make mosaics, birdboxes and flowerboxes. Jamie was not acting like himself at all, nor was Siri, who had a similar reaction when Harry stopped later on to help him. The Weasleys were all their normal, cheerful selves if a bit more withdrawn than usual.

The next time Harry stopped by his sons' desk, he looked around the room and made sure everyone was fully engrossed in their work before murmuring, "See me after class, both of you."

"Why? We haven't done anything wrong," Jamie whispered defensively.

"Did I say you had?" Harry replied. He held Jamie's gaze for a long moment before the boy dropped his eyes.

"No," Jamie admitted.

"I won't keep you long," Harry promised.

When class was over, Harry leaned against the front of his desk waiting for the room to clear before speaking to his boys, who stood before him with rebellious expressions.

When they were finally alone, Harry said, "What's going on with you two? You're both acting oddly. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," they said at once.

"Are people giving you a hard time because you're my sons?"

Both boys stood silently, eyes downcast.

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"Is that it or not? I know a boy made fun of your names. That's just silly – his name's 'Oscar,' after all. That's a kind of fish, you know," he said, hoping to get them to relax and smile a bit. "But James and Sirius are more grown-up names than Jamie and Siri. You're old enough to choose which name you want to use."

"Lupin," Jamie said immediately.

Harry sighed. He'd been afraid of this. "May I ask why?" he said, doing his best to be patient.

Both boys remained stubbornly silent for a few minutes, but then Siri blurted, "Everyone's read those books, or their parents have told them stories about you." He sounded hurt and angry.

"And why is that a problem?" Harry said, keeping his voice reasonable and calm. "You've always known that I'm famous. It's never bothered you before. I didn't choose to be famous. I'd love to be just a teacher at Hogwarts, nobody any more important than that. But I can't change who I am – nor can you, no matter how much you might want to."

The boys didn't respond for several minutes, and then Jamie snarled, "Are you finished? May we go now?"

Harry sighed. "Yes, go ahead. But work on your attitudes, boys. This resentment or whatever it is will hurt your grades. You barely participated in class today."

Siri looked up at him, his green eyes furious. "Right. Pull the teacher thing on us."

"The teacher thing?"

"Threaten us with bad grades, detention, all that stuff," Jamie said, as angry as his brother.

"Unfortunately for you, I am your teacher, and if I say something about your grades or detention, I must have a good reason for it. You're just going to have to accept that."

"May. We. Go. Now," Jamie said stiffly.

"Yes, go on," Harry said, realizing he wasn't going to get anywhere with them in such a mood.

As the weeks went by, Jamie and Siri continued to be sullen. Richard finally grew annoyed with them and asked to be put in the quads' room. The Potter twins and Richard were no longer the trio they'd been all of their lives, which saddened Harry and Remus, as well as Richard's parents and Ginny.

"I don't know what's going on with them, or why they're behaving this way," Harry told Remus at lunch one day. His boys were sitting by themselves at the Gryffindor table, not even a Weasley nearby. "They seemed to be popular at first, but they're isolating themselves now for some reason. I can't get a straight answer from anyone about what the problem might be."

"Nor can I," Remus said, sighing. "I wish I could help you, Harry. They seem to be miserable."

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"And they aren't writing home at all. Ginny's as worried about them as I am," Harry said, sighing. He raked his fingers through his hair in frustration, messing it up even more than normal. "Is it me? Have I done something to offend them? Maybe I shouldn't have taken this job."

"It isn't you, Harry, it's them. Whatever is bothering them has nothing to do with your teaching. You're an excellent teacher," Remus assured him. "They're just having a harder time adjusting than most children, I suppose."

"Maybe we over-protected them," Harry mused. "We tried so hard to keep them safe. . ."

"Stop blaming yourself," Remus said, clapping the younger man on his shoulder. "All kids go through phases where they resent their parents or wish they were someone else. They'll get over it in time."

Harry looked at his godfather, his aching heart in his eyes. "I miss them, Remus. We've always been so close."

"I know. They'll come around, Harry. They're good boys, and they know you love them. Give them a bit of space to work through whatever's bothering them."

"You've learned a lot with your kids," Harry said with a slight smile.

Remus chuckled. "That's actually a lesson I learned from being your godfather. There were many times you wouldn't talk about what was bothering you and I just had to wait until you were ready to talk to find out what was wrong."

"How did you stand the wait?" Harry said miserably.

"It's what parents do," Remus said, squeezing his godson's shoulder as he got up from the table. "You'll be fine, and so will they."

"I hope you're right," Harry sighed, gazing at his sons sitting so small and alone at the end of the Gryffindor table. His heart ached for them, but if he gave them special attention, he knew there were other students who would taunt them mercilessly about it. When he'd asked his nephews why they were no longer friendly with his sons, they just said, "Because they're acting like gits," and would say no more. His nephews were still friendly toward him, still cheerful, cheeky and a pleasure to teach, but his own sons were anything but a pleasure to be around these days. Gits, indeed.

Harry resisted the urge to use Legilimency on his boys to find out what was troubling them so, but they seemed to be growing more tense and angry, not less. They were failing spectacularly in his class and not doing much better in any of their other classes. The only academic activity they were successful with was Flying Class. Despite Harry being the teacher, they flew with joy and abandon, just like their father. It helped that he'd taught all of his children to fly when they were very young. All were competent fliers by the age of seven. The Weasley boys weren't far behind them. The Weasley-Potter clan had regular Quidditch games with every generation as involved as they wanted to be, which meant they often had many more Chasers on a team than required, since all of the children and most of the adults wanted to play.

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"It's not fair!" Peter Robinson, one of Jamie's and Siri's roommates grumbled in class the second week of Flying Class. He was still trying to get his broom to lift off the ground into his hand, while Potters and Weasleys soared overhead. Most of the rest of the class had at least hovered successfully, and many of them were now flying slow circles at low altitude, getting the feel of their brooms.

"What's not fair?" Harry said calmly, reasonably certain he knew the answer.

"Your kids and nephews have professional Quidditch players as dads and uncles!" the boy grumbled. "Of course they can all fly well! My parents wouldn't let me near the broom shed."

"We couldn't keep them out of the broom shed," Harry admitted with a rueful grin.

Harry's honesty earned a shocked look from the boy. "Really? But you're the most powerful wizard in the world! Didn't you put wards on the shed?"

Harry shrugged, as if his power had nothing to do with protecting his broom shed. "I didn't want to put any wards on the shed that might hurt them. They managed to get around the Locking Spell we put on it. I suppose they overheard one of us setting it and worked out how to reverse it. My wife and I decided it was better to teach them how to handle brooms safely than to let them get hurt trying to sneak a ride." He chuckled a bit. "My wife sneaked broom rides all the time when she was little. Fortunately, she didn't get hurt badly or often, but there are racing brooms from my Quidditch days in our broom shed. If the children managed to get one of those going, they could be seriously hurt. We taught them to fly early to keep them as safe as possible." He patted the boy on the shoulder comfortingly. "I know some incredible fliers who couldn't get the broom to lift for them at all for the first couple of classes. Don't worry, you'll be fine. Let's try it again. Here, I'll stand behind you and watch. Maybe I can spot what you're doing wrong."

"OK," the boy agreed. He sighed, then squared his shoulders and held his hand out, looking over his shoulder at Harry before trying again.

"Keep your eyes on the broom. Concentrate on it and *believe* it when you say 'Up,'" Harry instructed. He watched as the boy tried again. The broom vibrated a bit, but didn't move. "Concentrate, Mr. Robinson," Harry reminded him, then opened his hand slightly and sent the broom into the boy's hand.

Peter's face lit up. "I did it! I did it!" he cried excitedly.

"Yes, you did!" Harry said, patting him on the back encouragingly. "Now put it down and try it again. Repeating a spell right away helps you learn it more quickly." He put his hands on his hips, certain the boy could do it himself this time now that he had some confidence about it.

"OK," Peter said, putting the broom back on the ground, then holding his hand out confidently and saying "UP!" The broom sprang to his hand with no help from Harry at all. "I did it!"

"Yes, you did," Harry said, smiling. "Now mount it and kick off very gently. I just want you to hover, so you can get a feel for the balance required."

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"OK," Peter said, a huge grin on his face. Before long, he was cruising around at low altitude, low speed, but with a triumphant gleam in his eye. "Thanks, Professor!" he said as he flew past Harry.

"Well done, Peter!" Harry said, grinning at his newest flier.

Richard landed next to Harry. "You helped him, didn't you, Uncle Harry?" he murmured.

Harry looked at his nephew and gave him a conspiratorial wink. "He needed a little boost in his confidence. I gave him that. Then he was able to do it by himself. Don't tell on me, OK?"

Richard grinned up at him. "OK. I like Peter. I'm glad he finally got it. Some older kids were calling him a squib because he couldn't get his broom to lift."

"That's really unfair of them," Harry said with a frown. "Everybody has trouble with something. Even your mum, who was the best in school at everything, had trouble learning some spells at first. And we don't even want to talk about your dad and me! If it weren't for your mum, we wouldn't have survived our early years here."

Richard smiled. His uncle rarely said much about his childhood. Any such revelation from Uncle Harry was a treat. "She's still fussed that she never got the Animagus transformation."

"Is she still working on it?" Hermione hadn't said anything about her failure at the Animagus transformation in a long time.

"Every so often, yeah."

"I expect she'll get it someday. She's certainly tried hard enough."

"What do you think she'll be?" Richard asked.

"She makes a cute poodle," Harry said, grinning at the memory, "but she probably has other ideas." He looked up at his fliers, then back down at his nephew. "You only have a few more minutes of class, Richard. Get back up there and practice, OK?"

"OK." Richard kicked off and flew up to where the quads were encouraging their classmates to try more difficult manoeuvres. Harry arrived among them and got everyone working on appropriate exercises before some of the new fliers got hurt trying to emulate the Potter/Weasley clan. Harry reined in his nephews and sons with good humour, which was one of the reasons Flying Class was every student's favourite hour of the week.

At the end of class, Harry called everyone in and told them to put their brooms away. As they walked back into the castle, Harry saw Jamie and Siri walking ahead of him. They were talking animatedly, looking like their normal, cheerful selves for the first time in what seemed like ages. Harry smiled, glad to see them happy again.

"Wicked class, Uncle Harry!" Tim said as he and the other quads caught up with him. They were already starting their growth spurts. It seemed they were going to be tall like their fathers. "Thanks for showing us how to do that spiral roll. It was great!"

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Jamie and Siri turned and smiled at their father. "Yeah, it was fun!" they agreed, dropping back to walk with their cousins and dad. They joined their cousins in a happy discussion of the advanced moves Harry had shown them to keep them occupied while he helped the beginning fliers.

Harry listened to the happy chatter around him, his heart warmed by his sons finally acting like the boys he loved so much. Now, if he could just work out how to get their flying prowess to translate to academic skills, everything might be all right.

In Transfiguration Class a few weeks later, Jamie, Siri and several other students were having a difficult time doing the required spell. No matter how hard they tried, they were having no success at all – and in Jamie and Siri's cases, they simply weren't trying very hard. Harry sighed, knowing if he tried to help them, they'd resent it, but if he didn't, they'd fail the class, which they were close to doing already. He stopped by their desk and squatted in front of it.

"Let's see, then," he encouraged them.

"It doesn't work," Jamie grumbled, waving his wand haphazardly.

"Sometimes you seem to be related more to your Uncle Ron than to me," Harry said with a grin. "He used to do the same thing when he got frustrated."

Jamie looked up at his father, startled. "What do you mean?"

"The way you're waving your wand. It's just what your Uncle Ron would do."

"What did you do?" Siri asked, openly curious rather than resentful for once.

"I just kept doing it wrong over and over, until either the teacher or your Aunt Hermione corrected me. So since Aunt Hermione isn't here, and I'm the teacher, how about letting me show you how to do it?"

"OK," Siri said, looking grumpy again.

"It's more of a curved wave, like this," Harry said, demonstrating with his own wand. The hedgehog on Siri's desk immediately became a pincushion. Harry changed it back and gave his son an encouraging look. "Now you try."

Siri bit the inside of his cheek, concentrated hard and tried again, with no luck.

"Grip your wand more tightly," Harry suggested. "Have another go."

Siri tried again, gripping his wand firmly. Suddenly, the wand became an animated rubber halibut, which Siri dropped instantly. It flopped dispiritedly on the ground, dragging the trick wand behind it. The class erupted in laughter, which stilled when Harry stood up and glared around the room.

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"Weasleys," Harry said, his voice stern as he looked at his nephews. "Who substituted a Wheezes wand for Sirius's?" All the redheads had innocent faces. Harry glanced around the room, then back at his sons. Jamie was looking at his wand oddly. "What?" Harry said.

"Is mine a Wheeze wand too?" the boy asked.

"Grip it firmly and give it a wave," Harry said kindly. When Jamie held the wand firmly and gave it a strong wave, it turned into an animated rubber parrot that instantly began squawking, making the class laugh again.

Harry vanished both trick wands, then straightened, glaring at his still-giggling nephews. "Well?" He waited, but received only innocent looks in reply. "Fine. If that's how you want to be, *Accio Jamie's wand. Accio Siri's wand*," he said, then caught the wands neatly when they flew to him from Tim's and Luke's bags. "Detention, Tim and Luke. See me after class."

"But Uncle Harry!" Tim began.

"They were being gits!" Luke added.

"They deserved it!" they said together.

"And you deserve detention," Harry said sternly. "Have you done this to anyone else?" This time, there were guilty looks on their faces. He turned to the class and said, "*Accio Weasley Wizard Wheezes wands*." Five more wands flew to his hands. He turned to his nephews and held out his hand expectantly. Tim and Luke dug in their bags and placed five real wands in Harry's hand. "That's a week's detention and fifteen points each from Gryffindor."

"Thirty points!" Luke cried. "But Uncle Harry—"

"That's Professor Potter in here, Luke, you know that," Harry replied, "and you deserve the punishment I gave you. Don't do this kind of thing – or anything else with Wheezes products that will disrupt class – again." He gave the real wands to their owners and

set the class back to work, then squatted in front of his sons' desk again. "OK, now that you're properly equipped, let's have another go."

Both boys sighed dispiritedly, then tried again.

"Grip your wand a bit more firmly, James," Harry encouraged his son. When Jamie obeyed him, suddenly his hedgehog turned into a pincushion. Jamie sat back, his eyes wide in shock. He'd never succeeded so quickly before. "Well done!" Harry said, grinning at his son.

"Did you do that?" Jamie said, looking at his father with sudden suspicion.

"Absolutely not," Harry replied. "Watch, I'll reverse the spell, and then I'll put my hands on your desk and not move them while you do it again. How's that?"

"OK," Jamie said, looking quite uncertain about the whole thing. Once his father's hands were flat on the desk, Jamie gripped his wand firmly and did the spell again. His hedgehog instantly turned into a pincushion. "I did it! I really did it!"

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"Yes, you did," Harry said, giving the boy an approving pat on the shoulder.

"What am I doing wrong?" Siri whinged, obviously still quite frustrated.

"Show me what you're doing," Harry said, watching his son's work closely. "OK, your wand isn't pointing at the hedgehog, it's wandering about. Aim the spell where you want it to go."

"I was," Siri grumbled.

"May I show you?" Harry offered. Siri nodded reluctantly. Harry did the wand movement very slowly and the hedgehog turned into a pincushion. "Did you see the shape of the movement?" he said as he reversed the spell. "Pay attention to that, it's important. Try again."

Siri sighed, an uncertain look on his face.

"You can do it," Harry murmured. "Trust yourself."

Siri looked up at him, then gripped his wand firmly, a determined look on his face. He took a deep breath, waved his wand and the hedgehog became a pincushion, but it still had a hedgehog's legs. The boy's face lit up with delight. "I did it! Well, almost," he amended, grabbing the pincushion as it raced toward the edge of his desk on frantic legs.

"Yes, you did," Harry said, a fond smile on his face. "I'm proud of you." He reversed the spells on both boys' pincushions and said, "Do it again. You'll find it's a lot easier each time."

They tried again and both of them succeeded this time, looking up at their father with shining eyes. "Wow! That's so cool!" Jamie said, admiring his pincushion.

"Yeah! Let's do it again!" Siri enthused.

Harry grinned, glad to see their natural enthusiasm finally returning. Suddenly, the castle shook. "What the—" Harry murmured as he strode to the window to look outside. He turned back to his class, many of whom were screaming in panic or chattering loudly. "Quiet! Everyone go to the far side of the room, away from the windows."

"Why? What's going on?" someone asked as the students scurried to do what he'd said.

"I don't know what's going on, but you're safer away from the windows," Harry replied, glancing at his students to make certain they were staying where he wanted them to be. He moved to a window, opened it and leaned out, trying to see what had shaken the building. It shook again, nearly throwing him out of the opening. Many of his students shrieked again, while his sons and nephews were wide-eyed with fear. "*Quiet!*" he hissed, trying to keep his voice low.

Harry glanced at his phoenix. "Merlin, would you go and see what's happening?" The phoenix spread his wings and flew out of the window, quickly disappearing around the turret at the nearest corner.

Headmistress McGonagall entered the room just then. "Professor Potter, a word, please? Ah good, you have the students away from the windows. Well done." She looked quite agitated.

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"What's going on?" Harry asked when she neared him. They stayed by the windows and spoke quietly, trying to avoid frightening the children any more than they were. The castle continued to rock, the concussions settling into a nearly steady rhythm.

"There's a dragon attacking Ravenclaw Tower," McGonagall said, her dark eyes frightened. "Hagrid's down. You're the only other person at Hogwarts who has experience at handling dragons."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What do you mean, Hagrid's down? And I stole an egg from one for the Tri-Wizard Tournament. That's not experience in handling them – it's experience in escaping them!"

"It's still more experience than any of the rest of us have," she said tartly. "Hagrid's hurt – he's lying on the ground. I've already sent people out to see to him."

Harry's heart constricted in fear for his friend. "Is he alive?"

"He appears to be," she replied. "Harry, I wouldn't ask you to do this, especially alone, but we need help immediately and there isn't anyone else. Charlie Weasley's out of the country at the moment, isn't he?"

"Yes, he and his family are on holiday in Europe," Harry replied, thinking hard. "Why would a dragon attack Ravenclaw Tower?" He heard gasps from some students who overheard his comment.

"I have no idea," McGonagall said, shaking her head.

"Please, Professor?" a girl said timidly as she raised a shaking hand. "I think I know."

"*What?*" McGonagall snapped, frightening the girl.

"What do you know, Harriet?" Harry said kindly. This girl was one of the many children who had been named after Harry Potter since he'd defeated Voldemort.

"My brother's in Ravenclaw. He said two boys were going to steal the watch dragon's eggs," she said nervously.

"When were they going to do this?" McGonagall said sharply.

"I don't know," the girl replied.

"Merlin!" Harry called. The phoenix flashed into the classroom an instant later. "What did you learn?" Merlin chirruped at Harry for a moment, then was silent. "That's what I thought," Harry muttered, bracing himself as the castle shook again. "Go to Ravenclaw Tower. There should be two dragon eggs there, probably in a dormitory room. Flash them back to her nest. Put them back, then get out of there as fast as you can."

Merlin chirped something else that made Harry pause.

"What is it?" McGonagall said, sensing Harry's sudden increase in tension.

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"He can't flash eggs – it could harm the babies," he replied, his face grim. He swallowed hard, looked out of the window at the aching blue sky for a long moment, then sighed. "OK, Merlin. I'll distract her so you can fly them there." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his Shrinking Charmed broom, an Excalibur Potter Special, currently the fastest broom in the world. He'd had it made to his specifications when he was still playing Seeker for the Lions. The broom company had added the Potter Special to its line of racing brooms. It was a popular broom, adding to Harry's personal fortune with each sale. As he enlarged the broom, he heard gasps coming from his boys.

"Dad?" Jamie said, his voice quavering anxiously. "What are you doing?"

"Where are you going?" Siri asked at the same time.

The castle shuddered again, much harder this time, making books fall off of the shelves and desks in Harry's room, and two windows shatter. Children screamed and clustered together in frightened groups. James and Sirius Potter stayed glued in their seats near the far wall, their anxious eyes locked with their father's. Harry strode over to their desk and wrapped his arms around them, kissing each of them on top of the head, breathing in the scent of the sons he loved so dearly.

"I have to go lead this dragon away from the castle, boys. She's going to hurt a lot of people if I don't," he said as he released them.

"Why you?" Siri said in a shocked whisper.

"I'm the one with the fastest broom," Harry said with a cocky grin, which slid off of his face quickly. "You boys look after each other for me, and listen to Cousin Minerva."

"Dad, don't go!" Jamie cried. "Dragons are dangerous!"

"I know. I'll be back as quickly as I can," Harry said, ruffling their hair as he stepped back from them. He glanced up at his wide-eyed nephews and gave them a small wave, then bit his lip nervously as he looked at his boys again.

He drew in a deep, calming breath and blew it out, forced a cocky grin again and said, "Transfiguration lesson" to his class as he changed his professorial robes into his London Lions Quidditch uniform. Calling, "Let's go, Merlin!" he swung onto his broom and flew toward the windows at racing speed, vanishing the glass as he approached it.

"DAD!" his boys cried, running to look out of the window, their hearts in their throats as they saw the "Potter 7" on the back of his uniform shrink until they could no longer read it as he flew away. Professor McGonagall put her arms around them and drew them away.

"Your father will be back soon. You need to go back to your seats. It isn't safe to be near the windows," she said as kindly as she could.

Jamie and Siri went back to their desk against the far wall and sat in terrified silence, their eyes glued to the windows, praying their father would be all right.

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Harry pressed the stone on his ring and murmured, "Ginny" as he neared the corner of the castle and slowed his broom. His wife's face appeared above his ring just as he eased around the corner, trying to evaluate the situation before engaging the dragon in battle.

"Hi, sweetie. Are you flying? Your hair's blowing around," Ginny said with a cheery smile. Then she looked at him more sharply. "What's wrong? Are the boys all right? You look awful."

"Ginny, I have a problem here – the boys are fine, but I have to deal with an unhappy dragon," he said, trying to make light of a very serious situation.

"What do you mean, an unhappy dragon? Why isn't Hagrid taking care of it? What are you doing?"

"I have to lead her away from the castle. She's attacking Ravenclaw Tower, making the whole castle shake. Stones are falling from the turrets, windows are breaking," he explained. "I don't have much time to talk. I just wanted—" His voice faded. He didn't know what else to say.

"Harry, be careful!" She knew better than to suggest he not face the dragon. He was doing what he felt he had to, and nothing she said would turn him from it. And knowing his heart, his tremendous sense of duty and honour, she'd never ask him, no matter how much she wanted him to be safe. She knew he'd never be able to live with himself if he didn't do everything he could to deal with this problem.

"I'll do my best. I love you."

"I love you. I'll be right there," she said, already moving to grab her medical kit.

"No, stay with the children," Harry said. Suddenly, his eyes widened and he gasped. "Bloody hell. Gotta go," he blurted, then signed off. The dragon had seen him and was headed right for him.

"Merlin, go!" Harry cried as he wheeled his broom around and raced away, hoping the dragon would follow him. She followed him a short distance, then turned back to Ravenclaw Tower.

"Bloody ruddy sodding damned hell," Harry grumbled as he turned his broom and aimed it toward the dragon. He pulled out his wand and sent a Conjunctivitis Curse at her eyes, catching just the edge of one eye as she whipped her head around to spit flame at him. He turned his broom and raced away from the flame. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw he was going too fast – the dragon was losing interest and going back to the castle, already lashing her tail in preparation for smashing it into the castle walls again.

Harry spiralled down toward her, picking his spot before sending a Stinging Hex at her sensitive eyes, the only place where a dragon was vulnerable to spells. With a roar of rage, the dragon came after him again. Harry maintained a sixty foot lead on her, staying just out of range of her flaming breath, yet still close enough to keep her interested.

The dragon was a wily one, and broke off the chase when they were a distance from the castle. She turned, flying back toward the now partially demolished Ravenclaw Tower, but Harry cut across her path, sending another Stinging Hex at her eyes. With a roar of rage, she twisted in

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mid-air faster than thought, following him much too close for comfort. Her flames caught the tail of Harry's broom on fire. He aimed a spout of water at the flames so close to his back, but kept missing because he had to zigzag so much to evade the dragon's flames, yet stay close enough to her to keep her interested in the chase.

Harry glanced toward the castle and finally saw Merlin emerge with two small things in his talons. They didn't look like eggs. *Oh no*, he thought, *the babies hatched*. He knew baby dragons had little chance of survival if not hatched properly. His heart sank when as he studied the small animals in Merlin's talons. They weren't moving. He was certain they must be dead.

Harry felt the heat from his burning broom tail on his back and concentrated on putting out the fire, finally managing it just as his cloak caught fire. He ripped it off and let it fall to the ground, fighting to control his now-tailless and rather unbalanced broom, then aimed more water on the back of his clothes, which he could feel were smouldering.

The dragon was right on his tail, concentrating fully on him. That was fine with Harry for the moment – Merlin needed time to put the babies back in the nest. Whether the babies were dead or alive, once the dragon found them, she should settle down to do whatever dragons did for their babies – or so Harry hoped.

When he saw a sudden bright light near Hagrid's cabin, Harry knew Merlin had delivered his burden to the nest and flashed away. He saw his godfather and Snape glance up as they Levitated Hagrid's body into his cabin below him. Harry couldn't tell if Hagrid was alive from the quick glance he was able to spare him. Grim-faced, Harry pointed his broom at the nest, staying just in front of the dragon's flaming breath.

When he neared the nest, Harry raced straight up into the sky, hoping the dragon would see her young and settle down. She saw them, all right. She landed in her nest, crooning to her babies. Harry soared high overhead, watching to be certain she was going to stay there. He saw her nudge the small forms with her nose. The babies rolled over, their tiny bodies already stiff in death. With a horrible roar, the dragon lifted off and came straight at Harry, high above her. The chase was on again, and much more seriously this time.

Harry tried to lead the dragon down the valley away from the school, but she suddenly broke off the chase and flew straight at Ravenclaw Tower again. Harry raced after her, determined to turn her before she demolished any more of the castle. He had no idea how many students might be trapped within the now nearly collapsed Tower, but it was possible that they could be saved if rescuers were given enough time without attack. He flew alongside her and sent another Stinging Hex at the dragon's eyes to annoy her enough to pay attention to him, then turned his broom and flew away, trying to stay just barely out of her range again.

Apparently, the dragon wasn't interested in leaving the castle environs, no matter how Harry tried to tempt her. She flew along the wall as Harry circled back toward her. He could see his sons and nephews peering out of the window of his classroom. Minerva seemed to be so appalled at what he was doing that she wasn't paying close attention to the class anymore.

"Get back!" Harry cried as he sped past the windows. "It's not safe there!" He didn't wait to see if anyone obeyed him, because the dragon chose this moment to come after him again.

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Harry's broom was shuddering now, and losing power due to its extensive damage. He didn't know how much longer it would hold out. He bent low to the handle, trying to coax more speed out of his failing broom. A glance over his shoulder showed him the dragon was gaining on him.

What the bloody hell am I going to do now? he thought, gasping in pain as a wall of flame seared his back. The flames from his burning robes licked his ear and the side of his face, even catching his hair on fire for a moment before he was able to douse the flames with water from his wand again. He groaned in agony but sped on, thinking frantically as he tried to come up with a way to protect the castle as well as survive the situation.

"His broom's losing power!" Jamie cried, watching his father with horrified eyes. He and his brother were on either side of Professor McGonagall, nearly hanging out of the window trying to keep track of the action outside. The Weasleys were standing with their faces pressed to the glass of the other windows. Most of the rest of the class was standing on desks trying to see above all the clustered heads filling the windows.

It was obvious to anyone watching that Harry's broom was failing. It was shuddering horribly and flying very erratically with no tail to balance it. Apparently the pedals were no longer functional, because Harry had to haul on it manfully to turn it, rather than it turning quickly in response to his command of the controls as it normally did. And it was slowing down quite obviously now, getting closer to the dragon's flames every second. When Harry's robes and hair caught fire, everyone in the room screamed until he got the flames put out. Now both the broom and Harry were very obviously in bad shape.

Jamie reached into his pocket and pulled out his Shrinking Charmed broom. He said the password that automatically reversed the charm. Harry had given a broom to each of his children when they were very young, taught them the basics of flying and the password he'd put on the brooms that would enlarge them so the children would always have a way to escape if they were ever in danger. When his broom was full-sized, Jamie handed it to his headmistress.

"Can you send this to Dad? I don't know how," he said simply.

"Yes, James, I can. Well done," she said with an approving smile. She Banished the broom, sending it to fly beside Harry, who was losing altitude as well as speed now. Everyone in the classroom held their breath, wondering if Professor Potter would be able to change brooms at the still-breakneck speed at which he was flying, with an angry dragon breathing flames literally down his neck.

Harry was fighting with his badly damaged broom, urging every bit of speed out of it that he could, but he knew he was in serious trouble. Suddenly, a child-size broom appeared next to him. He took a deep breath and leaped onto the new broom, zooming off gratefully as his faithful Potter Special finally gave up and fell to earth. He grinned and waved up at the windows, knowing they were watching him and grateful for his son's quick thinking. The broom was far too small for Harry's lanky frame, but it was quick and agile and in good working order. It would simply have to do.

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The dragon seemed to feel she'd chased him far enough and turned back to the castle, heading straight for the now-demolished Ravenclaw Tower. Harry still wanted to lead the dragon away from the castle, so he circled around and approached her from the front, flying under her lengthwise, but low enough to avoid her flaming breath. He zipped up under her belly and bumped her hard with the front of the broom to get her attention, then raced away under her tail. He just missed being knocked off his broom by her tail as she whipped around to follow him.

He headed toward the lake's surface, wondering how he could get her head submerged just long enough to put out the flame – or would submerging her head put out her flame? He honestly didn't know, but he had no other bright ideas at the moment.

As they raced just above the lake's surface, he glanced down and saw merpeople staring up at him and the dragon passing so close overhead. He turned when he reached the opposite shore, heading across the water in another direction. He still couldn't think of a way to submerge her head – his broom wouldn't work underwater, that was certain. For now, he was simply hoping to tire her out, since he had no way of defeating her that he could think of. He flew with his toes nearly skimming the water, wishing he was out here for fun instead of in deadly peril.

As they neared the middle of the lake again, tentacles reached out of the water and coiled around the dragon. Sebastian had her body firmly wrapped up, but she was still flying well. The weight of the sixty-foot-long squid was a small burden to the forty-ton dragon. Sebastian moved his tentacles, trying to trap her wings. The dragon brought her back legs up and began ripping at the giant squid's body and tentacles with her sharp claws. Moments later, the tattered remains of the faithful squid fell back to the lake with a resounding splash.

"NO! *Sebastian!*!" Harry cried when he saw what was left of the squid hit the water. Sebastian had sacrificed himself to try to help Harry, but he hadn't slowed the dragon at all. His sacrifice was for nothing. Harry's heart ached for the animal, which had always been sweet and playful with students, except for those boys who had put the Everlasting Sleep Curse on Harry and tried to drown him in his seventh year.

Harry's attention was torn from Sebastian's floating, mangled body by a lick of flame searing his agonized back again. He got back to the serious work of dealing with the dragon, pushing the broom as fast as it would go while trying to put out the occasional fire in the shredded, scorched remnants of his robes.

"Oh no," Minerva McGonagall sighed. "Poor Sebastian."

"Sebastian?" one of the children said quietly.

She turned and looked at the frightened, curious faces around her. "The giant squid. Those of you not near the windows may not have seen it. He tried to stop the dragon, but it killed him. Sebastian was a great friend of Professor Potter's."

"The squid and Professor Potter were *friends*?" a boy asked in amazement. "How can that be?"

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Richard Weasley looked at the boy in amazement. "Didn't you say you'd read my mother's books? Uncle Harry can do a gill transformation so he can swim underwater for long periods. He and the squid used to play together when he was in school here."

Minerva McGonagall sniffled, then glanced around at the frightened children. "That's right. He once told me Sebastian liked to be rubbed between the eyes," she said, wiping angrily at the tears in her eyes. She'd had no idea the loss of the squid would hurt her so much.

Jamie and Siri looked at each other when Professor McGonagall stepped away from the window a bit to answer the question about the squid. They had identically terrified looks on their faces. The squid was huge! If it couldn't stop the dragon, then how could their father possibly do it? Tears welled in their eyes as they shared the thought, then turned back to watch the bitter contest between their dad and the dragon.

Not only were his children's brooms much too small for a grown man, but they were far slower and much less manoeuvrable than his racing broom. Harry was in serious trouble and he knew it. The dragon reminded him of this fact by setting the tail of his broom afire, the blaze catching the back of his robes again. He'd been scorched several times now, and his back and the backs of his legs were covered with blistered burns. He groaned with pain as he pointed his wand at his back and legs, putting out the fire once more, then had to grasp the broom handle tightly with both hands as the small broom began a horrible vibration. This broom wasn't going to last much longer.

Harry flew toward shore, hoping to at least set down on dry land when the broom gave out. The lake's edge was covered with gravel that had been created when Harry was blowing up boulders while learning to use his new wand during his seventh year. There was no soft place to land, and the gravel would be terrible footing if he had to stand and fight. There were no nearby boulders to hide behind. He scanned the area, looking for a better place to land.

The dragon swerved suddenly and lashed out with her tail, breaking the broom in two. Harry was stunned by the blow, his head reeling, barely aware of the ground sixty feet below rushing up toward him.

"DAD!" Siri screamed. His heart was pounding so hard, it felt as if it would burst out of his chest as he watched his father fall to earth. He felt frozen, horror-stricken, broken-hearted. Siri was the tender one of the pair. Jamie was the practical one.

"SIRI!" Jamie cried, pointing his wand at his father. "We can do this!"

Siri understood immediately and pulled out his wand. Together, the twins said, "*Arresto Momentum!*" a spell their father had taught each of his children when they'd learned to fly.

"Good idea, boys," McGonagall said, shaken out of her shock by their action. She added her spell to theirs. All three of them held their wands on Harry, slowing his descent as well as they could at such a distance.

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Harry shook his head, trying to clear his senses. Someone was trying to keep him from crashing. He added his own spell to soften his landing and hit with a dull thud rather than a bone-crunching crash. He groaned as he rolled onto his side and pushed himself into a sitting position, then waved toward the castle, knowing someone there was watching out for him. He looked up as a shadow loomed over him. The dragon was landing, intent on finishing him off.

"Bloody hell," Harry grumbled as he staggered to his feet. "Now what?" He stumbled a bit as the gravel rolled beneath his feet, then moved to higher ground, above the gravelled edge of the lake where the dragon stood, weaving her head at him as if deciding where to bite him first. Harry staggered away from her, cursing the burns in his back and legs that were now hindering his movement. "Merlin," he murmured, more a curse than a call for his phoenix, but suddenly Merlin was there with him, sitting on his shoulder. Harry's repeated spells had nearly blinded the dragon in one eye, so he tried to stay on her blind side as he moved quietly away from her.

"Thanks," Harry said, stroking Merlin gratefully as it poured tears over his pain-ridden back. "Listen, I'm glad you're here. You've given me an idea. Here's what we're going to do." He spoke to the bird for a moment while keeping a careful eye on the dragon. As the phoenix lifted off, Harry pointed his wand back toward the castle, cried, "*Accio sword!*" then stood waiting for it to arrive. To his horror, he saw Ginny running across the grounds right in the path where the sword would be flying. "GINNY! GET DOWN!" he cried, then screamed again as the dragon's flames reached him once more. He doused the flames with water from his wand as he hobbled away from the dragon as quickly as he could.

Ginny hit the ground as soon as she heard him call out to her. Seconds later, her hair fluttered in the breeze caused by Godric Gryffindor's sword flying over her. When it passed her, she looked up and studied her husband's condition with a practiced healer's eye. The unsteadiness of his movements made her shudder with horror. His Quidditch robes were in smouldering tatters, his back exposed and showing terrible burns that had to be excruciating. The backs of his legs weren't in much better condition. Normally so quick on his feet or a broom, Harry was crippled now and would not be able to run away from the dragon. But, being Harry Potter, he wouldn't run, he wouldn't Disapparate, he wouldn't try to escape. He'd face the monster and do his very best to defeat it in order to protect everyone else. As she watched, he caught the sword and turned to face the oncoming beast.

"Oh, Harry," she moaned, "what are you going to do now?"

"MUM!" both Potter twins cried.

"What's she doing here?" Jamie said. He looked at his twin. "Did you call her?"

"No. Did you?" Their parents had given each of the children one of Harry's Famous Wizard cards with the Communication Charm installed so they could contact their parents or each other as needed. Jamie and Siri had made good use of these cards in detention since they'd started Hogwarts.

"No. Dad must've done it," Jamie concluded, then stilled as his mother fell to the ground and a sword zoomed over her head. "What—"

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"Oh, well done, Harry!" McGonagall murmured approvingly.

"What's he doing?" Tim Weasley asked. "I don't get it."

"He's summoned the sword of Godric Gryffindor so he can kill the dragon," McGonagall said, not nearly as calm as she sounded.

"But how's he going to get that close?" Richard Weasley said nervously.

"I don't know, but I'm sure he has a plan," she assured him.

"We need to go help him," Jamie said determinedly, turning toward the door.

"Oh, no, you don't," McGonagall said sternly as she grabbed his shoulder with a firm hand. "Your father has enough to deal with without worrying about you boys. You can see even your mother is keeping her distance. If she got any closer, she'd distract him. He'd get hurt trying to protect her. You stay here and let him finish the job."

The boys gave her a rebellious look, but subsided into terrified silence when they looked out of the window again.

Harry kept a close eye on the dragon's movements. He limped into the shelter of some rocks some distance away when she approached him, then stepped out just long enough to hit her with a strong Stinging Hex in her blind eye.

She roared in pain and shook her head hard, then looked up because Merlin was pecking at the other eye. He pecked just enough to annoy her, not blind her, then flew high in the air above her, luring her upward.

The dragon couldn't decide if she wanted to kill Harry or Merlin first. She dropped her front legs back to the ground with a resounding thud, then started after Harry again, only to be immediately distracted by Merlin pecking her eyelid once more. With a roar of rage and pain she reared straight up on her hind legs, shooting flame at the phoenix above her. She stretched her body upright as high as she could, moving faster than anything that big should be able to, and caught the phoenix in her flame. With a small cry, Merlin fell to earth, his body disappearing in the long grass near the edge of the lake.

While Merlin distracted the dragon, Harry ran as hard as his injuries would allow and lifted Gryffindor's sword, crying "*Prolato!*" as he shoved it between the plates on her stomach into the tender skin beneath them. Stretching her body to reach Merlin had separated the plates wide enough for the sword's blade to enter her body easily. Harry's spell lengthened the sword's blade tremendously, growing long enough to slice through nearly half of the thickness of the dragon's body. Harry threw his entire weight against the sword's grip, shoving it sideways as hard as he could to do maximum damage inside the dragon. When he felt the beast beginning to react, he reversed the Lengthening Spell, withdrew the sword and began running for his life as the animal began to collapse. The dragon clutched at her belly with her front legs, raking Harry's back and side with her claws as she did so, cutting him to the bone. Harry screamed and fell, the sword and his wand by his side.

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Harry could feel the dragon's huge body coming toward him in what seemed like slow motion. With an agonizing effort, he grabbed his wand and rolled onto his back, screaming again as horrible pain washed over him. He bit off the scream and ground his teeth in determination, calling on every ounce of his magic as he pointed his wand at the dragon above him. "*Arresto Momentum!*" he cried as his golden aura burst forth around him in a brilliant halo. The dragon's fall slowed a bit, and he rolled over and tried to crawl away, dragging the sword with him. He was too weak to get to his feet again.

"What's that?" Tim said in shock when he saw the golden aura around his uncle.

"That's his aura," Professor McGonagall explained, trying to keep her voice steady. She, the Potter twins and the Weasleys who knew the spell had all added their *Arresto Momentum* charms to Harry's, but at such a distance, and with the dragon's tremendous weight, they weren't having much effect.

"His aura?" someone asked.

"Not all wizards have them – just those who have been through the Refiner's Fire, as he has. It shows when he uses his full power and he isn't in complete control of it for some reason," she replied. "His aura rarely shows, but in the heat of battle, particularly when he's injured, he simply can't expend the energy it takes to conceal it."

"He's barely moving," Jamie breathed. "He's not going to get out in time."

"Have faith in your father, James," McGonagall said with more assurance than she felt. "He's come through many a tough situation before this."

"OK," Jamie said in a small voice. He glanced down at his mother and saw she had her wand out too, but he couldn't tell what kind of charm she was doing.

McGonagall tried a Summoning Charm, but the dying dragon's wing flailed just then, and that impenetrable hide simply made the spell bounce off. The movement of the wing made Minerva think her charm had actually pulled the dragon a bit farther over Harry. She raised her wand in horror, then tried a Banishing Charm, but the dragon was simply too much mass for her to move alone, especially at such a distance. She could see other spells bouncing off the dragon's hide as teachers and students watching from other parts of the castle tried to help Harry. Nothing was working.

Ginny, too, had used *Arresto Momentum*. All the charms in the world weren't going to hold forty tons of dragon off her husband for long, so she switched to a Summoning Charm to pull him away from the danger. Just as she cast it, though, the dragon's flailing claws caught in his robes and held him fast. "*Draconus Exumai!*" Ginny cried, trying to throw the dragon's claws away from Harry. The spell came too late. The dragon's foot moved away from Harry, but she crashed to earth with his body beneath hers.

"**HARRY!**" Ginny screamed, tears streaming down her face. "**NO!** You are NOT leaving me now! **NO!**" She pointed her wand at the dragon, crying, "*Mobilicorpus!*" but the charm didn't

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budge the beast at all. She tried again and again, with no results. She fell to her knees sobbing brokenly, but still trying to cast spells to free her husband from the dragon's body.

Dumbledore ran down the hill, having just arrived from a meeting in London. "Ginny! Where's Harry? Your mother said—" he said as he approached the grieving woman.

"He's . . . he's under there," she said, pointing to the dragon with a shaky hand.

The students and staff were pouring out of the castle now that the dragon was dead. They gathered around the fallen beast, the heartbroken woman and the wizened old man in a silent circle of grief. Jamie and Siri ran to their mother while the Weasleys gathered around Dumbledore, all of their faces white with shock.

"Mum? We need to get Dad out from under the dragon," Jamie said, shaking his mother's shoulder gently.

"I tried," Ginny whispered, still pointing her wand at the fallen beast but no longer casting any spells. "I couldn't budge her."

"If we all do it together," Jamie said stoutly, "we can do it!"

"That's a good idea, James," Dumbledore said, smiling at his great-great-great grandson. He glanced at Fawkes, who had arrived with him, then turned to the gathered students and staff. He pointed his wand at his throat and said "*Sonorus*." Soon his magnified voice filled the castle grounds.

"Thank you for coming out. We need your help. When I count to three, everyone do your Levitation Charm and hold it while Mrs. Potter summons her husband out of there. Ready? One, two, three!"

With one voice, hundreds of people said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Fawkes grabbed the huge thumb claw on the front of the dragon's wing, the only thing small enough for him to grasp in his talons, and lifted with all his might. Dumbledore put everything he had into the charm, and was soon surrounded by the pale gold aura of his aging Refiner's Fire powers at maximum strength. His silver hair and beard whipped in a wind of his own creation as he held the charm with every ounce of his waning powers.

The Potter twins, the Weasleys, the staff and students all held wands shakily or steadily toward the dragon. Harry was well-liked as both a Transfiguration teacher and flying instructor, even by the Slytherins, who wholeheartedly joined in casting the charm. Incredibly, inch by painful inch, the dragon began to lift off of Harry's body.

Ginny stood and watched the dragon's body moving in disbelief. Suddenly, in the dragon's shadow she saw the messy black hair of the man she so loved, his body barely covered by the tattered remnants of blood-red Quidditch robes. "*Accio Harry!*" she shouted, sobbing with relief when his bloody, mangled body arrived at her feet. The gathered witches and wizards lifted their charm, allowing the dragon to fall back to earth with a resounding crash, as Ginny knelt beside her husband, Vanished what was left of his Quidditch robes, shoes and trousers, and began examining him.

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"How is he?" Siri asked timidly.

"He's badly hurt," Ginny said, scrubbing tears from her face and forcing herself to act professionally. "Jamie, hand me my bag," she said to the twin nearest her medical kit. Jamie handed her the bag and knelt beside her, across his father's body from his twin, who was gently touching Harry's upturned right hand.

"Mum?" Siri said after a moment. "His hand's burned."

"He's burned all over, son," she replied distractedly.

"No. It's the animals," he said, looking up at her.

Ginny looked up from where she was trying to clean debris from the huge gashes in Harry's back and saw new brands from the phoenixes and griffins on Harry's wand. She shook her head. "That's from his wand. He used his full power and was injured enough that it wasn't completely in control," she said as she went back to work. Harry was bleeding badly from these claw marks and they needed to be closed as quickly as possible. "The animals on the wand add power to it and brand his hand if he doesn't control his magic properly."

"It looks painful," Siri murmured, touching his father's hand lightly.

"It is," Ginny agreed, glancing at her son. He was the tender-hearted one, the one who always helped her when the little ones had skinned knees or cut fingers. He had a healer's touch already. She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, wiping the tears away. She had work to do, and Siri wanted to help. "Jamie, look in my bag for a small pot that's orange and has a blue lid. Give that to your brother." She looked up at Sirius, who now held the pot in his hand. "That's essence of murtlap. It will make his hand feel better. Be sure there's no debris – no grass or gravel or anything – in his hand, then rub a generous amount of the ointment into his hand. Be very gentle with your rubbing, Siri, because those burns are quite painful to him," she instructed. She glanced up a few minutes later and saw Siri was completely involved in rubbing ointment into every crevice of Harry's palm. Jamie was hovering over her, not certain what to do. Remus and Dumbledore were now sitting beside her, offering their help. Fawkes dripped tears into the huge gashes in Harry's back while Ginny examined her husband for broken bones and internal injuries.

"How is he?" Remus asked quietly, not really wanting the boys to overhear the conversation.

"It's bad, Remus, it's so bad," Ginny murmured, her voice breaking. She shook her head, angry with herself for letting her emotions get the better of her again, then got back to work. She continued to pass a crystal over his body and murmured her findings to Remus and Dumbledore. "Compound fractures of both legs. Broken pelvis. Broken ribs. Broken left humerus and left clavicle. Second and third degree burns on probably sixty percent of his body. And these deep gashes in his back. He probably has more internal injuries than I've found so far, since the bloody damned dragon *fell* on him."

"It's a wonder he's alive after that," Dumbledore said, bending down so he was face to face with his grandson, who was lying on his stomach. "Hello, Harry," he added tenderly as the horribly wounded man opened his eyes.

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"Hi," Harry said, then began coughing, moaning in pain as he did so.

"Coughing is actually good, love," Ginny encouraged him. "It will help your lungs. But I know it hurts. I'll have you fixed up in a jiffy. Just be patient."

"Gin – love you," he said, trying to focus on her. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I know you were doing what you had to," she replied, smiling down at him. She bent and kissed him gently, then removed his glasses so he'd be more comfortable, and got back to work. "I love you too. Now behave yourself so I can fix you up, OK?"

"K," he murmured.

"Mrs. Potter," Severus Snape said as he stepped up behind her, "are there potions you will need that I might help with?"

"Yes, I'll need a huge quantity of essence of murtlap, some, um –" Ginny had to stop and wipe tears from her eyes again. The enormity of the healing task before her was truly overwhelming. Her husband had just been crushed by forty ton dragon. He should be a smear on the ground now, not still alive and even talking. "How did you manage it, Harry?" she murmured.

"Armpit," he breathed, then tried to smile.

"Armpit?" she said, confused.

"Got . . . trapped . . . in her armpit," he replied. "Bit of . . . space there."

"Oh, well, that explains it, then," Ginny said, trying to smile at him. "Well done."

"Yeah," he agreed.

Ginny got back to work, glancing up at Snape and reeling off a list of potions she'd need with the professional ease born of her long years of healer training. Snape hurried back into the castle to get what she'd asked for.

Before long, Harry was stabilized enough to move. A stretcher was conjured under him and levitated very carefully by Remus. Ginny walked next to Harry, keeping an eye on his vital signs. Siri capped the bottle of murtlap essence and walked beside his mother. Jamie walked on the other side of the stretcher, gazing into his father's face.

"Jamie," Harry whispered.

"Yes?"

"Bring . . . the sword. You're the . . . Heir."

"What?" Jamie said, confused.

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"Do what he said. He'll explain later," his grandfather told the boy. Jamie ran back to where Harry's body had lain, found his father's wand and pocketed it. Then he hesitantly lifted the bloody sword lying nearby. It was so long and heavy, Jamie had to use both hands to lift it. The thick, gooey dragon's blood on the blade dripped in huge globs to the ground. Harry's blood, much thinner than the dragon's, but still in a vast quantity, covered the hilt of the sword. Jamie recognized the difference in blood and dropped the sword, looking at the sticky gore now covering his hands in horror. With no warning, he bent over and vomited.

"Mr. Potter, are you all right? What's wrong?" Professor McGonagall said, hurrying over to him, then pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his mouth.

"This . . . this is my dad's blood," he sobbed, tears streaming down his face as he stared at his own hands, then at the beautiful jewelled hilt smeared with Harry's blood.

"I know. Would you like me to take it?" she offered kindly.

"No. My dad told me to get it. I'll carry it," he said with all the dignity an eleven-year-old could muster. His young face hardened as he stared at the sword for another moment, picked it up, then caught up with the slow-moving group taking his father to the hospital wing.

"You boys stay out here," Ginny said as her sons tried to follow the group bearing Harry into a curtained area in the hospital wing. "I'll let you know when you can see him."

The boys nodded, their eyes huge and dark with fear. They shuffled back against the wall and sat down, as close to the curtain as they could manage without touching it. Jamie held the sword across his knees. Thick, viscous dragon blood dripped from it, making wet splatter marks on his robes and the floor around him. He sat staring at it, holding the jewelled grip with one hand so the sword wouldn't slip and cut him. He'd already sliced into his robes by being careless when carrying it – the sword was unbelievably sharp. Jamie rubbed the other hand unconsciously but continuously on his robes, as if trying to wipe off the blood smeared all over his hand and robes. Once in a while, he'd change hands and rub the other hand on his robes over and over.

Siri watched his twin uneasily. He'd never seen Jamie so unnerved. Jamie was the strong, bold one of the pair. Siri didn't know how to comfort him.

A sudden anguished scream from their father made both boys jump. The sword clattered to the floor. Jamie picked it up again, looking around warily. He was supposed to be taking care of this sword, not dropping it on a hard stone floor. He sighed and picked it up again, gripping it more tightly than before. He was grateful the stupid sword hadn't cut him when it fell.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said anxiously. "I don't know where to touch you to help you lift your head so you can take the potion, sweetheart." Harry's face was badly burned on one side, and covered with cuts and abrasions on the other. There was no safe place to touch him without hurting him.

"S OK," he groaned, opening his mouth and turning his head to the side as well as he could. He couldn't be placed on his back due to the burns there, so giving him potions was difficult.

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"It's not OK," Ginny grumbled, wiping her streaming eyes with the back of her wrist. She managed to get some pain potion in his mouth and breathed a sigh of relief as he visibly relaxed a bit. "Better?"

"Yeah," he replied. As she bent over him and worked on his injuries, he said, "Tell Hagrid – wait. How . . . is he?"

"I don't know, baby," Ginny replied. She glanced up at Remus, who ducked out of the room to find out about Hagrid's condition. Once a healer had arrived in Hagrid's cabin to work on him, Remus and Snape had rushed out of the cabin just in time to see Harry disappear under the dragon's falling body.

Ginny smiled encouragingly at her husband as the curtains fell back in place after Remus passed through them. "Be still now, so I can take care of you."

Harry lay as still as he could manage, flinching and grunting when Ginny did something particularly painful. The pain potion she'd given him had only taken the edge off the pain, not removed it completely. Suddenly, Harry screamed and thrashed on the bed in agony.

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry," Ginny sobbed. "There's just so much damage," she muttered, shaking her head. She stopped and took a deep breath, then got back to work, wiping the tears from her face with angry motions.

Madam Pomfrey entered the enclosure with Remus close behind her. "Ginny, Marcus will be finished with the students in a few minutes. Why don't you let him treat Harry? This has to be hard for you," she said kindly.

"I'll take care of him," Ginny said with determination. "Marcus is welcome to come and help me when he has time."

Remus bent down so he was on Harry's eye level. "Harry?" He waited until Harry looked at him. "Hagrid's going to be fine. He has a concussion and a few broken bones, but nothing too serious."

"Thanks," Harry breathed. "Tell him . . . I want . . . the hide."

"The hide?" Remus said, confused.

"That bloody damned . . . dragon's . . . hide," Harry said stubbornly.

"Whatever for?" Remus asked, astonished.

"Boots . . ., cloaks . . .," Harry's words were cut off by a painful cough that left him moaning. When he had his breath back, he looked at Remus and picked up where he left off. "Doormat."

Ginny was startled into laughter. She bent down to look him in the eye. "A dragon hide for a *doormat*?" He smirked a little and gave her a very definite wink. Ginny's heart lifted for a moment. Harry, bless him, was being deliberately funny.

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"I . . . earned it," Harry said, watching his wife's reaction with satisfaction.

"Yes, you did," Remus said, grinning at his godson. "I'll let him know."

"Thanks." Harry's eyes became unfocused as he fought against the pain wracking his body. Something Ginny or Madam Pomfrey was doing made him scream again, a long anguished wail. When he caught his breath, Harry waved one hand feebly at the curtained wall and said, "*Silencio*," then dropped his hand wearily to his side.

"Why'd you do that?" Ginny said distractedly.

"The boys . . . are just . . . there," Harry said looking toward the edge of the curtains where they met the wall. "I can . . . see them."

As Harry spoke, twin voices from outside the curtain cried, "MUM! MUM! What's wrong?"

"Oh, dear, I forgot about them," Ginny said, aghast at what they'd been hearing. "Thanks for the Silencing Charm. I wish I'd thought of it." Harry nodded slightly. "Now stop doing magic and let me take care of you, all right?" She glanced at Remus, who was walking toward the curtain. "Thanks, Remus."

"I'll do what I can," he promised.

Outside the curtains, Remus gathered the twins into his arms, holding them close and letting them cry as long as they needed to. "Nothing's wrong, no more so than when we went in there," he assured them.

"It got so quiet all of a sudden," Siri said, pulling back to look at Remus. The boy's face was white with fear. "Dad was screaming, and then—"

"He just . . . *stopped*," Jamie finished for his twin, his face equally white. "We thought—" He quieted, unable to voice his fear.

Remus understood now. "Your dad didn't want you to hear him scream, so he put a Silencing Charm on the area. Some of the things being done to heal him are rather painful, unfortunately, and the pain potions he's been given aren't helping much yet."

"How long before we can see him?" Jamie asked. "I need to talk to him."

"It will be a while. We'll let you know, all right?" Both boys nodded miserably. Remus felt his heart turn over, filled with overwhelming love for these two boys who looked so much like their father, and filled, as well, with tremendous fear for Harry. He was hurt so badly this time. How could he possibly survive? Remus shook his head, angry with himself for even considering such a thing, then held the boys close to him and kissed each one on top of his messy black hair, breathing in the healthy scent of active young boys. "He loves you and your brothers and sisters and your mum so very much. I promise you, he will fight as hard as he can to get well quickly so he can be with all of you again soon. And as you saw today, when Harry Potter fights, he's brilliant." He pushed them away a bit so he could look in their eyes.

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Both boys looked up at the man they considered a grandfather. "He was brilliant, wasn't he?" Jamie said, his voice shaking a bit, but his eyes awed.

"Yes, he was. That's the way he is, lads, a hero in every way. Don't ever forget that."

"We won't," they chorused.

"I'll go and see how he's doing, all right?" Remus said, anxious to get back to his godson. "Is there anything you want me to tell him?"

"No, I need to talk to him myself. Thanks," Jamie said, his eyes dark and serious.

"All right, then. I'll keep you posted."

The boys nodded, their faces solemn as they watched him turn and go back through the curtains that separated them from their parents.

The boys sat down, leaning against the wall next to the curtain, as close to their father as they could manage. The Silencing Charm made an unnatural stillness in their area. As they waited for someone to come and tell them their father was improving, Siri looked at the gore-covered sword in his twin's hands. "Why d'you suppose Dad wanted you to bring that?"

"Because I'm the Heir," Jamie replied, rubbing his bloodied hands on his robes as he'd been doing ever since their parents had disappeared behind that curtained wall, only breaking his rhythm when Remus had joined them moments earlier.

"What's that mean?"

"I have no idea."

"What are you supposed to do with the sword, then?" Siri said, rather glad at the moment that he wasn't the oldest Potter child and didn't face whatever responsibility being the Heir entailed.

Jamie shrugged, staring at the sword uneasily. "Dunno. I guess I should clean it, but I don't know how."

"I'll help you," Siri offered. He shared Jamie's feeling of horror when they looked at the blood-covered sword, but cleaning it was something they could do for their father. "Dad would want it to be cleaned, wouldn't he?"

"Yeah," Jamie agreed, tearing his eyes away from the sword to give his brother a grateful look. "Thanks." He watched his twin go to a nearby shelf and get a bowl and two flannels, then fill the bowl with warm soapy water.

The two boys sat on the floor, the sword between them, and began washing it very carefully. Tears splattered the sword and the floor around it as they worked. Somehow they felt that, with every speck of blood they removed, they were washing away a part of their father's life. They tried to be quiet, but finally sobs began to escape them.

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The curtains parted and both Remus and Dumbledore came out and knelt beside the twins. "Oh, you dear lads, what are you doing?" the old wizard said, wrapping an arm around Jamie as Remus embraced Siri.

"T-t-taking care of D-D-Dad's s-sword," Jamie said, his voice shaking as he tried to stop sobbing.

"You don't have to do that," Dumbledore said, taking the flannels from their hands and putting the bowl full of bloody water aside.

Jamie looked up at his grandfather, his eyes streaming with tears, but a very Harry-like stubborn set to his jaw. "Dad said I had to get it. He said I'm the Heir."

"You're not the Heir yet, James," Dumbledore assured him. "You're the next Heir, but you don't have to worry about that for a long time."

Jamie looked at his grandfather in confusion, but then his face lit up. "That means Dad's the Heir and he's getting better, right?" he said hopefully.

"I have every expectation that he will make a full recovery soon," Dumbledore said, praying his hope was not a vain one. He knew Harry was in a desperate fight for his life at the moment, but the boys needed a bit of comfort just now. "Let me show you a very useful spell," he added, trying to distract them. He pulled out his wand and passed it slowly over the length of the sword. Blood and gore disappeared in the wake of the wand's movement.

"Thanks," Siri said, sounding greatly relieved.

"Yes, thanks, Grandfather," Jamie added, but his face looked somehow more bereft than before.

"What's wrong, James?" Remus said, studying the boy's solemn face.

"Dad gave me a job to do and I didn't manage it. I've been awful to him all this time at school, and . . . and . . ." Jamie stopped speaking and sat there shaking his head, apparently at a loss for words.

"Your father told you to bring the sword," Dumbledore said, reaching out and putting his hand under the boy's chin, then gently turning Jamie's face up to look at him. "You brought it. He didn't tell you to clean it. I'll ask Cousin Minerva to put it back in her office, shall I?"

"Is that what Dad wants me to do with it?" Jamie said uncertainly.

"Yes. Your father didn't want you to worry about this sword – he just wanted you to bring it in." He patted the boy's shoulder reassuringly.

"What did he mean when he said I'm the Heir?" Jamie said, watching his grandfather closely. Now that his eyes had been dragged away from the sword, he didn't want to look at it again.

"Your father will explain that to you in good time," his grandfather replied. "Or I can tell you later if you wish. But it's really his place to explain it. I don't want to take that pleasure from

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him." He rose to his feet, lifting the sword as he got up. "I'll give this to the headmistress, then, shall I?" Jamie nodded. "Right, then. I'll be back in a moment. Why don't you go and wash your hands and faces? You'll feel better then." He patted both boys on the head and moved toward the nurse's office, where Minerva was conferring with Madam Pomfrey.

"He's doing fairly well right now," Remus assured them. "Shall I stay out here with you?"

"No, but thank you," Siri replied in a low voice. "Mum needs all the help she can get right now. Just come and tell us how he is every so often, OK?"

"I'll do that," Remus promised. He hugged the boys, then went through the curtains again.

Jamie and Siri remained on the floor, gazing at the damp patches that still showed traces of pink in the water there, and then at the bowl which seemed to be full of blood. They wiped the floor with their flannels, wrung them out over the bowl, then got to their feet and stood staring at the bowl, apparently unwilling or unable to pick it up.

"Oh, I'm sorry, boys. I forgot something," Dumbledore said from across the room. "*Evanescio*." With that, the bloody water in the bowl vanished. He glanced at Jamie's robes and said, "*Scourgify*," smiling a bit at the relief on the boy's face when the blood disappeared from his robes.

The boys gave their grandfather grateful looks and then put the bowl away and hung the damp flannels to dry. After washing their faces and hands, they went back to their places outside the curtained wall and settled down to wait for news of their father.

Jamie turned to look at his twin. "Thanks for helping."

Siri shrugged. "You'd do the same for me." He put his arm around his brother's back and patted him, trying his best to comfort his twin while wishing someone would comfort him, as well.

Jamie gave him a half-hearted smile and sighed. "What are we going to do?"

Siri looked at him, his eyes a dark, stormy green just like Jamie's. "Wait."

"That's all we can do for now, Ginny," Marcus Pomfrey said as he straightened up and stretched his back. "Do you want to send him to St. Mungo's?"

"I'll stay with him," Ginny said. "Transporting him will be too hard on him. We can take care of him here."

"Well, I'm only a fire-call away if you need me," Marcus said, patting her on the shoulder. "I'll come and check on both of you soon."

Ginny put her hand on top of his where it lay on her shoulder. "Thanks."

"Take care of yourself, too," he reminded her. "Your children need you. So does he," he added with a nod toward Harry's still form.

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"I know."

"I saw your boys sitting just outside," he said with a smile. "They're handsome lads. You must be so proud of them."

"We are. They're good boys," she said, sniffing a bit. "Well, they're not always good," she added with a sad chuckle. "They're just like Harry, and not only in looks." She followed him through the curtain and saw her boys sitting quietly by the wall. She waved to Marcus as he walked away, then opened her arms to her boys.

"You look tired. I am too. Come and give your mum a hug," she said, giving them a weary smile.

"How's Dad?" Jamie said as he and Siri wrapped their arms around her, all of them well-practiced in how to manage a twins-plus-mum hug.

"He's resting now. It's going to take him a long time to heal, I'm afraid, but I think he's going to be all right," she said, rubbing her cheek in Siri's rumpled hair and looking seriously into Jamie's eyes. "You boys were wonderful. I hope you know that."

"We didn't do anything—" Jamie began.

"You didn't get hysterical. You were quiet and calm and did whatever your dad and I asked you to do. You can't imagine what a help that was to me, what a comfort. You're such good boys." As she held them close, she felt her spirit being restored somewhat by their love. She pulled back to look at them and smiled. "You've grown! You're nearly as tall as me now."

The boys gave her feeble smiles, knowing she was trying to distract them. "When can we see him?" Jamie said. "I need to talk to him."

"Not for a while," she replied. "He needs to rest. I gave him a heavy dose of potion to help him sleep."

"Can we sit with him, Mum?" Siri said. "So he won't be alone when he wakes up?"

"That would be wonderful, boys. He'd like that," she said, studying their faces with worry in her eyes. "But I must warn you, he doesn't look good."

"We saw him when you got him out from under the dragon," Siri reminded her.

"I know, but even cleaned up, he looks bad. I just wanted to warn you."

"OK," both boys said. "We won't bother him, Mum," Siri continued. "Please, may we sit with him?"

"All right. Just be quiet, all right?" They both nodded. Ginny pulled the curtain back and let them enter the enclosure around Harry's bed. When she heard their shocked gasps, she put her hands on their shoulders and gave them a reassuring squeeze. "He'll look better when the swelling goes down."

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The boys just gulped and nodded, more horrified than they'd expected to be. Harry had a severe burn on the left side of his face, and the bottom of his left ear was a sodden mass of tissue little resembling the well-shaped shell it had once been. The swelling from the burn made his face look twisted and strange. Some parts of his body were heavily bandaged or splinted, others were naked and shiny with some kind of ointment. A Warming Charm kept him warm, since a blanket would have been painful wherever it touched him. He floated above the bed a bit to keep pressure off of his many wounds. The hair at the back of his head and near his left ear was singed off, the rest of it sticking up madly in all directions. He looked strangely innocent without his glasses. Even the outer edge of his left eyebrow had been singed, leaving the rest of the eyebrow as an oddly truncated dark arch over that eye.

Ginny studied her sons' faces, noting the horror there. "Are you two all right?" They nodded, unable to speak. Ginny sighed, then pulled them back through the curtain. She stood looking into two pairs of heartbroken green eyes. "Listen to me. I know seeing him is very hard for you. I'm proud of how you handled it. You were so strong! You don't have to go in there again until he's better."

"But we want to help!" Siri said. Jamie nodded in agreement, his heart in his eyes.

"Truly?" They nodded again. "Then you must promise me this, boys," Ginny said quite seriously. "You must never look at him with horror, fear or disgust. He is your father. He loves you more than anything in this world. He just offered his life to save yours and those of the other people here. He knew he could die before he ever went out of the window. But he did it willingly, because he loves you and wanted to protect you, no matter what it cost him. You do understand that, don't you?" She watched as they thought about her words.

"Yes, Mum," they said in unison.

"Right. Remember that when you sit with him. If you show any sign of revulsion or horror, if you make him feel bad about himself, about how he looks – that would be such a cruel thing to do, and I know you aren't cruel boys. But I also know he looks awful right now, and that must be very difficult for you to deal with. If you're going to sit with him, you must promise me to be cheerful and loving with him, no matter what. Can you do that? Think about it before you answer me. This is a very serious question."

Both boys looked at her quietly, then turned as one to gaze at their father, still visible through the parting of the curtain. They turned back to their mother and nodded, their eyes solemn. "We'll behave. And we'll do whatever he needs us to," Jamie agreed.

"What can we do for him?" Siri asked.

"When he wakes up, he'll probably have questions. He'll probably want to know if anyone died, and if so how many, and how many are injured. I'll tell you those numbers as soon as I know them. Whatever he asks, answer him as honestly as you can, but remember to be kind. Don't be discouraging in any way. He'll need a drink of water, I'm sure. I'm certain he'll tell you he's fine when you ask how he is, but pay attention to how he looks, how he acts. You'll be able to tell if he's in much pain or if he's fairly comfortable. You'll need to call me to come check him when he wakes up, but unless he's in serious pain, you can chat with him a bit before you call me. I know all three of you will need that time together."

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"OK, Mum," the boys chorused.

"I'll check back with you later. Take turns going to the loo so one of you is always with him. Let me know when he wakes up," she said, smiling at each boy in turn. "I'm going to help Madam Pomfrey with the injured students. Thank you for helping."

"Just tell us what to do, and we'll do it, whatever it is," Siri said earnestly.

"Sit with him quietly and take care of him when he wakes up," she said, then leaned down and kissed her husband on his forehead. "I'll be back soon, sweetheart," she murmured. "Get well!" With that, she stepped through the curtains with a final wave to her boys.

Jamie and Siri pulled up chairs and sat down to wait for their father to wake up. The longer they looked at their father, the harder it was to keep the tears from falling. Siri looked at his brother. "I can't believe we were so stupid."

"Yeah," Jamie agreed, then turned back to watch the rise and fall of his father's chest. He couldn't look his dad in the face. The burns there were too horrible for him to contemplate, much less look at. Jamie sat quietly for a long time, then picked up his chair and moved to the other side of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't . . . I need . . . erm. . . ." Jamie said, swallowing hard. "I need to be over here." He sat down and found himself looking at his father's horribly burned back. The view here was no better than from the other side. Jamie covered his face with his hands and tried to keep his sobbing quiet. If he looked away, he could calm down, but his eyes seemed to be drawn inexorably to Harry's back. The dragon had gashed him horribly. Those gashes added to the faint network of scars already criss-crossing Harry's back, a reminder of the beating Voldemort had given him in his sixth year at Hogwarts. And over all these cuts and scars, burns blistered his back, the skin scorched and horrible looking. A stench of burnt hair and meat hung in the room, as well. Jamie swallowed hard and simply closed his eyes, no longer able to look, but refusing to leave. He had a debt of honour to pay here. He'd promised to sit with his father, and that's exactly what he was going to do.

Siri looked at his brother and thought he'd had a pretty good idea what was going through his twin's mind. He, too, closed his eyes, wiping frantically at the tears sliding down his cheeks.

Some time later, Harry woke up and saw one of his boys sitting by his bed looking quite solemn – or was he crying? Without his glasses, Harry couldn't tell. "Hi," he said with a slight smile, his voice whispery and weak. He squinted, trying to discern which of his sons it was.

"Hi, Dad," the boy murmured, trying to smile.

"Jamie?" Harry said, his voice a raspy whisper.

"No, it's Siri. Jamie's behind you," the boy said glancing over his father's shoulder at his twin.

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"Sorry," Harry said, trying again to smile. His face hurt horribly. Speaking, smiling, any movement made his badly burned left cheek scream in pain.

Sirius saw the grimace crossing his father's face. "No problem, Dad. You almost never mistake us," he said, doing his best to smile.

"Jamie?" Harry said, trying to move his head a bit so he could see his other son. He thought he heard a sob behind him, but he couldn't be certain.

"Jamie," Siri said, a bit impatiently, "come here."

Jamie came around the bed at a foot-dragging pace, finally sitting down next to his twin. He barely glanced at his father. "Hi, Dad."

"What's . . . wrong?" Harry said, frowning a bit at his oldest son. "Am I . . . that badly hurt?"

Jamie was silent. Siri elbowed him, scowling at his brother as he did so. Finally, the oldest Potter boy lifted his head and looked at his father. The tracks of tears were plain on his face. His face was red and puffy from a long spell of crying. "It isn't you, Dad. It's me. I'm so sorry."

"For . . . what?" Harry said, completely confused.

"I've been such a *git*," Jamie replied, dropping his eyes again.

"We both have. We're sorry, Dad," Siri said earnestly.

"What . . . are you . . . talking about?"

The twins looked at each other, as if deciding which one would be the spokesman. Jamie shuddered, but finally lifted his head with determination. "Siri and I have been horrible to you. We haven't even tried to do the work in class. We've been disrespectful and rude and . . . and . . . *stupid*!" His voice was both angry and ashamed.

"You're not . . . stupid. What are you . . . on about?" Harry asked, frowning in concern.

Jamie grumbled to himself for a moment before speaking. When he finally began to talk, the explanation burst from him in a torrent. "When we got to Hogwarts, everyone had read Aunt Hermione's books. They were so impressed with you. They wanted to know what 'big magic' we'd seen you do," Jamie said, nearly snarling in rage. "We told them we'd never seen you do anything 'big,' so then they said Aunt Hermione was making everything up, and that you were a fraud. And we were so incredibly thick, we believed them!"

Harry nearly smiled, glad the problem that had been plaguing his boys was something he could actually deal with. "Is that . . . all it was? You thought . . . I was a fraud?"

"We didn't know what to think! These older kids said things that made us doubt Aunt Hermione's stories. They said Aunt Hermione just made that stuff up so she could sell books and make a lot of money. *You've* never told us those stories. We learned them from her. You

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and Mum don't talk about that stuff at all, so what were we supposed to think?" Jamie said, sounding desperate now.

"That the memories were . . . too painful . . . for us to want . . . to remember," Harry said quietly.

"Oh," Jamie said, suddenly looking deflated. He shared a guilty look with Siri. "We didn't think of that."

"It's all right," Harry said, trying to reach for them. One arm was encased in a huge cast, the other hand and arm heavily bandaged and he was lying on his stomach because of his seriously burned and slashed back. Harry glared at the hand he could see in frustration. He wanted to ruffle his boys' hair, to smile at them and tell them everything would be fine, to find a way to make them laugh or at least smile again. But he had no idea how to manage that in his present condition. He finally managed to lift his bandaged right hand toward them, but it was so painful, he groaned and dropped his arm, gasping with pain.

"What do you need, Dad? Do you want a drink? Mum said you might be thirsty when you woke up," Siri said.

"Where is she?" Harry said, glancing around.

"Tending the kids who were hurt when the tower collapsed," Jamie replied.

"How many?" Harry asked, his eyes worried.

"About twenty injured, I think," Jamie replied, glancing at his twin for confirmation. Siri nodded. "Most of them were in class. It was just the Second Years who were in the tower and a few others who were out of class because they were ill."

Harry's heart ached as he thought of all those bright, eager faces, most of them just a year older than his boys. "Any dead?"

"Six," Jamie said after a moment's hesitation.

"Boy, Mum knows you well," Siri said with a slight smile. "She said that would be one of the first things you asked when you woke up."

"She and I . . . have been . . . through . . . this . . . kind of thing . . . before," Harry said with great effort.

"Don't try to talk so much, Dad," Siri said. "You're not very strong yet."

"I have to . . . tell you something," Harry said determinedly.

"What?" Jamie replied, his body tense as he waited to hear the reprimand he felt he deserved.

"I love you both. I'm proud of you. I understand how . . . hard it is when you start Hogwarts, how . . . hard it is when other kids pick on you. And you *have* seen . . . big magic – you just

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didn't recognize it because . . . you're used to it." Harry stopped to catch his breath after speaking for so long.

"Big magic?" Jamie breathed, staring at his father hopefully.

"Adferos. Not just . . . anyone can send them. The wards around . . . the house. Your mum, Uncle Ron . . . and me . . . changing into animals. Being an Animagus is . . . very rare, you know, and multiple Animagi are . . . nearly non-existent. There are . . . very few in history. Grandfather and I are the . . . only two multiple Animagi . . . alive right now. And being able to change into a magical . . . creature is even more rare. My being a phoenix . . . Animagus, as well as a thestral, is very . . . unusual – really 'big' magic," Harry said, a faint twinkle in his eye as he watched varied expressions race across his boys' faces.

"Those are big magic?" Jamie said, surprised.

"Yes."

Jamie banged his fists on his knees. "We are *idiots*! We should have known!" Siri nodded his agreement.

"We never told you that stuff was . . . unusual for wizards," Harry said simply. "It's just . . . the way we live."

"We are so sorry, Dad," Siri said again.

"When we see those gits—" Jamie began.

"Just ignore them. If you tell them those things . . . , it will seem like bragging, and that will get you . . . even more trouble from gits like that," Harry said, watching his sons carefully. "Promise me. I don't want you . . . getting into fights."

"Yes, Dad," the boys chorused, looking a bit resentful, but relieved as well.

"The cool thing is," Jamie said with a sudden smile, "your fight with the dragon was just *full* of big magic."

"And awesome flying!" Siri added.

"Yeah," Jamie agreed. "They can't call Aunt Hermione a liar anymore. You're everything she said, and more! How cool is that?"

"Very cool," Harry said, glad to have his boys acting like themselves again.

"We're not doing a very good job of taking care of you," Siri said, suddenly all business. "Do you want anything?"

"Mum said you'd need some water," Jamie added. "Do you want a drink?"

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Harry nodded. Jamie carefully lifted his father's head while Siri held a straw to his lips so he could drink some water. A few sips later, Harry was finished. He lay there gasping after Jamie laid his head back on the bed.

"Are you OK?" Jamie asked in concern. He and his twin studied their dad's face. Harry was terribly pale, his hair still sticky with blood, his body swathed in all kinds of bandages for his various injuries.

"I'm . . . fine," he said with as reassuring a smile as he could muster.

Both boys laughed uneasily. "Mum said you'd say that too," Siri said, reaching out to touch his father's less-injured shoulder with a gentle hand.

Harry smiled. "Yeah. I always . . . say that."

"I'll go and get Mum," Jamie said, then dashed through the curtains to find her.

Ginny hurried into Harry's enclosure a few minutes later. "Hi, baby. How do you feel?"

Harry tried to smile, and wiggled the fingers of his burned right hand a little, which was all he could manage. "With . . . my hands," he said, earning a smile for his cheek.

"You are such a silly man," Ginny said fondly as she examined him. "I love you so much, Harry. You really need to get well now, and stop making me work so hard."

"You always . . . were . . . a lazy wench," he teased as she examined him.

Jamie and Siri looked in open-mouthed astonishment from one parent to the other. They were actually *playing* with each other, with Dad so terribly hurt! The twins stared at each other in confusion.

"It's OK, boys," Ginny said, noticing their bewilderment. "Your dad and I learned a long time ago that humour is a great help in making him heal faster."

Harry moaned as Ginny very gently Levitated him and turned him so she could inspect his burns and the gashes on his back.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know this hurts. The pain potion I just gave you will start working soon," Ginny said as she looked him over.

Harry nodded, then sighed as she rolled him onto his right side. "That's . . . better."

"Not moving, or lying on your side?" she asked.

"Side."

"OK, I'll prop you so you'll be more comfortable," she said, casting spells around him to support him so he wouldn't roll over either way. "Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks." He lay still for a moment. "Merlin?"

The Time of Destiny

"He's fine. Richard found him. Fawkes is taking care of him whenever Fawkes isn't with you. Merlin was burned, so he's a baby again," Ginny explained. "He's already squawking about wanting to be with you, but he's not strong enough yet."

"Thank Richard for me. And tell Merlin . . . I miss him," Harry whispered, then drifted off to sleep again, the pain potion finally giving him some relief.

"So you stole the eggs?" Headmistress McGonagall snapped, her nostrils thin and white with fury as she glared at the two boys standing before her. Tiny Professor Flitwick stood beside her, his normally cheerful face uncharacteristically grim. Someone in these boys' dorm had told Flitwick who'd stolen the eggs. Now the boys were facing the wrath of both professors.

Maxwell Parsons and Philip Graves were Third-Years and had been in Charms class when the dragon attacked Ravenclaw Tower. They'd watched Harry's battle with the dragon with joy, cheering mightily while watching the legendary Harry Potter in hero mode. Their joy turned to horror when they realized he was being seriously injured. When the dragon fell on him, they'd collapsed in horror, both of them sliding down the wall and burying their faces in their hands. Harry Potter was dead, and it was their fault! Professor Flitwick had just told them Harry had been rescued and was now clinging to life in the hospital wing. Now they glanced up at their furious headmistress and finally answered her question.

"Yes, Professor, we stole the eggs," Maxwell murmured as Philip nodded.

"Why in Merlin's name did you do such a thing?" She glared from one boy to the other. They were both at the top of their class but arrogant about it. Far too often, both boys seemed to think they knew more than most of the older students, and sometimes even the professors.

"We wanted to try hatching them ourselves. We were researching dragons and knew the watch-dragon had eggs in her nest, and it seemed like a good research project," Maxwell said, shrugging his shoulders as if anyone in their right mind would have done the same thing.

"What made you think you could get away with stealing the dragon's eggs?" McGonagall snapped, her voice shrill, her lips very thin, her dark eyes snapping with fury.

"Harry Potter did it when he was fourteen," Philip Graves said defiantly. "We didn't see why we couldn't do it. And we *did* get away with it. She didn't catch us!"

"Harry Potter . . .," she began, then had to stop and breathe deeply to control her rage and hold back the tears that sprang to her eyes when the boy said Harry's name. "Harry Potter may *die* from what he had to do to protect the school from that dragon, and that's *your* fault, boys, not his in any way. Just because he managed to do something doesn't mean that just anyone can do it. He is an extremely powerful wizard, and was even before he went through the Refiner's Fire. And the egg he stole was a golden one, not the dragon's real egg. Professor Potter would never take a dragon's egg away from it simply because he felt like it, or because he thought he could do it! That would be cruel to the animal, and he's not a cruel person. Harry Potter is an honourable man, and he was an honourable boy, as well, bless him. He—" She couldn't go on, she was simply too angry to speak.

Both boys took a step back in the face of her rage. "We're sorry," Maxwell said.

The Time of Destiny

"Nobody was supposed to get hurt," Philip growled, still defiant.

"*Two baby dragons* died. The *watch-dragon*, who has protected Hogwarts for many years and was normally quite docile, died. The *giant squid* died, bless him." She blinked back tears at the memory of Sebastian trying so hard to help Harry. "Worse than that, I know several of your classmates have died, as well, but not how many, not yet. Some others may die of their injuries. Many others are hurt," she reminded them, wondering how they could be so dense when they were normally so intelligent. Her face grew even more grim. "And *Harry Potter*, who is a genuine hero in every way, may die. He has seven children, *seven* children, two of whom are here at Hogwarts. Those children will be fatherless if he dies. And it will be *your fault!*" Minerva pressed her lips together, knowing she should not lay such a burden on these boys, but they were thirteen, quite old enough to understand the gravity of their actions.

"You will be charged with the deaths of these students, at the very least, and possibly with the destruction of Ravenclaw Tower and the deaths of four valuable magical creatures. Aurors will be coming to collect you this afternoon. There's no point in telling you to pack your things. You'll never find them in the wreckage of Ravenclaw Tower." She shook her head distractedly, wondering what Dumbledore would do in her place. Yes, he was here, but he was with Harry and shouldn't be disturbed. Finally, she decided she'd covered everything necessary.

"Give me your wands," she said imperiously, holding out her hand. They reluctantly obeyed her, gasping in shock when she snapped both wands in half. She shook the broken halves in their faces, her eyes snapping in fury. "You are expelled from Hogwarts. And don't think you'll get anywhere with an appeal to the Board of Governors. I'm sure they'll wish we had even more punishments to use on you once they hear about this incident. Your parents are waiting for you in the Great Hall. They will accompany you and the Aurors to the Ministry."

Minerva studied the boys' faces and wondered when the true gravity of what they'd done would hit them. Would they ever understand how much harm they'd done? They were certainly quiet enough now. She sighed, and finished what she had to say. "If we find your things, we'll send them to your parents. Don't expect the Ministry to be merciful to you. Your arrogance has cost you dearly, boys. I hope you learn a lesson from it."

Ginny went home for a short time the next morning to check on the rest of her children, and brought them back to Hogwarts with her, at their insistence. They'd seen the newspaper reports their grandfather Dumbledore and grandparents Weasley had been trying to keep from them. They needed to see their father themselves, to be certain he was alive. Ginny warned them that he looked terrible and was in a great deal of pain, so they'd need to be as brave as possible when they saw him.

Harry was asleep when they arrived. He woke up when he heard children crying.

"What's . . . wrong?" he sighed, opening his eyes and squinting to see who was there. He thought he'd recognized some of their voices, but some voices were so distorted by tears or by trying to whisper that he wasn't certain who they were. "Dan? Brian? Lily?" He looked up at his wife, his eyes confused and distraught. "Why did . . . you bring them? They're scared."

The Time of Destiny

"They insisted on coming," she said simply as she bent over and slipped his glasses onto his face as carefully as possible, wincing when he flinched in pain. "I thought . . . I didn't know what else to do. They were frantic to see you."

"K," he murmured, smiling at her as well as he could. He looked at his children, all five of the young ones crying and clutching either their mother or each other. "Come here. Let me . . . see you," he encouraged them.

Dan sniffled hard, scrubbed at his face determinedly, and then took the first step, followed closely by Lily. Lily reached out and wrapped her small hand around the tip of one of Harry's uninjured fingers. "Does it hurt when I do this, Daddy?" she asked softly.

"No, poppet, it's wonderful . . . to hold your hand again," he assured her.

Dan wiped away his tears and swallowed determinedly, then bent down until he was nose to nose with his father. "I heard you were brilliant, Dad," he said in awestruck tones. Then a cheeky grin flashed across his face. "I also hear you ruined two perfectly good brooms."

"Yeah, I did," Harry agreed, chuckling a bit. "Need to . . . go broom-shopping . . . soon."

"Sounds like fun," Dan said. By this time, John and Brian had joined them, with Beth hanging back shyly.

"How are you, Dad?" Brian asked nervously. He wanted to touch his father, but seemed to be afraid to do so.

"I'm a bit . . . messed up right now, but . . . I'll be fine soon," he assured his children.

Beth crept out from behind her big brothers and stood by her father's head, finally leaning forward and planting a gentle kiss on the unburned skin of his forehead. "I love you, Daddy. Please get well soon."

"Thank you, sweetheart. I appreciate your . . . kissing me to . . . make me better," Harry said, doing his best to smile at her.

"We can't stay long or we'll tire him too much, children," Ginny said, watching her husband's face closely. He'd lit up when his children approached him with love instead of horror at his injuries. Bringing them here had been good for Harry, and apparently for the children as well. Ginny would not have brought them if they hadn't insisted. *Another lesson learned from the children*, she told herself.

Each child kissed Harry's forehead and wished him well before leaving, promising to come see him again soon. Harry's eyes shone with joy that his children's love for him could overcome the fear and disgust he thought they should have felt at how he looked.

He looked up at Ginny. "Thanks for bringing them." His eyes wandered from child to child. "Thanks for coming. It's good to . . . see you. See you soon."

"Get well soon, Dad," Dan said heartily. "We need to go broom shopping!"

The Time of Destiny

"Come home soon, Daddy," Lily added. "We miss you."

"I'll do my best," Harry promised.

Harry watched them go with tears in his eyes, his heart full to bursting with love for his family. He smiled at Ginny again as she gave him a parting glance and blew him a kiss.

"I'll be back soon," she promised, then waved as the curtains fell between them.

Out in the hallway, the children were in various stages of shock. Ginny gathered them into her arms and held them until their crying eased.

"I can't tell you how proud I am of you," she told her children. "Your father was so glad to see you. I know it was very hard on you to see him like this, but you helped him so much. You were wonderful! I'm glad you insisted on coming."

Dan scrubbed at his streaming eyes, annoyed that he was crying like a little kid instead of being the mature nine-year-old he thought he was. He was the man of the house for now, and he was going to do the best job possible until his dad got home and relieved him of that duty. He wiped his face once more, then began helping his mum comfort his brothers and sisters. Jamie and Siri returned to the hospital wing from lunch just then, and joined Dan and Ginny in comforting the little ones.

"Did you see what happened?" Dan asked Jamie when they had a moment alone.

"Yeah. It was awful," Jamie said with a shudder.

"I heard Dad was amazing, though," Dan said, his dark eyebrows drawn together in a frown. "What was it like?"

Jamie looked at his younger brother, a sad smile on his face. "He was absolutely brilliant. You'd never believe anyone could fly like that, or keep fighting as badly hurt as he was – but he just kept going until the job was done. It was horrible, but it was incredible, too."

"You'll have to tell me about it sometime."

"Yeah. Later. When he's well, OK? It's too soon now."

Dan nodded. "Yeah, I understand. Good to see you. How do you like Hogwarts?"

"I'll like it a lot better when Dad's well," Jamie said, knowing in his heart that Hogwarts would feel much different to him – and that he would be different, as well – after this experience.

A short time later, Molly Weasley arrived. When she saw Jamie and Siri, she opened her arms to them, tears in her eyes. Ginny had told her parents that the boys had witnessed the entire battle and then helped tend their father.

"Oh, there are my brave boys," Molly said, holding them close. "I'm so proud of you! Your mother told me you've been such a help to her. How are you?"

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"We're fine," Jamie said, turning solemn eyes to his grandmother. The sight of her dear face, so filled with love and sympathy for him and his brother, brought tears to Jamie's eyes. He swallowed hard, trying not to let them fall.

Molly wasn't fooled. "You are so like your dad, both of you," she said, looking from Jamie to Siri. Both had their jaws set exactly like their father, a stubborn light in their eyes as they tried not to cry. "He always says he's 'fine,' no matter how badly hurt he is."

The boys had heard their father say he was fine, too, even as badly hurt as he was. Molly's comment was more than the twins could bear. With anguished sobs, they fell against their grandmother and buried their faces in her shoulders.

"There, there, you sweet boys. Things will be better soon," she said, hoping she was right. She glanced at her daughter and saw the exhaustion and heartache on her face as the younger woman comforted her other children.

Jamie and Siri relaxed in their grandmother's arms for a moment when their tears finally ended, then straightened up. "Sorry, Grandma," Jamie said, wiping ineffectually at the damp stains on the shoulder of her robes.

"Yeah, we didn't mean to get you all wet," Siri said, mirroring his twin's actions.

"It doesn't matter, boys. I'm just glad I was able to be here for you," she said, studying their beloved faces. "Are you all right?" They nodded and bent toward her, kissing her cheeks at the same time, which they knew she enjoyed. "I just love having so many twins in the family," she said fondly, smiling at them. "Those double kisses are so sweet." She kissed each of them in turn and ran her fingers through their hair, trying to neaten it a bit, then fussed with their robes, straightening a wrinkle here and there.

"Jamie, Siri, are you late for class?" Ginny said suddenly, looking at her oldest boys over the heads of the others.

"We're on break, Mum," Siri said, but Jamie looked at his watch.

"Not for much longer, though," Jamie said.

"Then you'd better go and get your books," Ginny said, moving away from the other children so she could hug the boys. "Thank you for all your help. I'll be here when you finish class for the day. Come and say hello then, all right?" They nodded. "Run along now. Have a good afternoon."

Jamie and Siri ruffled the hair of their younger brothers and gave their sisters hugs before leaving. They turned and waved just before they disappeared around the corner.

"Mum, if you want to see Harry—" Ginny began.

"D'you mind watching the children a bit longer, then?" Molly asked, studying her daughter's weary face.

The Time of Destiny

"Not at all. Go ahead, I'm sure he'd like to see you. Just tiptoe in, in case he's fallen asleep, all right?"

"Right. I won't stay long," Molly said, then took a deep breath and blew it out and pasted a determined smile on her face before striding through the hospital wing doors. She parted the curtains around Harry's bed and peeped in. He seemed to be asleep. Ginny had warned her parents about his appearance, but nothing could have prepared Molly for what she saw now.

"Oh, you precious boy," she murmured, tears springing to her eyes. "Bless your heart, you must be in so much pain."

"It does . . . twinge a bit," he replied, opening his eyes and trying to smile at her.

"Oh, Harry! I'm sorry! I thought you were asleep," Molly said, bending down to his eye level. "How are you, love? Can I bring you anything from home? I've come to take the children back home and thought I'd pop in as long as I was here."

"I'm . . . fine," he said, smiling a bit when she shook her head in amusement at his normal response. "No, I don't . . . well, I could use some clothes," he said at last. "Damned dragon ruined my best school robes."

"I thought you were in a Quidditch uniform when, erm . . ."

"I transfigured my school robes. They're ruined."

"I'll get some things together for you, then, so you'll have them when you're ready for them," she promised. "And your own pyjamas, right? So you don't have to wear those hospital things?"

He smiled a bit. "Yeah, thanks."

"If you need anything, anything at all, you just let me know, all right?" she said, eager as always to be helpful. "And we'll take good care of the children. Don't you worry about them. They'll be fine."

"I know."

"We'll all take turns sitting with you, too, so Ginny doesn't get too tired."

"Thank you. I'm worried about her," he said, his eyes dark and sad.

"Ginny's strong. She'll be fine," Molly assured him. "I don't want to tire you, and I'm sure Ginny wants to come back in here, so I'll just go and take the children home now. You get well soon, dear. I love you. Arthur and the rest of the family all send their best. They'll come round to see you soon. Take care." She bent down and kissed his forehead, then ruffled his hair a bit, doing her best to not look at his horribly burned ear and cheek, nor at the patches of scalp showing where his hair had been burned away.

"Thanks. Love you too," he said, giving her a weary smile.

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She waved and stepped through the curtains, closing them carefully behind her, then walked into the farthest corner from his enclosure and cast a Silencing Charm on herself before allowing herself to give in to her grief. When she'd calmed a bit, she wiped her tears away and forced a smile on her face again, then went to claim her grandchildren and take them home. Molly hugged Ginny tightly before she left. "Oh, you dear girl. I'm so very sorry. I wish there was some way to take away the pain you and Harry and the children are feeling now."

"Thanks for taking care of the children for us," Ginny said, resting in her mother's arms for a moment, drawing strength from the contact.

"Well, I couldn't let Albus have all the fun, now, could I?" Molly said, smoothing Ginny's russet hair away from her face, then kissing her daughter's cheek. "Let me know if you need anything. Harry asked for clothes and pyjamas, so I'll get those together for him. Would you like me to bring you a change of clothes, as well?" Ginny nodded. "Fine. I'll ask Arthur to bring them when he comes to see you this evening. Hermione and her children are helping yours with the chores. She and Ron are going to help us with the children as well. Fred and George and Charlie and their wives send their best, and promised to come see both of you when Harry's strong enough to have more company. Do let us know if you need anything else."

"I will, Mum. Thanks again." Ginny turned to her children. "You lot behave now. Don't give Grandma or Grandfather any trouble!"

"We'll be good, Mum," John promised.

"And we'll take good care of the animals," Brian added.

"And of the little ones as well," Dan murmured, sliding a brotherly arm around each of his baby sisters, who were still wide-eyed with shock but trying their best to be brave.

"I can't ask any more than that," Ginny said, looking from face to beloved face. "See you later." She watched them walk away with her mother, then sighed and turned back to the hospital wing doors and the long, hard task of getting her husband well again.

Thus began the slow, pain-filled process of Harry's recovery from his ghastly injuries. Jamie and Siri, Remus, Dumbledore, McGonagall, the Weasley nephews, Ron, Hermione, Molly, Arthur and many others stopped by to help, to sit with him, or just to watch him sleep over the next several days. Even Severus Snape stopped by to see him from time to time, their feud long past. Professor Flitwick cast a Whimsy Charm which created silent, constantly moving group of bubbles containing a variety of funny, whimsical or pretty things for Harry to watch. Since Harry wasn't able to read and wasn't strong enough to stay awake while someone else read to him, these whimsies floated above his bed to entertain him and whoever was sitting with him during the long watches of the day and night.

Ginny rarely left the hospital wing, kept busy to the point of exhaustion working on Harry and the injured children. Madam Pomfrey, of course, was working all hours of the day and night caring for her patients, but she was quite grateful to have a healer staying there to help. Marcus Pomfrey and other healers came from St. Mungo's to lend a hand often over the first few days, but as people improved and were released, they came less often.

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Several days after his battle with the dragon, Harry seemed to be feeling much better, although the burns were going to take quite a while longer to heal than his broken bones and internal injuries. Ginny was doing everything she could to reduce scarring, but there was no question about it, her handsome husband was going to be horribly disfigured for the rest of his life. The left side of his face and his left ear were burned so badly, they'd never heal perfectly. His back and the back of his legs were in terrible shape, and quite painful unless he was heavily drugged.

Ginny counted her blessings that he was still alive. His sense of humour seemed to be intact, and, once he was well, he'd be able to do most of the things he'd done before, if a lot more slowly. He'd never fly with the freedom or ease he had before, nor would he be able to run with his children. His days as an athlete were over. He had deep, irreversible scarring in the muscles on his back and lower legs from both the serious, repeated burns he'd suffered, and the gashes from the dragon's claws. Ginny hadn't told him he'd be permanently disabled, but she could see the sad knowledge in his eyes.

Harry knew life wasn't going to be the same for him anymore. He'd seen the horror in the eyes of his children, nephews and other visitors when they'd first seen him. He'd never asked how he looked, or how well he was going to heal. He'd lived with an awful scar all of his life. He could learn to live with these scars too – or so he hoped.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Ginny asked as she parted the curtains around his bed the morning of the seventh day.

"I'm fine," he said trying to give her a cheeky grin. He lifted his head a bit and whispered, "Want to fool around?"

"Harry!" she said, blushing as she laughed. "Of course! But not here. And not just yet. You're not strong enough."

"Spoil sport," he said, resting against his pillows again, satisfied that he'd made her laugh. "I could make you do all the work, you know."

"Oh, you are a bad boy, Mr. Potter," she said, smiling at him fondly. "As soon as you're well enough, we'll go home and I'll take you up on that offer."

"You're on!" He winced and tried to stifle a gasp as she lifted his arm a bit to check his side. His burns were still quite painful despite the best care wizard medicine could provide. Phoenix tears weren't an effective treatment for burns for some reason, although both Merlin and Fawkes had tried numerous times to heal the burns covering so much of Harry's body. Their tears eased the pain for a short time, but they couldn't heal the burns themselves. Harry had even tried using his own healing powers, but he was simply too weak to manage it.

Merlin was back to his full glory and nestled against Harry's side, crooning his soothing songs. He'd done his best to heal Harry's injuries as soon as he was able to, but he couldn't improve on what Fawkes had done. Now, the beautiful bird glanced up at Ginny, then gazed at Harry expectantly, chirruping to him.

The Time of Destiny

"OK," Harry said, stroking the magnificent bird affectionately.

"OK what?" Ginny asked as she straightened his covers.

"Do you remember when I disappeared in my seventh year with Merlin?" Harry said carefully.

"How could I forget? That was terrifying, not knowing where you were, how you were," she replied distractedly. Suddenly something in his tone got through to her and she looked up at him sharply. "Why?"

"Merlin thinks I might heal faster there. I want to go to the land of the phoenixes with him," Harry said, taking her hand in his left one. All of his broken bones were healed now, although not all of them had healed perfectly. He was glad to be out of the casts, though, and to have at least one hand to use. His right hand was still badly burned from his wand branding him and continued to be mostly useless due to the pain involved.

"No, Harry. You have the best possible care here," Ginny began. "I have more specialists coming in and—"

"I'm not healing fast enough," he said, interrupting her. "I don't want to be in the hospital for months. I have work to do, children to teach, my own children and nephews to love, and a wife who needs me whole again," he said, gazing deeply into her eyes. "I'd like to try this. I think it will work."

"But you can't fly!" Ginny said, her voice unsteady. She could see the resolution in his eyes. He was going whether she agreed or not.

"No, I can't, but I believe I can change into a phoenix. If I can manage that, Merlin can flash me there," Harry explained, trying to sound as reasonable as possible.

"Harry, changing into an animal when you're so badly injured—"

"Will be painful and very hard on me. I know that," he said softly, "but if I do this, I'll be well so much sooner. Please don't worry. I don't want to hurt you or the children, but I need to go."

"When?"

"Now," he said, giving her hand a small squeeze. "Give me a kiss to remember."

Ginny stepped away from him. "No. Not until you tell me how long you'll be gone and promise me you'll be back when you say you will."

"Merlin thinks at least a week, maybe two," Harry said honestly. "I think he's right."

"Two weeks. That's the longest you'll be gone?"

"Two weeks. I'll ask Merlin to promise to bring me back then, no matter how I am. All right?"

"Are you sure about this?"

The Time of Destiny

"No, but I can't think of anything else to do. Wizard medicine isn't helping me fast enough. I have this alternative that may work for me. I want to try it," he said seriously.

Ginny sighed. "All right," she said, her shoulders drooping. "Are you going to say goodbye to the children?"

"I want to leave now, before I lose my nerve," he said, his eyes apprehensive. "I know the transformation is going to be painful. I want to get it over with, and I don't want them to see me go through that." He took her hand again. "I love you, sweetheart. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sighing again, Ginny sat on the edge of the bed and leaned toward him, giving him a heartfelt kiss he'd remember for a long time. When she sat back, he touched her cheek with one gentle finger, then cast a Silencing Charm on his enclosure and changed into a phoenix. The transformation wasn't instantaneous as it normally was, but took several seconds during which Harry the man, and then Harry the phoenix screamed in absolutely agony. When the transformation was finally over, an injured phoenix flopped about miserably on the bed. It had huge sections of feathers missing where Harry was burned, and half of its face was horribly disfigured, just as Harry's was. Merlin grabbed it as gently as possible in his talons and spread his wings, and then the two of them disappeared in a flash of light.

"Take good care of him, Merlin," Ginny whispered as she sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing her hands over the sheets where her beloved husband had just been. She could still feel the warmth from his body there. Ginny lifted the pillow and buried her face in it, breathing in the scent of him. Since his injury, his normal scent that had always reminded her of fresh air and sunshine had been replaced with a smell of scorched meat and hair. She didn't mind the smell because she knew that he was alive under all those awful burns. No matter how he looked or smelled, no matter how crippled he was, he was her Harry and she loved him. And now he was gone again, and for who knew how long? If he'd lost track of time in the land of the phoenixes before, what was to prevent him from doing so again? She stifled a sob, hugging the pillow tightly.

"What was that flash of light?" Poppy Pomfrey demanded as she rushed through the curtains surrounding Harry's bed. "What happened? Where is he?"

"He's gone back to the land of the phoenixes," Ginny said quietly as tears streamed down her face. "He said he'll be back in two weeks, possibly less."

"Why?" Poppy cried, noticing the anguish on the younger woman's face. "Why did he leave?"

"He thinks he'll heal faster there," Ginny said with a small, disconsolate shrug.

"Do you believe that?" the nurse asked, touching Ginny's shoulder consolingly.

Ginny shrugged again, sighed as she wiped furiously at her tears, then rose and went about her business, taking care of the remaining victims of the tower collapse like the good healer she was.

The Time of Destiny

"He's gone *where*?" Jamie said, his eyes wide and frightened as he and his twin stood by their father's empty bed.

"To the land of the phoenixes," their mother explained. "Merlin took him there. He'll be back when he's well."

"Well . . . erm . . . OK then," Jamie said with a shrug, glancing at his twin for confirmation. Siri nodded in agreement and the two of them relaxed. They'd heard a bit about the land of the phoenixes when they'd overheard their Aunt Hermione talking with their grandfather one time. They knew she'd put it in one of her books, but they hadn't read that one yet.

"Let's just tell people he's gone to a specialist, OK?" Ginny said, eyeing her boys carefully. "We don't want to start a lot of rumours."

"Right," the boys agreed.

Eight days later, two phoenixes flashed into the living room of Harry's house in Godric's Hollow about an hour before dawn. One phoenix went to his perch and began preening himself, while the other changed into Harry Potter, still in his pyjama bottoms and bandages. Harry pulled out his wand and Vanished the bandages, then stretched his muscles in every direction with satisfaction. He ran his hands over his face, arms and back and grinned, then tiptoed up the stairs to the room he shared with his wife, hoping she was home. Putting a Silencing Charm on the squeaky hinge in their door, he slipped into their room and felt joy fill his heart. There she was, her hair gleaming in the soft moonlight coming through the window. She looked tired, worn and desperately unhappy.

Harry sighed, sorry that he'd made her sad, and then smiled when he pictured the welcome she'd give him. He pulled his wand out of his pocket and put it on the night table, laying his glasses beside it, then took off his pyjama bottoms and tossed them in the bin, glad to be free of the last reminder of the hospital at last. Lifting the covers as gently as possible, he slid into bed and leaned over her, preparing to kiss her, then leaped back as a wand was pointed right at his nose, with a furious redhead behind it.

"Who are you and how did you get in here?" Ginny demanded.

"Gin, it's me! Harry! I'm back!" he said, grinning at her, but holding both hands up where she could see them.

"Tell me something only Harry would know," she said suspiciously as she sat up in bed, glaring at him, the wand trained steadily at his heart now.

He chuckled. "You have an absolutely delicious birthmark on the back of your bum that I'm dying to nibble."

"Harry?" she said, frowning. "*Harry*?" She reached a trembling hand toward his face, her fingers gliding over the smooth plane of his cheek. "How . . . ? Is it really you?"

"Yes, of course, silly!" he said happily. "Who else would sneak into your bed? Or do I need to hex someone?"

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"It's just that . . . your face!"

"What about it?" he said in sudden concern, touching his face where she had. He'd been too eager to see his wife again to be bothered with looking at himself in a mirror. His skin *felt* fine – what if it didn't *look* fine?

"It's . . . it's perfect! You had such awful burns, they should have scarred horribly! How did they heal them?" She was fully awake now. "Get up, turn on a light. I want to see you!"

Harry obediently got out of bed and held his hand toward the bedside lamp, lit it wandlessly, then turned slowly in place so she could see every inch of him.

Ginny laughed in delight, a low throaty sound. "I'd say you're glad to see me," she said at last, grinning at him.

"Oh yeah," he breathed, sitting on the bed next to her and smoothing her sleep-tumbled hair away from her face. "I've missed you."

"Tell me how this kind of healing is possible, and then I'll give you the best welcome home ever," she promised.

"I went through a Burning Day," he said simply as he began kissing the tender spot behind her ear, planting soft kisses down her neck to her collarbone.

Ginny put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back. "Wait. A *burning*? But you were covered with burns! How could you . . . ?"

"I didn't say it was pain-free," he said with a grimace, "but it was the best thing to do." He could see she wanted more information before she'd let him get back to work making her nerve endings sing, so he sat up and cupped her cheek in his hand, stroking the lovely soft skin there with his thumb as he spoke.

"When a phoenix experiences a Burning Day, it's reborn as a baby bird," he began. "You know this." She nodded. "Grandfather's never been through a burning, nor did Merlin ever return to human form after one, so I was quite nervous about it. I mean, yeah, I became a baby bird again after taking that Killing Curse in the Battle of Little Hangleton, but I didn't go through a burning then. Since Voldemort's death, I've spent my time in the Chamber of Knowledge researching everything possible about phoenixes and Animagi to satisfy my curiosity, but there just isn't that much information on either subject. While I was lying there in the hospital wing trying to recover after fighting the dragon, I thought about all my research and remembered that no wizard has ever gone through a burning as far as anyone knows. But then I realized there was no reason to think it wouldn't work." He shrugged. "It seemed logical to me, and Merlin agreed with me. Then he started insisting I do it as soon as I was strong enough to transform. And that's what we did. Merlin and the other phoenixes watched over me while I went through the burning, and then Merlin stayed with me as I grew again. As I grew, I noticed I had feathers all over my body again, rather than the bare places I had when I was injured, but I didn't know how successful the burning and rebirth were until I changed back into a human in the living room a few minutes ago."

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"Your skin is perfect," Ginny said, leaning around to look at his back. "Oh my! Harry! It really *is* perfect!" She grabbed his right arm and slid her hands down the inside of his forearm. "The scars are gone, all of them! The gashes from the dragon's claws, the whip scars from Voldemort, the knife scar on your arm here from Wormtail –" She pulled him into a standing position again, turning him so she could study him closely in the light. "Even the scar on your bum you got as a child is gone!" she said in delight. "Your skin is gorgeous! Not one scar!" She looked up at him and noticed his hand had immediately gone to his forehead.

"I still have one," he said with a rueful grin. "I guess curse scars are immune to this kind of healing." He looked at his right hand as he dropped it from his face. "Look at that! The words from Umbridge's foul quill are gone too! And so are the brands from my wand! Wow!"

"It's a miracle!" Ginny said, taking his right hand in both of hers and turning it over, looking for old wounds that were only memories now.

"I have better things to do with that hand than let you look for scars," he said huskily, taking his hand from hers and gliding it down the sweet curve of her back as he pulled her to him. "And when did you go back to sleeping in my t-shirts? You haven't done that in years," he said as his hands slipped under the bottom of the shirt and began to lift it off of her.

"This was the shirt you wore at home the day before you were injured," she said simply as her head came free of the old London Lions t-shirt that was one of Harry's favourites. "It still smelled like you, and I missed you so much," she added, rubbing her cheek against the dusting of dark hair on his chest and drinking deeply of the lovely clean scent of her healthy husband.

"I missed you too," he said, lifting her in his arms and kissing her soundly as he laid her back on the bed. He began a trail of kisses from her mouth, to her eyes, her nose, both cheeks, the hollow of her throat, the sides of her neck, her ears, back down the sides of her neck again and down the length of her body. He gave each breast careful attention, relishing his wife's moans of ecstasy. "You are so beautiful," he murmured as he lifted himself over her. "I love you so much."

"I love you, baby," Ginny sighed, happy tears streaming down her face. "Don't ever leave me again."

"I'm staying right here for as long as you'll let me," he promised.

"Forever, then."

"Forever and a day," he agreed, then went back to concentrating on loving her. Finally, he relaxed against her, sighing contentedly.

Some time later, Ginny opened her eyes and chuckled.

"What?" he said, raising up on one elbow to study her face.

"We're flying again," she said, gesturing to the ceiling that was much closer to them than normal.

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"I know how you love to fly," he said with a warm chuckle. "I did that just for you."

She turned her head to the side and studied their position in relation to the pictures hanging on the walls. "Hmmm. At least eight feet high this time. You are a happy lad, aren't you?" she teased.

"Yes," he replied, nuzzling her neck for a moment before resting his head on her shoulder, loving the feeling of her fingers running through his hair, of her body entangled so comfortably with his. "It's good to be home."

"Kids! Breakfast!" Ginny called some time later. "Hurry! Aunt Hermione will be here soon to take you to school!" Ginny and Hermione took turns hauling their broods to the local wizarding primary school. This was Hermione's week to do it.

"You sound happy this morning," Dan said as he slid down the banister on one hip. "What's up?"

"I am," Harry said, grabbing his son from behind and spinning him around, then gnawing gently on his neck while growling like a bear. "How are you?"

"Dad! When did you get home? You look great! Mum said – never mind," Dan cried, staring at his father's face as Harry set him down.

"Always believe your mother, no matter what she says," Harry admonished him. "I was a wee bit damaged, but I'm fine now."

"You were more than a wee bit damaged," Dan said, raising an eyebrow in a perfect imitation of his father's sceptical look.

"Well, yeah, maybe a bit more than a wee bit," Harry agreed, then turned to grab his twin daughters as they bounded down the stairs crying, "Daddy! Daddy!"

"How are my little beauties this morning?" he said, lifting one in each arm and kissing each of them soundly on the cheek.

"It's so good to see you!" Lily said.

"I missed you, Daddy!" Beth chimed in.

"DAD!" John and Brian said together as they reached the landing and saw what the commotion was about.

Dumbledore entered the room from his suite just then. "Harry! How are you, dear boy?" he said, extending his arms for a hug.

"I'm fine, Grandfather. How are you?"

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"Much better, now that you're home. You look wonderful! The phoenixes did a good job." Dumbledore beamed at his grandson. Not one trace of a burn mark showed on any of his exposed skin. It was a miracle!

Harry grabbed John and Brian playfully and spun them around, then hauled them to the breakfast table, a twin tucked under each arm. A noisy, happy breakfast ensued, with Harry rushing so he could get to school on time himself.

"You're going to work on your first day home?" Ginny said, looking a bit hurt.

"I have two more boys to greet," Harry reminded her, "and I've been out of class long enough anyway. I want to get back."

A few minutes later, Harry was ready to go, having kissed his wife and five of his seven children goodbye, and given his grandfather another warm hug. Harry couldn't wait to see his other two children, Jamie and Siri, who had helped their mother care for him when he was so badly injured. He hoped they weren't too worried about him.

He waved at his family once more before nodding at Merlin to take flight so he could flash them to school. Just as Merlin started to lift his wings, there was a knock at the door.

"That will be Hermione," Ginny said, moving toward the door. "Do you want to say hello to her before you leave?"

"Yeah, sure!" Harry said, relaxing again.

Ginny opened the door and saw Hermione was standing there, her hand raised, ready to knock again. Her younger children were gathered behind her, dressed for school.

"Hi, Gin! Are the kids ready?" Hermione asked. Then she looked closer at her sister-in-law's radiant face. "What's happened? You're glowing!"

"He's back!" Ginny grinned and turned with her arm outstretched toward her husband.

"He is? Is he all right?" Hermione said, peeping around Ginny to see Harry.

"I'm perfect," Harry replied, a cheeky grin firmly in place. "What else would I be?"

"Oh, Harry! We've been so worried!" Hermione cried, throwing herself into his arms.

"I'm sorry I worried you, but I had to go. It's good to be home," he said, hugging her tightly. "How are you?"

"I'm the one who should be asking that," she chided him. She pulled back and looked him over seriously. "You look marvellous! How ever did you manage it?"

"I went through a burning," he said. "Ginny can tell you about it, I'm running late. Or just come over for dinner tonight and we can chat then." He glanced across the room and got a grin and an approving nod from his wife. "There, it's all fixed. See you later!" He kissed his best friend on the cheek and ruffled the hair of her children, then nodded at Merlin. An instant

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later, the two of them flashed away from Godric's Hollow and arrived in his classroom at Hogwarts.

Harry moved around his classroom, trying to discern from things he saw out of place what Minerva might have been teaching the class. He opened the lap drawer of his desk and pulled out his lesson plan book, looking to see which lessons she might have checked off.

"Harry! You're back!" Minerva cried as she entered the room. "And you look fantastic! I didn't think those burns would heal so well!"

"They wouldn't have if I hadn't gone through a burning," Harry said, glancing up at her. "A phoenix burning," he corrected, seeing her confused look. "I'll tell you about it later. But it worked, even on old scars. Look at this," he said, holding out his right hand.

"No animal brands," she said in awe.

"And the lines from Umbridge are gone as well," he said, turning his hand over for her to see.

"Amazing!"

"Yeah," he said, grinning happily. "I feel great! Now where did you leave off? Thanks for taking my classes for me."

After conferring a few minutes, Harry knew what his students had covered and what they were to learn next. He thanked the headmistress and went to his storage room to get the materials his first class would need. McGonagall returned to her office, glad to have only one job to deal with once more.

While he was gone, the class began filing in and settling in their seats. They knew Professor McGonagall was sometimes late to class because of her duties as headmistress, so they weren't surprised she wasn't there to greet them. They were delightfully shocked to see Harry come out of the storage room.

"Professor Potter!" "Uncle Harry!" "*DAD!*" his students cried at once, obviously delighted to see him.

Harry grinned at the class. "Good morning! I've missed you," he said, glancing around the room. He chuckled at the rowdy quads as they bounced in their seats trying to get his attention, then smiled warmly at his own sons who had run toward him when they saw him, and now stood staring at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. Harry moved to stand in front of them, a grin on his face and his arms extended in greeting.

"Hello, James, Sirius. It's good to see you again."

The twins ran into his arms and hugged him tightly. "It's Jamie, Dad," his oldest said when he lifted his face to gaze at his father.

"And Siri," his second son added.

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Harry smiled and held them close, then rubbed their heads and stepped back from them. The boys returned to their seats. Harry was delighted to see that Richard was sitting by them again. Their friendship had been damaged by the twins' attitudes, but now they seemed to have mended their relationship. He smiled at Richard, then looked over at the quads and said, "I'll chat with you lot after class, all right? Let's get to work."

All of Harry's classes that morning were a delight to him; the students were glad to see him and worked hard at whatever he was teaching them once they got past their rambunctious celebration of his return. They made him laugh, and he returned the favour. Was there anything as wonderful as teaching eager young minds? He didn't think so.

At lunch, Harry sat between Remus and Minerva, filling them in on his experiences with the phoenixes as he ate. Their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of two large grey owls delivering a long, thin package.

"What do you suppose that is?" Remus said, a twinkle in his eye.

"No idea," Harry said, grinning at him. He saw owls delivering similar packages to both Jamie and Siri and wondered what was up. When he opened the package, he laughed out loud. "Wow! A new Excalibur Potter Special Mark II!" he said as he lifted the handsome broom from the wrappings.

"Look at that," Remus said, pointing to the handle. Under the broom's name, Harry's name was inscribed in elegant gold letters, followed by a carving of a dragon. "That's beautiful!"

"Yeah, it is," Harry agreed.

"Who sent it to you?" Minerva asked. "Looks like your boys each got the same kind of broom."

"The same kind? This is the fastest broom in the world!" Harry said, gazing at his boys with a hint of worry in his eyes.

"Harry? You were riding a Nimbus 2000 when you were eleven and had only been on a broom a few times, remember? They'll be able to handle these brooms," Remus assured him. "They've been learning how to fly since they could walk, and their teacher was the best Seeker in the world. They'll be fine."

Harry blushed a bit at his godfather's compliment, then looked at the delight on his boys' faces. They were looking at him now, grinning hugely and holding their brooms up for him to see. Harry nodded and grinned back at them, lifting his broom a bit as well.

"Oh, here's a card," Minerva said as she moved the wrappings off of the serving dishes. She handed the card to Harry, who opened it quickly.

"It's from Jason Kavanaugh, president of the Firebolt company," Harry said as he glanced at the letter.

"So what does he say?" Remus prompted.

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"Nosy git, aren't you?" Harry teased.

"Yes," Remus agreed, laughing with his godson.

"OK," Harry replied.

"Dear Harry,

This is the broom you and I discussed months ago. I've incorporated all the changes you suggested, and I believe you'll find it flies much better now. All the test flights have been marked by excellent performance and no problems at all. I think it will be a big seller. I certainly appreciate your help in the design of the new Potter Special.

I'm sending one of these brooms to each of your sons, James and Sirius. I hope you don't mind. My two children were in Ravenclaw Tower when the dragon attacked. Your courage saved their lives. Your son James's quick action in sending you his broom when yours failed, saved your life and those of many who were still in the tower, my children included. Sirius was a tremendous help in the Hospital Wing, which I saw with my own eyes when I was there visiting my children. Your boys are certainly a credit to you, Harry, and it's my great pleasure to give them these brooms.

Thank you for all you've done to help the wizarding world over the years, Harry, and for the tremendous pleasure we've had in watching you play Quidditch. Now a generation of children is learning to fly from the greatest flyer ever, and learning Transfiguration from a multiple Animagus. They are truly blessed, and I mean that sincerely.

A new Potter Special has been sent to your wife today, as well. I remember what a wonderful flyer she is. I hope she will enjoy it.

I plan to outfit your whole family (including all those nephews) with new brooms, if you will allow me to. I don't want to send Potter Specials to young children or inexperienced flyers, since these brooms are so responsive and quick, but I'm sure you've noticed I haven't given you a choice on accepting these four brooms. However, I will give you a choice as to which brooms and how many you want for the rest of your immediate and extended family. Please send me a list of the proper brooms and the recipients your earliest convenience. I trust your judgement in the proper choices for your loved ones. And I simply refuse to hear any arguments about my giving your family these brooms. Those two children are my life. You and your sons saved them. This is the least I can do to thank you.

Enjoy the brooms!

Kindest regards,

Jason Kavanaugh, President

Firebolt Brooms, Inc.

"Well!" Minerva said. "That's a marvellous letter, Harry! What a kind man, and what a lovely way to thank you."

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"Yes, it is," Harry said, smiling as he re-read the letter. He glanced up at his boys and saw they were reading their letters, too.

"Excuse me," he said as he rose from the table, broom and letter firmly in hand. Harry walked down the length of the Ravenclaw table and stopped behind the Kavanaugh children, a First Year and a Second Year, both of them delicately built and small for their ages. "Hi, Roberta, Rachel. How are you?"

"We're fine, Professor!" The girls' voices were light and dainty. "We enjoyed class today!"

"It appears you had time to write a note to your dad," he said with a crooked grin, waving his letter in front of them. "Did you do this?"

Both girls blushed. "Erm . . . yes. We let him know you were back," Roberta replied. "He asked us to tell him when you returned."

"Obeying your father is best," Harry said, smiling. "Thank you, girls. This is a beautiful broom. I can't wait to try it out. Nor can my boys, I expect."

"We didn't know how else to thank you for what you did," Rachel said, blushing a bit.

"This is a very fine thank you indeed," Harry assured her. "I'm glad you're all right. See you in class." He smiled at them, then turned and walked over to the Gryffindor table, which was buzzing with excitement.

"DAD! Did you see?" Jamie cried excitedly.

"What's yours like?" Siri added.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," Harry replied with a grin, laying his broom on the table alongside those of his boys. "Look at that. They each have a dragon carved on them. I wonder if that's going to be the standard for this broom?" Harry mused.

"No, Mr. Kavanaugh said in his letter that he did that just for your broom and ours," Jamie replied, his eyes sparkling with delight. "They're special, just for us."

"Wasn't that nice of him?" Harry said, grinning at his beaming boys. "I think we need to try them out after class today. What do you say?"

"Yeah!" both boys agreed.

"Can we have a go, Uncle Harry?" one of the quads asked.

"Yeah, sure! See all of you later, then," Harry replied. "Boys, shrink those brooms and put them away so you don't get in trouble in your classes."

"OK," his sons agreed.

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In the late afternoon sunlight, three Potters stood astride three new Firebolt Excalibur Potter Special brooms. All the Weasley nephews and many others were gathered to watch the Potters try out the brooms. Harry was patiently explaining the controls to the boys.

"These controls are a lot more complex than you're used to, and the broom is much faster than anything you've ridden, as well as being more responsive. You need to start out slowly," Harry warned them. He glanced up at his nephews, who were eyeing the brooms hungrily. "You lot paying attention?"

"Start out slowly," Tim and Luke said together.

"Complex controls," Richard added.

"Fast and responsive!" the other set of twins chorused.

"Well done!" Harry laughed and looked at his sons. "Ready?"

"Yes!" Jamie and Siri cried with one voice.

"Kick off slowly, then. Let's go."

Harry and his sons flew low and slow at first as the boys learned how the controls worked. As their skills increased, Harry let them go faster, until finally he felt safe letting them fly at will. When they had satisfied their urge for speed a bit, they turned to their dad.

"Show us what these brooms will do, Dad!" Jamie urged.

"Yeah! Go on, Dad!" Siri agreed.

"You don't have to ask twice!" Harry said, laughing. He leaned forward and the broom leaped beneath him, racing forward at breakneck speed. He lay flat along the broom handle and urged it on, "Go, go, go, go, go!" He did barrel rolls and spirals and dives that made the onlookers scream in terror that he was going to crash. Harry whooped with delight as the broom performed better than he'd dreamed possible.

Harry Potter was in his element, racing the clouds across the sky, his sons at his side. *I have everything a man could want*, he thought as the thrill of flying merged with his love of his wife and children, and his joy at his renewed health and safe return home. He grinned and whooped again, streaking across the sky with his black hair blowing madly in the breeze, his emerald green eyes alight with ecstasy, a happy man indeed.

The End

AFTERWORD

Soon after his return from the land of the phoenixes, Harry Potter found a new giant squid that didn't mind relocating and donated it to the school in memory of Sebastian. Harry replaced Remus Lupin as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher and head of Gryffindor House when Remus retired. When Minerva McGonagall retired, Harry became the headmaster of the school, a job he retained and enjoyed for the rest of his very long life. Like his grandfather,

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Harry was also a consultant to the government when needed, served as Chief Warlock on the Wizangamot for many years, and served as Supreme Mugwump on the International Confederation of Wizards. He served as a consultant to the ministries of other countries when asked, and also suggested and helped write new laws whenever needed. He and Ginny had seven children, a full "Quidditch team" as they'd hoped: twins James and Sirius, Dan, twins John and Brian, and twins Lily and Molly Elizabeth, known as "Beth." All of the children except Dan had Harry's green eyes. Dan's were blue. The girls were both redheads like Ginny, and all the boys had black hair like Harry's except for Dan, whose hair was dark brown.

Ginny Weasley Potter replaced the retiring Madam Pomfrey when all of the Potter children were finally at Hogwarts. She and Harry had a long, happy life together with many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren to brighten their lives. And Harry made sure she not only had the best possible broom at all times, but that she had always lovely horses to ride. Hagrid was delighted to build a stable and care for the horses Ginny, Harry and their children loved to race across Hogwarts' grounds when they were in residence there.

Ron Weasley became the Minister of Magic and changed many laws that were unfair or unequally enforced. He became one of the best and longest-termed Ministers in history. His name was forever linked with Harry Potter's in wizarding history books, which Ron found ironic. He laughed to think of the many generations of kids who would be bored stiff in History of Magic class hearing about his exploits with Harry. He and Hermione had three sons: Richard, Will and Cliff, all of whom Hermione named after men who she'd either enjoyed reading about, or who were writers themselves ("Richard the Lionheart," the wizard playwright William Shakespeare and the character "Heathcliff" from "Wuthering Heights").

Hermione Granger-Weasley became well-known in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds (although she used a pen name in the Muggle world) as the author of the Harry Potter books, which were also made into Muggle films. She found it amusing that the boy chosen to play Harry looked so much like Harry's blue-eyed son Dan, and even had the same first name. Of course, this writer isn't going to say that Dan Potter is billed in the films as Dan Radcliffe, but you're welcome to draw your own conclusions.

Dobby and Winky, the Potters' house-elves, had seven children who grew up as playmates and babysitters of the Potter children. When they were grown, each young elf went to live with one of the Potter children and served them as bodyguards, house-elves and friends all their lives. Harry helped Dobby quietly spread his message of freedom for house-elves throughout the land. Hermione's childhood dream of elf emancipation finally came true when Ron was able to enact legislation freeing house-elves everywhere. Dobby and Winky's children and other elves throughout the wizarding world were able to marry and have children born in freedom, as they had been, as a result.

Fred and George Weasley became rich beyond their wildest dreams by selling joke products to wizards around the world. They also developed a line of products for Muggles: magic wands that turned into umbrellas or bouquets of flowers with the flick of a wrist, then turned back into a wand with a slightly different flick of the wrist, and many other such items. Their wives kept them in line well enough and raised large broods of sons for them, nearly all of whom were as rowdy as their fathers.

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Charlie Weasley and his wife spent their lives studying dragons in Wales while their five redheaded boys were small, then travelled the world doing research once their nest emptied.

Remus Lupin taught Defence Against the Dark Arts until his retirement, and served as head of Gryffindor House when Minerva McGonagall became Headmistress. Remus campaigned for werewolf rights for years, as well as promoting the use of the Lycanthropy Cure which had worked so well for him. His children showed no signs of Lycanthropy, for which Remus was extremely grateful. He doted on his two children, Matthew and Bonnie. He'd never expected to be able to marry, much less have children. His life was a happy one, with a loving wife, two intelligent, healthy, happy children, and his family's inclusion in the extensive Potter-Weasley clan, who they joined for all holiday and birthday celebrations and every London Lions Quidditch game they could manage. He was considered a grandfather by the Potter children, which pleased him immensely, and his own children found good-hearted spouses and provided him with a happy brood of healthy grandchildren, as well.

Tonks Lupin retired from the Auror ranks when her children were born, only going back on active duty when both of them were at Hogwarts. She joined Remus in his campaign for werewolf rights and in promoting the Lycanthropy Cure. They lived a long and happy life together. She doted on Harry, Ginny and their children, acting like a very young grandmother to them long before she was a grandmother in reality.

The London Lions regretted losing Harry as Captain when he left them to work at Hogwarts full time, but they didn't miss seeing him at home games. Harry kept the huge family box at the Lions stadium long after he left the team. The Lupins, Potters and Weasleys, sometimes joined by the Dursleys, went to as many home games as they could manage, cheering the Lions on to many championships. Eventually, the Potter-Weasley clan needed to use an Enlarging Charm on the box, because their extended family had grown so large.

Neville Longbottom married a witch he met in the Greek isles while researching Mediterranean water plants. His books became the definitive authorities on the subject and were used by both professional herbologists and school teachers alike.

Dean Thomas went to art school and got into advertising, using his art skills to create wonderful ads for many companies in the wizarding world. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes were his biggest clients. He also did illustrations and cover art for Hermione Granger-Weasley's Harry Potter books. He enjoyed his life as a bachelor, squiring beautiful women, whether witch or Muggle, to many plays, parties, gallery openings and other social events.

Parvati Patil became a designer of women's dress robes, working her way up at Gladrags Wizardwear, mostly at the Paris location. She married a French wizard but had no children, because she was afraid she'd lose her figure through childbearing.

Lavender Brown married a Muggle and became a psychic catering to the Muggle trade. She had two children and became comfortably cuddly in the process. Her husband was just glad there was more of her to love.

Luna Lovegood took over the Quibbler when her father retired. It's read world-wide now and is famous for its pictures of strange monsters and visits from aliens. She has earned enough money from the Quibbler to start a foundation dedicated to finding a live example of the

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Crumple-Horned Snorkack and bringing it to England for study. She felt she was too busy to settle down, so she remained unmarried.

Albus Dumbledore lived with his grandson and his family for many happy years. When he left on "the next great adventure," he was buried in the church yard in Godric's Hollow near Harry's parents.

Minerva McGonagall spent her retirement years writing down the stories told to her by Merlin the phoenix. She has every hope of publishing them before she dies. She and Hagrid were delighted to welcome a new giant squid to Hogwarts soon after Harry's return from the land of the phoenixes. She maintained a close friendship with Merlin, enjoying many conversations with the phoenix particularly on long winter evenings.

Merlin remained Harry Potter's phoenix and enjoyed watching the new generations of witches and wizards work their way through Hogwarts. He spent many a delightful hour telling his stories to Minerva McGonagall as well as Harry and his family.

Severus Snape continued to teach at Hogwarts until ill health forced his retirement. The Dark Mark and botched Killing Curse took an unforeseen toll on his body, giving him frail health at a much younger age than normal. He did find happiness at last, when he married the young widow of the Hogsmeade apothecary. They had one son, who Severus was pleased to see looked like his wife and had her disposition rather than his. Snape wrote several text books on Potions and the Dark Mark before he died. Harry Potter chose to use these books at Hogwarts when he became headmaster.

Madam Bones retired from the Ministry after serving for several years. She kept her seat on the Wizangamot and became a trusted advisor to Ron Weasley when he became Minister.

Dudley Dursley finally met a woman who would put up with him, and married her. She put him on a diet right away and ran a strictly disciplined house, which seemed to suit Dudley quite well. He worked his way up through the ranks at Grunnings until he was a Director like his father.

Petunia Dursley stayed in contact with Harry Potter the rest of her life. She and Vernon spent holidays with the Potter family as often as possible. Vernon and Dudley even came to enjoy some of their holidays in the wizarding world, although they were never as tolerant of wizard pranks as wizards would be. They also enjoyed going to the occasional London Lions game with the Potter-Weasley clan.

Anthony Joyero, the jeweller, continued to make unique jewellery for Ginny and Hermione, and medals and awards for the Ministry. He was delighted whenever Harry Potter provided him with mosaic picture frames or jewellery boxes to sell. They always sold very quickly and for excellent prices. Joyero retired a very wealthy, very happy man, and was a good friend of Harry Potter throughout his life.

Colin and Dennis Creevey spent their careers working for the London Lions, Colin as their photographer, Dennis in the marketing department. Both married sweet witches who provided comfortable homes and two children each.

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Alex McCullough went into medical research, inspired by his work on the Healer Squad in the D.A. He spent many evenings in front of a cosy fire telling his children stories about the fabled Harry Potter, who he felt truly blessed to have known while in school.

Dan Jacobs and his band, Toads in the Loo, had thirty albums go multiple-crystal. When Dan tired of touring, he became a record producer and delighted in discovering talented newcomers. He married the woman who had started his first fan club and had four children, all of whom joined him in the music business.

On Second Thoughts

Minerva studied the boys' faces and wondered when the true gravity of what they'd done would hit them. Would they ever understand how much harm they'd done? They were certainly quiet enough now. She sighed, and finished what she had to say. "If we find your things, we'll send them to your parents. Don't expect the Ministry to be merciful. Your arrogance has cost you dearly, boys. I hope you learn a lesson from it."

She watched the boys' faces as they turned to go. Maxwell Parsons and Philip Graves were intelligent boys, but didn't seem to have a knut's worth of empathy between them, and they still carried themselves with a hint of their usual swagger. Of course, it was possible that the tragedy resulting from their actions simply wasn't real to them yet. They seemed to have no concept, no understanding of what they'd done. Minerva couldn't allow that. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair to those who had suffered so much because of their actions.

"Wait!" she said, her tone imperious. The two boys turned and looked at her, then shivered when they saw the cold, hard expression in her eyes. "On second thoughts, I believe you should see the results of your folly. Come with me."

She glanced at Professor Flitwick, the boys' Head of House, who was beside himself with grief over the devastation caused by these boys: several students dead or dying, many others injured; three dragons and Sebastian, the giant squid, all dead; Hagrid injured; and Harry Potter horribly burned and mutilated, hovering between life and death after the dragon had fallen on him. Now Flitwick met the headmistress's eyes and gave a small nod. She nodded back as she swept past him and the two students and went through the office door, riding the spiral staircase down to the corridor. Flitwick brought up the rear, making sure the boys kept up with McGonagall's quick steps.

When they reached the Hospital Wing, McGonagall turned and glared at the boys. "You will see horrors here that may make you ill, or may make you want to cry out in shock. You. Will. Remain. Silent. You will guard your expressions so you don't upset them with looks of horror or disgust or anything else but kind-hearted sympathy. You will not disturb these patients in any way. If you do, I will make you wish you had not! Do you understand me?" Both boys swallowed hard and nodded. McGonagall's glasses flashed furiously for a moment and then she spun around and opened the door to the hospital wing as quietly as possible. She lifted a finger to her lips and made certain each boy saw her warning, then tiptoed down the aisle between beds, skirting the curtained area behind which Harry Potter was trying to rest after going through excruciating pain while being treated.

Harry's sons, Jamie and Siri, sat by the curtained area, feeling a bit relieved now that they'd had a chance to speak to their dad, but still worried sick. They knew he was still in very critical condition. Their mum was inside the curtained enclosure with him now, trying to find more ways to help and comfort him. The twins glanced up when the two professors and two boys in Ravenclaw robes passed them.

Maxwell and Philip glanced at the Potter twins, saw their pale, scared faces, their eyes a dark, turbulent green, exhaustion and headache plain in their posture. Both boys turned their eyes away from the twins, following their headmistress's steps with dogged obedience.

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Jamie and Siri looked from the Ravenclaw boys to their Cousin Minerva. They'd never seen such a thunderous expression on her face. Professor Flitwick looked so distressed, they thought he might be ill. The twins wondered if these boys the brothers of some of the injured or dead students. As the group moved on, Jamie and Siri looked at each other and shrugged. They felt sorry for the boys, who looked as if they were dreading something.

"Wonder who they are?" Jamie said as he watched the group move on.

"Dunno. What d'you suppose has Cousin Minerva so worked up?" Siri said, watching the headmistress's straight back and tense posture. "I've never seen her that upset."

Jamie sat quietly, watching the group walk away, thinking about what they'd seen. "I don't think she's upset," he said wisely. "I think she's angry."

"Glad she's not that angry with us," Siri said with a shudder.

Jamie sat up straighter as a thought occurred to him. "She's not just angry, she's *furious* with those blokes, isn't she?" he said. He turned to his twin. "What two boys from Ravenclaw do you think she'd be that angry with?"

Siri gasped. "The ones who stole the eggs and started all of this!" he growled. His eyes flashed livid green fire, matched by the rage in Jamie's eyes. "They nearly killed Dad!"

"Let's go and listen to what's going on," Jamie said, getting to his feet and starting to follow the group.

"Boys?" Ginny called, peeping out from the curtained area. "Would you help me a minute?"

Both boys glared at the backs of the Ravenclaws now being dragged between beds on one side of the room, then turned to their mother. "What can we do?" Jamie asked, knowing that caring for his father was more important than revenge at the moment.

"Jamie, would you go bring me a bowl of clean water and a flannel? Your father's sweating with pain again and I want to wash his face." She looked worn out herself now. "It should comfort him a bit."

"OK," he said, running to the supply cabinet.

"Siri, you can help me in here," she said to her second son, who followed her inside.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick led the boys from bed to bed, asking whoever was working there to tell them the extent of each person's injuries. The professors spoke encouraging words to the patients who were awake and words of comfort to their families, but Maxwell and Philip remained silent, glancing apprehensively at McGonagall from time to time. Several times they were forced to swallow the bile that threatened to overwhelm them. They knew better than to be ill in front of McGonagall when she'd specifically forbidden it.

They stopped at one bed where a tiny first year girl was gasping for breath. She'd been crushed by the falling stones of Ravenclaw Tower. Her parents sat weeping by her bed,

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unable to hold her hands or brush the hair off her damp forehead because she was so badly injured and in agony despite high doses of pain potion. Professor McGonagall looked over the parents' bowed heads at the Healer working on the child. He held her look and gave a minimal shake of his head, then went back to work on the child.

Suddenly, the girl exhaled a long breath and didn't inhale again. The mother began to wail, the father sobbing as he tried to comfort his wife. McGonagall dug hard, sharp fingers into the shoulders of the two culprits and pulled them away from the grieving parents. Professor Flitwick stayed to try to comfort the couple, wiping his own streaming eyes as he pulled the curtain around the bed for privacy.

Maxwell and Philip swallowed hard, their eyes wide and frightened now, their faces pale as they stared at the closed curtain. Their swaggers were gone now.

"Do you see? *You* caused that child's death with your stupid, irresponsible actions," McGonagall hissed, her back ramrod straight, her nostrils pinched and white, her lips thin and angry. "Not the dragon. You. Do you understand what you've done?"

Both boys nodded, glancing toward the hospital wing doors, hoping she'd let them leave now.

"No, I don't think you do," she said after watching their faces for a moment. "Come along." They stopped by several other beds, staying for just a moment or two with each patient. Fortunately, no others died while they were there.

Finally, they reached the end of the hospital wing and entered a curtained area. Six beds stood silently in this area, each with a small, still form covered in a sheet.

"No, I don't—" Maxwell began, trembling as he turned to leave. Philip stayed silent, his face plainly terrified.

"Yes, you will," McGonagall snapped, shoving him further into the enclosure. She led them from bed to bed, pulling back the sheet and forcing the boys to look at the battered, mangled bodies lying there. The boys gagged and swallowed hard, remembering McGonagall's injunction against reacting in any way.

When she covered up the last body, something caught her attention, making Minerva look up toward the ceiling. Three ghosts hovered there uncertainly.

"Ah, there you are," the headmistress said kindly, smiling a bit at each ghost. "Don't be afraid. I'm sorry to tell you that you died. You don't have to stay here now. There's a wonderful world waiting for you if you'll just go toward the light."

"The light?" one of the ghosts, a second-year girl, said uncertainly. Golden curls framed her face, giving her an angelic look that tugged at McGonagall's heart..

"Look up, dear," Minerva said in a gentle voice. "I can't see it, but you should be able to." She pointed toward the ceiling and watched their faces. "Do you see it?"

"I see it!" the ghost of a dark-haired boy said excitedly. He raised his arm and pointed. "There it is! See it?" The others nodded and began chattering excitedly.

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"Just go toward it, and you'll be fine," McGonagall said, tears welling in her eyes as they followed her instructions. "You were wonderful students. I enjoyed having you in class. Don't linger," she warned as the two boys looked back toward them. "The light doesn't stay for long, I'm told."

"Thanks," one of the boys said, then turned and followed the others. Soon all of them were gone, leaving Professor McGonagall weeping and the two culprits shaking.

With a mighty effort, Minerva managed to stop crying, swiping angrily at the tears before facing the two boys again. Maxwell had crumpled to the floor, crying as silently as he could. Philip stood stony-faced, biting his lip to keep himself from reacting in any way.

Minerva watched the two boys, her teacher's heart wanting to comfort them, but the six small bodies on the beds before her reminded her why they were there. "Get up, Mr. Parsons," she snapped at Maxwell. "We're not finished yet."

Both boys gaped at her. "W-w-we're not?" Maxwell gasped as he struggled to his feet.

Philip shook his head over and over, muttering "No-no-no-no-no!"

"Yes," Minerva snapped, grabbing each boy's shoulder and shoving them through the curtain. "We have one more stop to make, and I promise you, if you make a sound of any kind, or if you have anything less than a pleasant expression on your face the entire time, you will regret it more than anything in your life. Do you understand me?"

The boys nodded, biting their lips and trudging beside her up the aisle between beds. Their little procession stopped at the curtained area where the two Ravenclaws had seen the Potter twins. The boys shuddered and resisted as McGonagall pushed them toward the curtain.

"Do not disobey me in any way or I will hex you," she snarled.

The boys gulped and turned toward the curtain, but still didn't step through it.

Minerva squeezed each boy's shoulder, a bit more painfully than necessary. "Remember. Pleasant expressions and not a single sound. Clear?"

They nodded and stepped through the curtain with her.

"Ginny, dear, I'm so sorry to disturb you," Minerva murmured kindly to Ginny, who was bent over Harry with her back to the newcomers. "I just wanted to see how he is."

"He's on a huge dose of pain potion," Ginny said, trying not to sniffle as she turned toward the headmistress. "He's dozing a bit from time to time." She looked at the two boys, exhaustion and grief plain on her face. "More injuries? Where are you hurt, boys?"

"They aren't injured," Minerva said quickly. "I'm teaching."

"Ah, I see," Ginny said, so distracted by her worry about Harry that she didn't really "see" at all.

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Her sons, standing beside her, knew exactly who those boys were. They'd sat outside their father's curtained area again after helping their mum and seen the boys going from bed to bed with an obviously furious headmistress and a horribly grieving Flitwick. Flitwick had dropped out of the procession at one point, staying in an area where a curtain had been drawn quite suddenly. Jamie and Siri had seen that happen enough by this time to know that it signified nothing good, especially when they could hear the wailing of the parents until someone thought to put a Silencing Charm on that area. Jamie and Siri had been called in to help their mother again just as Minerva was taking the two Ravenclaw boys into the enclosure where the bodies lay.

"Jamie?" Harry whispered to the son standing closest to him. Even without his glasses, he could see the small mole behind Jamie's left ear, the only difference between them, which most people never noticed.

"Yes?"

"Who's here?" Harry didn't have his glasses on, so he was seeing a tall, thin woman in black he thought must be Minerva, and two students. Why were they here?

"It's Cousin Minerva and a couple of students, Dad," Jamie murmured. "Don't worry about them. Just rest."

"Are you thirsty, sweetheart?" Ginny said, bending down to be on his eye level.

"Yes." He did his best to smile at her.

"Water or pumpkin juice?" she asked as she ran a gentle finger tenderly down the undamaged side of his face. He was lying on his side and floating a bit above the bed so he'd be as comfortable as possible given his extensive wounds. He had a lightweight blanket covering his hips for modesty's sake, but his horribly burned torso, with its deep gashes from the dragon's claws, was there for anyone to see.

"Water." He sighed, wishing he wasn't so weak. Talking was a real effort for him.

"Siri," Ginny began, then smiled as her son approached with a goblet of cool water already in his hands, a straw in it to help his father drink. "Thanks."

Siri held the glass while Jamie and Ginny worked together to lift Harry's head a bit. When he was finished, he smiled his thanks and relaxed again, watching his family move around him.

Ginny glanced up at Minerva. "If you want to speak to him, this would be a good time. He just had another dose of potion, so he'll be asleep again soon."

Minerva leaned down and murmured, "Stay here," to the boys, then went and bent over Harry, who seemed to be only about half-awake now. She whispered something to him and then smoothed his hair off his sweaty face and kissed his forehead. When she straightened up, she smiled at him, as warm a smile as anyone had ever seen from Minerva McGonagall. The smile Harry tried to give her nearly broke her heart. His spirit was strong, but his body was so badly damaged. She continued to smile at him until his eyes drifted shut. Minerva cleared her

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throat and wiped away the tears that were resisting her strict emotional control, then turned and hugged Ginny.

"Let me know if there's anything, and I do mean anything, that I can do for you, or if you need something," Minerva said as she released the younger woman.

"I will. Thanks," Ginny said, trying to smile.

"You look shattered. Why don't I have another bed brought in here for you so you can rest?"

"No, I need to stay awake to check on him," Ginny replied, rubbing the back of her wrist across her forehead wearily. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not, but you will be," Minerva said, giving the young woman's shoulder a fond squeeze.

Ginny glanced up at her as a thought struck her. "Oh, is that chair I used to sit in still here? That squashy old thing I slept in when I was watching over him here while we were in school?"

"I'm sure it's around somewhere," Minerva said. "I'll find it, have it cleaned if necessary, and send it up as soon as I can."

"Thanks." Ginny went back to tending her husband, her concentration fully on him again.

"Are you boys all right? Do you need anything?" Minerva asked the twins kindly.

"We need Dad to get well, that's all," Siri said, gazing at his father with sad eyes. His eyes hardened as he looked at the two boys standing near the curtain, but he didn't say anything else.

"Well, let me know if you do," Minerva said as she patted each of the Potter boys on the shoulder.

"We will," Jamie replied, giving her a wan smile.

Minerva looked at Harry once more and sighed before retuning to the Ravenclaw boys. She turned them sharply toward the curtain and pushed them through it. They were heading toward the doors of the hospital wing when she felt two spells fly past her. She spun around, catching Jamie and Siri both with murderous looks on their faces, their wands pointed at Maxwell and Philip. Maxwell now sported huge stalks of rhubarb from his ears, nose and mouth, while Philip was battling the biggest batch of Bat Bogeys Minerva had ever seen. She stifled a laugh and mouthed *well done* to the Potter twins as she shoved the two Ravenclaws through the door.

"I think I'll just leave you like that for a while," she said with satisfaction as she steered them toward the Great Hall where their parents and Aurors were waiting for them. She finally took pity on Maxwell and removed the rhubarb from his nose so he could breathe, but Philip, who'd been unmoved for most of their tour of the hospital wing, was left to battle the Bat Bogeys on his own. With no wand and no knowledge of the spell, he had no chance of

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reversing it. Students they passed in the hall stared wide-eyed at the two boys, then moved off murmuring together.

Good, Minerva thought, thinking more like a relative of the Potters than a headmistress at the moment. *Maybe now the other students will learn that it's dangerous to bother the Potters!*

As the Aurors led Maxwell and Philip away, Minerva sighed. Both boys' parents were broken-hearted. They'd had such high hopes for their intelligent, creative sons, but had ignored their latent arrogance. Look where that intelligence and arrogance had taken them – a one-way ticket to Azkaban. The evidence was indisputable, and the boys had confessed. With so many students hurt, the Ministry would push this trial to the top of the list to get it behind them. These boys wouldn't be in the Ministry's holding cells for long. Minerva was certain of that.

Minerva looked around the Great Hall, seeing clusters of students here and there talking quietly, or consoling each other as they cried. *Back to work*, she thought, and went about the business of comforting her students and getting her school back to normal as quickly as possible. And at the top of her "to do" list was finding that chair and sending it to Ginny so she'd be comfortable as she watched over Harry again.